

Serving Naruto and Sakura

By nextguardian

Submitted: January 28, 2010

Updated: August 25, 2012

My OC is forced to play servant to Naruto and Sakura. He must ignore his own dreams to see that Sakura and Naruto live happily ever after- either as a couple, or as the two strongest shinobi ever.

Provided by Fanart Central.

<http://www.fanart-central.net/stories/user/nextguardian/57534/Serving-Naruto-and-Sakura>

Chapter 1 - Arc 1, Chapter 1: Captured	5
Chapter 2 - "Captured" Arc- Chapter 2	12
Chapter 3 - "Captured" Arc- Chapter 3	17
Chapter 4 - "Captured" Arc- Chapter 4	28
Chapter 5 - 'Captured' Arc; Chapter 5	33
Chapter 6 - 'Captured' Arc; Chapter 6	39
Chapter 7 - 'Captured' Arc; Chapter 7	45
Chapter 8 - Arc Iii: Comrades- Chapter 1	49
Chapter 9 - Arc Iii 'Comrades'- Chapter 2	54
Chapter 10 - Arc Iiii- 'Protect the Future' Chapter 1	59
Chapter 11 - ArcIiii 'Protect the Future' Chapter 2	64
Chapter 12 - Arc II: Love and Combat- Chapter 1	67
Chapter 13 - Arc II: Love and Combat- Chapter 2	71
Chapter 14 - Arc II: Love and Combat- Chapter 3	75
Chapter 15 - ArcII: Love and Combat- Chapter 4	80
Chapter 16 - Arc Iiii- Internal Conflict: Chapter 1	84
Chapter 17 - Arc Iiii: Internal Conflict- Chapter 2	89
Chapter 18 - ArcIiii: Internal Conflict- Chapter 3	93
Chapter 19 - ArcIiii: Internal Conflict- Chapter 4	98
Chapter 20 - ArcIiii: Saving Grace- Chapter 1	101
Chapter 21 - ArcIiii: Saving Grace- Chapter 2	107
Chapter 22 - ArcIiii: Saving Grace- Chapter 3	112

Chapter 23 - ArcIII: Seperation- Chapter 1	118
Chapter 24 - ArcIII-Seperation- Chapter 2	123
Chapter 25 - Arc III- Seperation: Chapter 3	126
Chapter 26 - ArcIII: Seperation- Chapter 4	131
Chapter 27 - Arc IV: Harsh Reality- Chapter 1	137
Chapter 28 - Arc IV: Harsh Reality- Chapter 2	141
Chapter 29 - Arc IV: Harsh Reality- Chapter 3	145
Chapter 30 - Arc IV: Harsh Reality- Chapter 4	148
Chapter 31 - Arc IVii: Deep Secrets-Chapter 1	151
Chapter 32 - ArcIVii: Deep Secrets-Chapter 2	155
Chapter 33 - ArcIVii: Deep Secrets-Chapter 3	158
Chapter 34 - ArcIVii-Deep Secrets: Chapter 4	162
Chapter 35 - Arc V: Broken- Chapter 1	167
Chapter 36 - Arc V: Broken- Chapter 2	171
Chapter 37 - Arc V: Broken- Chapter 3	175
Chapter 38 - Arc V: Broken- Chapter 4	180
Chapter 39 - Arc VI: Kyuubi Unleashed- Chapter 1	184
Chapter 40 - Arc VI: Kyuubi Unleashed- Chapter 2	188
Chapter 41 - Arc VI: Kyuubi Unleashed- Chapter 3	192
Chapter 42 - Arc Vlii: Deep Inside- Chapter 1	196
Chapter 43 - Arc Vlii: Deep Inside- Chapter 2	200
Chapter 44 - Arc Vlii: Deep Inside- Chapter 3	203
Chapter 45 - Arc Vlii: Deep Inside- Chapter 4	207
Chapter 46 - ArcVII: Still Human- Chapter 1	211
Chapter 47 - ArcVII: Still Human- Chapter 2	214
Chapter 48 - Arc VII: Still Human- Chapter 2	218
Chapter 49 - Arc VII: Still Human- Chapter 3	223
Chapter 50 - Arc VII: Still Human- Chapter 4	227
Chapter 51 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh- Chapter 1	232
Chapter 52 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh- Chapter 2	236
Chapter 53 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh- Chapter 3	240
Chapter 54 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh- Chapter 4	245
Chapter 55 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh- Chapter 5	249

Chapter 56 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh- Chapter 6	254
Chapter 57 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh- Chapter 7	259
Chapter 58 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh- Chapter 8	263
Chapter 59 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh- Chapter 9	267
Chapter 60 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh- Chapter 10	271
Chapter 61 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh- Chapter 11	277
Chapter 62 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh- Chapter 12	281
Chapter 63 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh-Chapter 13	285
Chapter 64 - Arc IX: In Demon's Hands- Chapter 1	291
Chapter 65 - Arc IX: In Demon's Hands- Chapter 2	296
Chapter 66 - Arc IX: In Demon's Hands- Chapter 3	302
Chapter 67 - Arc X: True Form- Chapter 1	306
Chapter 68 - Arc X: True Form- Chapter 2	311
Chapter 69 - Arc X: True Form- Chapter 3	316
Chapter 70 - Arc X: True Form- Chapter 4	321
Chapter 71 - Arc X: True Form- Chapter 5	325
Chapter 72 - Arc X: True Form- Chapter 6	330
Chapter 73 - Arc X: True Form- Chapter 7	335
Chapter 74 - Arc XI: Companionship- Chapter 1	340
Chapter 75 - Arc XI: Companionship- Chapter 2	346
Chapter 76 - Arc XI: Companionship- Chapter 3	351
Chapter 77 - Arc XI: Companionship- Chapter 4	359
Chapter 78 - Arc XI: Companionship- Chapter 5	366
Chapter 79 - Arc XI: Companionship- Chapter 6	372
Chapter 80 - Arc XII: Devastated- Chapter 1	376
Chapter 81 - Arc XII: Devastated- Chapter 2	381
Chapter 82 - Arc Xlii: What If?- Chapter 1	386
Chapter 83 - Arc Xlii: What if?- Chapter 2	392
Chapter 84 - Arc Xlii: What If?- Chapter 1	398
Chapter 85 - ArcXlii:What If?- Chapter 2	404
Chapter 86 - ArcXlii: What If?- Chapter 3	409

Chapter 87 - Arc XIIIii: What If?- Chapter 1	413
Chapter 88 - Arc XIIIii: What If?- Chapter 2	419
Chapter 89 - Arc XIIIii: What If?- Chapter 3	424
Chapter 90 - Arc XIIIii: What If?- Chapter 4	431
Chapter 91 - Arc XIIIii: What If?- Chapter 5	437
Chapter 92 - Arc XIII: The Real World- Chapter 1	444
Chapter 93 - Arc XIII: The Real World- Chapter 2	449
Chapter 94 - ArcXIII: Real World- Chapter 3	455
Chapter 95 - ArcXIV: Uchiha Legacy vs. Heaven's Temper- Chapter 1	460
Chapter 96 - Arc XIV: Uchiha Legacy vs. Heaven's Temper- Chapter 2	465
Chapter 97 - FINAL ARC: Part 1	469
Chapter 98 - FINAL ARC: Part 2	474
Chapter 99 - FINAL ARC: Part 3	478
Chapter 100 - FINAL ARC: Part 4	485
Chapter 101 - FINAL CHAPTER	490
Chapter 102 - "After" Arc- 1	499
Chapter 103 - 'After' Arc- 2	503
Chapter 104 - 'After' Arc-3	508
Chapter 105 - 'After' Arc- 4	512
Chapter 106 - 'After' Arc- 5	517
Chapter 107 - 'After' Arc- 6	523
Chapter 108 - 'After' Arc- 7	528
Chapter 109 - 'After' Arc- 8	533
Chapter 110 - FINAL	537

1 - Arc 1, Chapter 1: Captured

Note: This story is going to be more mature and violent than my average works. In this case, I want to depict semi-realistic dangers of wars between shinobi. I've rated this story appropriately. Please read only if you are comfortable with those ratings.

Enjoy the story! I am taking requests for couples fic's (Please view at least one completed sample of my work before making a request. I can provide a link upon request.)

-NG

When I was twelve years old, I began to understand the world. Or so I thought. Girls were icky. I didn't like guys, either- they were idiots. There was only myself, and martial arts. That was all there was to it. No others interests. None.

I would train with the most powerful man in our village, starting with my thirteenth birthday. But as I began my training, a prediction was made.

I was seated in samurai attire. My parents were behind me, my Mother's hands on my shoulders. I did my best to stay calm, but I was actually terrified.

Lord Hokage looked into his crystal ball, nodding and making 'mmm' sounds of concentration or consent.

"Your child, this boy Kimihiro, will one day become a pillar of this village. He will help lead the next group of legends to their destiny."

My parents looked at me proudly. I didn't fully understand, but I knew enough to remain seated while Lord Hokage spoke. I wanted to go practice more. I liked Lord Hokage, but I wanted to learn from him; not hear predictions that meant nothing to me.

"...However, his own future is unclear," the Third finally said. "It would be best for him to start serving the next legends, once they become apparent."

With those words, my future had become fore-ordained. I was to be a servant to the next legends.

"I will do all I can, Lord Hokage!" I announced proudly. I hadn't yet hit puberty, so my voice was still high as I bowed. I felt strangely happy, though a life of servitude didn't really appeal to me. I guessed it was the feeling of belonging that really made me happy.

--

Eight years passed. I grew into a twenty-year-old, and a strong one. My parents were proud of me. I was a newly-promoted jonin of the Village Hidden in the Leaves. I had gotten strong, and I was good at my job.

But it wasn't a normal life. I was hampered by illness. This illness slowed my mental growth when it came to emotions. I was about fifteen or sixteen, so I was just getting seriously interested in girls. I didn't really consider girls to be a priority until twenty because of this illness (though, in other areas, such as reading, my mind was above that of my peers). My eyes fell on one girl- a girl I worked with a lot.

Sakura Haruno. She was seventeen now, so it would be at least a year until I could make a serious advance. But I didn't have the guts to do it. But I could totally worship her from afar.

I never understood 'carefree youth', as I spent all my free time studying. I wasn't yet strong enough to earn a female of my own, nor to protect this village. I had been called a 'hero', but that didn't mean enough to me. I wanted *friends* to acknowledge it, too.

I didn't make friends easily, though.

By now, my destiny was forgotten. One of the legends, Tsunade, had returned to run the village after my Master's death. She knew of his prophecy, but was quiet about it. She certainly didn't encourage me. It seemed she even went to lengths to push me away.

But I ignored it. I wasn't going anywhere. Someday, she would be gone, and I would remain.

It was odd to think we'd become close within a year. And then, once we did, she would give me the orders I had been told to prepare for since I was twelve.

I had no idea how cruel fate would be to me.

--

"Ryouko?"

It was the Hokage's assistant, Shizune. She wasn't dressed in her combat gear, so I guessed that this was something on behalf of Tsunade herself. I would have thought this was a social thing, but she also called me by my ANBU training name.

"Yes, Shizune-sempai?"

"Come with me, please. The next legends have been decided."

Against my better judgment, I followed without complaint. Being a guy, I of course wondered if my new boss would be a girl. If she was, would she be beautiful? Would she be interested in me? As in 'interested'?

"Is one female?" I asked.

"Yes. There are two of them. You already know who they are, so I doubt you'll be horribly shocked."

--

I knelt by the door, listening to Lady Tsunade speak to them. 'Them' was Naruto and Sakura. They

were teammates, and apparently were also part of some plan of Tsunade's. But this plan wasn't a good one. Not for me, or anyone involved. This one involved making Naruto and Sakura a...royal couple, for want of a better word. Sakura was angry, Naruto didn't want to be tied down, and I was in love with Sakura- something she herself was unaware of.

"Enter!" Tsunade snapped. This was directed at me. Though I was a jonin, and outranked Naruto and Sakura, I was now their...well, servant and protector.

I hastened to obey, overdoing things by kneeling at the door and bowing so low my head touched the floor.

"Your orders, My Lady?"

Was this awful, formal voice really mine? It didn't seem right. But it was all I could do now.

Tsunade gave me a stern look, as if warning me against play-acting. But I wasn't. I was told beforehand that I was a servant, so that's how I acted. However embarrassing and humiliating, I had my reasons for wanting this assignment.

Tsunade finally had decided I was serious. "You will address these two now as 'Naruto-dono' and 'Sakura-Ojousama'. Your duties are their cooking, cleaning, and most of all...teaching."

I looked up, my face mild and stoic. As always.

"Teaching, My Lady?"

Tsunade smirked, motioning for Naruto and Sakura to leave. I made sure to bow, my head lowered, as they walked by. Both gave me odd looks, but were too preoccupied by their own predicament to seriously worry for me.

Once they had left, I stood up to speak to Tsunade as a jonin.

"There IS a reason I'm putting you through this torture, you know..."

I stayed silent, assuming she would tell me eventually. She did, though not before wringing the anticipation out for quite some time.

"...It's because you *can*. I understand what I'm asking of you is a lot, especially where Sakura is concerned, but there is simply no one else. Those two need to learn how to use their powers effectively."

"And Kakashi-sempai? He's spent far more time with them than I. I'm not questioning you, you understand. I'm just...curious. And I want to make sure this assignment is completed properly."

Tsunade regarded me with soft eyes. "A boy closer to their age will be easier for them. They need to get closer. I don't care if they're lovers or not. But they may be legendary, and they'll need to work together. Especially if Sasuke's really gone rogue, all they'll have to keep going is each other. You can understand that, can't you?"

My eyes must have dropped as I said 'Yes, I can', because Tsunade was again abnormally nice to me.

"Oh... You're not making this easy with those puppy eyes. You must really care for her..."

I snapped my eyes into something close to a glare. "I care enough to let her go. Naruto is best for her. I know I'm not 'one of you!'" I bit off at the end, wishing I had kept quiet. But it couldn't be helped. No matter what, I was never one of them. No matter how strong, I was the outsider. And I h-a-t-e-d it. Now, more than ever, I felt the sting.

Tsunade let me rant, apparently understanding how I felt. She just apologized again. I paused, wonder if she would rescind her orders.

"...Go on, now. You have those two to attend to. They'll be living below the Hokage Rock. I'll leave it to you to see to their nutritional and physical needs."

I lowered my gaze. "Of course. By...by your leave!"

I left before she could say anymore. I could *feel* her pitying me, and it made me feel worse. I didn't need anyone's sympathy. If this was my job, I would do it, and I would do it well.

--

First, my warrior clothes were packed away. I was no longer a shinobi, strictly speaking. I was a strange mix of elder and servant. Instead, I donned a long, black robe, tied with rope around the middle, and with a hood. These would be my training clothes. My formal wear was packed away.

I was to live with Naruto and Sakura, in a small cottage on the edge of their property. It had two rooms, and it pissed me off. For no good reason, I was angry with the cabin itself. But I just packed my stuff up, chopped the bed up for firewood (out of pure rage. Really, I had no need for wood), then laid two tatami mats and a couple blankets and pillows in a corner. If I was pissed, every facet of my life would feel that anger. Even now, after a month had passed, I was still furious.

knock knock

I trudged to the door, wonder what horror awaited me on the other side. There was no good news these days.

On the other side was Naruto. He stepped in without waiting for me to say anything. I didn't even bother- I just hit the floor and bowed as low as I could.

"How's it going?" Naruto asked me, in his usual friendly manner.

"Very well, Naruto-dono. Thank you for honoring me with your attention."

Naruto just kind of scrunched his face up. "Uh, yeah. You can drop that formal crap, the old lady's not around."

"I can't do that, Naruto-dono. Orders are orders," I responded. "Can I get you anything?"

Naruto shook his head. "Nah...I'm good, thanks. I'm just, uh, gonna go now. See you tomorrow morning for some training or something, right?"

"Of course, Naruto-dono. I thank you again for your attention and kindness."

--

I curled up on my tatami mats that night, wondering just how far I had fallen. To be the servant of the girl I loved while she was with another man...

That hurt.

A lot.

But what could be done? It would do no good to be rude to them. This wasn't their idea, and they weren't happy about it either. Instead, we were all following orders. I had my suspicions that Tsunade didn't want to order this. She was never this kind to anyone, and she never seriously apologized for an order. This must mean that there are other aspects involved.

I turned over, listening to the floor creek beneath me. The higurashi were out in full force tonight, and really starting to irritate me. But eventually, their cries helped drift me to sleep.

I was to have a night of fitful dreams. Come morning, I would be soaked with cold sweat from a mix of nightmares and dreams of love that had long been unnoticed.

--

By the morning, I had decided to take a vow of silence during training. These two were destined for greater things than my tutelage, and they didn't need to hear me dog and moan about being forced to be a servant.

But by the time it was time to train, I had rescinded that. These were my friends, and I wouldn't alienate them. In fact, I would encourage them both. That was the duty of a friend and teacher, wasn't it?

So, casually, I walked over to Naruto. He was diligently practicing his Rasengan. He got better each time, and I wondered again why he needed my help. But nonetheless...

"Naruto-dono, hold up a second. I've got a question for you..."

Naruto had forgotten about my attitude last night, apparently. He was friendly as he stopped training to speak with me.

"Yeah?"

"You like Sakura- ...er, Ojousama, right?"

"Duh! I HAVE to, she's on my team!" Naruto replied. It was all I could do not to roll my eyes in exasperation. How could he be that thick?

"No, I mean...strongly like. As in...love?"

Naruto didn't answer me right away. Instead, he turned away from me and muttered. It was barely audible, but I heard it:

"Is it that obvious?"

I smiled. "Well then, how about you make it easy? You'd love to see Ojousama in a yukata, yes?"

"Hell yeah!"

"Well then...why not ask her to the festival? You should tell her how you feel there."

Naruto had been one of the people (shockingly) who had picked up on me feeling something special toward Sakura. That prompted him to ask:

"What about you?"

But I shook my head. "This old man's time has passed. I leave things to you, the next generation!"

Naruto just glared at me, knowing I was joking and dodging the question.

"We're in the same generation, you idiot!"

"Don't talk to your teacher that way! Now, go ask her to the festival! Shoo, Naruto-dono! Go talk to Ojousama, and don't come back to me until you've got an answer!"

--

I watched from a distance as Sakura and Naruto talked. I couldn't hear what they were saying. It was really none of my business anyway, right?

-

"Hey, Sakura, wanna go to the festival?"

Sakura had been mixing up some concoction from assorted roots and berries. She wiped the sweat off her brow, taking a moment to get used to Naruto being nice.

"Why? So I can buy you stuff?"

"Nah, no way! It's all on me! Whaddaya say? I haven't been to a festival since I left with Pervy Sage. And I didn't see you all that time, either. We should...ya know...catch up."

Sakura still seemed surprised, but gave her consent. Naruto began to dance around, in a state beyond happiness.

Yes! Sakura-chan in a yukata! Oh man, I'm so lucky!

--

From Naruto's reaction, I guessed Sakura had answered in the affirmative. I was genuinely happy for Naruto, but miserable myself. I became more miserable as I realized I, too, would have to attend this festival. I would be teased by the sight of Sakura in a yukata, hanging on Naruto's arm. But my job as a teacher came before my pride. And my work as a servant had been in the cards for eight years. I shouldn't have been surprised like this.

I guess I'd better my old hakama out for this. Maybe a new haori (jacket)...

This is hard...harder than I'd thought it would be. But I've got to stay strong! It's best for both of them like this. I'll do what I can to help them. It'll hurt less later...I hope.

2 - "Captured" Arc- Chapter 2

The festival was a splendid thing. Each year, the village went all out. Paper lanterns lined the streets so that the fun could continue late into the night. There were stands of food all over the center of the village. Everything from Okonomiyaki to yakitori, to yakinuki and oden. There were sweets, too. Manju was everywhere, and even things like ice cream and chocolate.

There were games, of course, and prizes. Balloons, toy ANBU masks, and headbands; the goldfish scoop, a dart game, and many other things. Games of skill and chance were all over, each bearing a warning that 'use of shinobi abilities' was 'strictly prohibited'.

People also dressed carefully, too. As shinobi, we got very used to our uniforms. So getting to dress in something else was something of a treat. The girls dressed beautifully in yukatas, with their hair done up. The boys dressed in their own, often more plain yukatas.

I wasn't much of a festival person. I never felt like celebrating. But I usually attended as an unofficial security guard. When the sake flowed, people got stupid. Especially with our visitors from the Sand village. More than once I pried apart two drunk, warring shinobi.

This year was going to suck. I could look at the girls, but all I would feel was jealousy. Jealousy that I didn't have that kind of life- you know, hanging out with friends, flirting with abandon, and all that.

But that wasn't my style, and it sucked. So I just resigned myself to having a lousy time.

"Hey, Ryouko-sempai, come with us!" Sakura called, waving. She looked gorgeous with her short hair done up and held in place with bells. Her bangs had been fanned out across her forehead. This was especially cute as she peered up at me with those big green eyes through her bangs. Said eyes were further accented by the dark pink yukata with small yellow stripes, held in place with a light pink obi (belt/sash).

I had really dressed up for the occasion myself. I had put on a dark blue formal samurai top with a deep purple hakama. I also wore a black haori jacket across my shoulders, tied with a very nice cord inlaid with genuine gold. My hands weren't in the sleeves, but resting on my wakazashi.

"No, you go ahead. I've got some work to do," I called back. That was only partially a lie, and therefore okay. Yeah, I'll just keep telling myself that. The important thing was that Naruto have ample opportunity to get Sakura to like him. It was kind of a consolation prize: Someone I liked would live out my dream for me, since I couldn't have it myself.

"'kay! See you later!" she called, running off with Naruto. I thought she tossed me a backwards glance, so I made sure to force a smile onto my face.

-

I immediately slunk toward the adult area, glaring at the guard when he asked me for identification. He didn't press the subject further. I was old enough to drink, and no one was going to question me.

I slid open a shouji paper door that led to a drinking/gambling hall. Gambling wasn't outlawed in the Leaf Village, but it was generally frowned upon. Thankfully, our leader enjoyed it, so it wouldn't be banned.

"5000 ryo to enter," called the tosei-nin to me as I entered. I kicked my sandals off in the pit near the door, picked out a cushion, and plopped down. I tossed the required amount on the table, accepted a cup of sake from a cute waitress, and took the chips given to me.

"So, you're here to party, too?"

I looked next to me. As this was a festival in which no one had a job, formality was relaxed a bit. You could call your boss an asshole, and it would be forgiven. Besides, the boss currently talking to me was already deep into the bottle, and wouldn't remember any mistakes I made tomorrow anyway.

"As to be expected from you, Lady Tsunade. I'm not here to party, I'm afraid. I'm just killing time until the kids call it a night."

I tossed some chips into the pit we were using for a simple game of Han or Cho (odds or evens).

Tsunade clicked her chips together, counting them as she stacked them in her hand.

"Really? Would it kill you to have some fun yourself?"

ka-chik. She tossed her chips down.

"Why take the chance it will?" I replied, without a hint of snottiness in my voice. I was aware that everyone else, save for the tosei-nin, was now watching every move I made. Someone dared argue with the Hokage?! Perish the thought!

"Hm. A sharp-tongued child! That's what you are!" she declared, seeming more amused than anything.

"Indeed," I agreed. I looked at the dealer. He was supposed to ask me my bet any time now...

"Han or Cho?" he asked, belatedly. He had been caught up in my conversation with Tsunade.

"Cho," I said instantly.

"Han," Tsunade replied. "Care to make another wager, Ryouko-kun?"

"And that would be, M'lady?" I asked mildly, my eyes on the game.

"If I win, you agree to have some fun tonight. If you win, then I'll give you something of Sarutobi-sensei's. Agreed?"

I felt like I was kicking a puppy. "Sure. I'll take the bet. In fact...All in on cho." I pushed my chips into a pile. Sure enough, Tsunade matched me. She was all in on Han.

The dealer rolled the dice. Pair of threes. Cho.

Tsunade grumbled, but muttered “A promise is a promise. Tomorrow morning, I’ll have something of Sarutobi-sensei’s for you. And you get to stay miserable.”

“That’s all I ask, M’lady,” I answered, taking my winnings and leaving. I heard her click her tongue at my sarcasm, but oh well.

--

Naruto and Sakura wandered around the festival, keeping pace with each other. Naruto was wracking his brain, trying to think of ways to impress Sakura. So far, he had ‘impressed her’ by:

Spilling bean jam on his yukata
Telling a dirty joke
Completely sucking at the goldfish scoop
Eating too much food
Belching loudly

Now, he saw the dart throwing game. On top of the prizes, he saw a giant teddy bear. Immediately, he decided to win it for her.

“Hey, Sakura, check this out! See that bear? It’s gonna be yours!”

Sakura looked excited at the prospect. But then Naruto’s face fell.

“Eh...heheheh! I’ll be right back! I’ve gotta go hit sempai up for a loan!”

Naruto ran off, his fried squid on a stick landing on the back of his yukata. Sakura’s eyes twitched dangerously, as she had just about had enough of Naruto for one night.

But still, his heart has been in the right place. He’s been trying to act like a gentleman. I guess I can let him off the hook.

--

--

As I stepped outside the gambling parlor, a girl in a beautiful yukata tripped into me.

“Sorry! My zouri (sandal) broke!” she exclaimed.

“Right. And I suppose you think you’ll find a replacement in my pocket?”

I had my hand firmly around her wrist. Her hand was in my jacket pocket.

“Ugh! I’ve never been caught before! How’d you know?!”

I didn’t answer. Instead, I took out my winnings and placed them into her palm.

“Don’t steal from anyone else tonight, okay? You can keep that.”

I walked away, not really caring about the money I had just given her. I didn't have friends, so I made money. I could afford to give some away. But I hadn't made it far before I heard frantic footsteps behind me.

"Hold on a second!"

It was the same girl. She and I were now under the light of a lantern, giving me a good look at her for the first time.

She had long black hair, not tied up traditionally- it flowed freely behind her, halfway down her back. Her yukata was beautiful, and obviously expensive. It was a sort of deep red color with light blue flowers printed on it. The obi was a mix of two kinds of gold, with the center being a lighter gold. She didn't have the traditional snow-white skin either. It was still white, but with some kind of tan to it. She was clearly part foreign, now that I gotten a look at her. And the more I looked, the harder it was to tear my eyes away. The girl was a knockout!

"Sorry. I don't need your money. I just enjoy the challenge," she explained. Her eyes were dark brown, nearly black, and very deep. Pretty, too. They weren't teared up, but they were wide enough to be.

"...Well, okay. But you can't prove that's my money. So you keep it."

I tried to walk away again, but the girl seized my sleeve. I turned to face her, and found she was nearly my height. She was looking me in the eyes now, after having looked at the rest of me.

"...You aren't like the other boys. Your eyes...they tell a different story."

Ba-dump. Ba-dump. That was the sound of my heart as this girl talked to me. She leaned in closer and closer, as if she was going to kiss me. But she stopped once she got up close. Slowly, she raised a hand to my face, planting it on my cheek.

"...You're cute up close. And your cheek is burning. You don't have a fever, so it must be...ah! You're girl-shy!"

I nodded slowly, secretly liking the feeling of her hand on my face. She was a kunoichi, so she could have been just messing with me, but I felt a strange sweetness about the girl.

In the distance, I heard voices shouting. There were looking for someone, apparently. I was obligated to help, but I really didn't want to. I found I enjoyed having this girl talk to me.

"I've got to go..." she said suddenly, her voice full of regret. "It's me they're looking for. I'm something of a rogue ninja from the Sand."

I looked at her seriously. How could this girl be a fugitive?!

"...Are you going to turn me in?" she asked, worry in her voice.

“...Tell me your name,” I requested.

“...Azami.”

I shrugged. “Well, Azami, you’re a rogue from the Sand, and as such, you’re not a concern of my village. Besides, this is a festival, and I’ve had a bit to drink. Maybe I’m talking with a really beautiful hallucination...”

Azami blushed at the compliment, once again looking at my face.

“...Thank you. You’re a sweet boy...You take care. I hope I meet lots more like you out there.”

She took my face in both her hands, pulled my head down, and kissed me on the cheek. Then she took off running, her long black hair flowing behind her, dancing a tantalizing dance that almost made me follow.

...Too bad I’ll never see her again. She was an interesting female. Now, I’d better just lay down and sleep off that ‘hallucination’.

I laid down on a bench, wadded my jacket up under my head, and pretended to be asleep. I heard a group of jonin and chunin run by, chasing after the girl I had just met.

--
--
--

3 - "Captured" Arc- Chapter 3

The festival was a splendid thing. Each year, the village went all out. Paper lanterns lined the streets so that the fun could continue late into the night. There were stands of food all over the center of the village. Everything from Okonomiyaki to yakitori, to yakinuki and oden. There were sweets, too. Manju was everywhere, and even things like ice cream and chocolate.

There were games, of course, and prizes. Balloons, toy ANBU masks, and headbands; the goldfish scoop, a dart game, and many other things. Games of skill and chance were all over, each bearing a warning that 'use of shinobi abilities' was 'strictly prohibited'.

People also dressed carefully, too. As shinobi, we got very used to our uniforms. So getting to dress in something else was something of a treat. The girls dressed beautifully in yukatas, with their hair done up. The boys dressed in their own, often more plain yukatas.

I wasn't much of a festival person. I never felt like celebrating. But I usually attended as an unofficial security guard. When the sake flowed, people got stupid. Especially with our visitors from the Sand village. More than once I pried apart two drunk, warring shinobi.

This year was going to suck. I could look at the girls, but all I would feel was jealousy. Jealousy that I didn't have that kind of life- you know, hanging out with friends, flirting with abandon, and all that.

But that wasn't my style, and it sucked. So I just resigned myself to having a lousy time.

"Hey, Ryouko-sempai, come with us!" Sakura called, waving. She looked gorgeous with her short hair done up and held in place with bells. Her bangs had been fanned out across her forehead. This was especially cute as she peered up at me with those big green eyes through her bangs. Said eyes were further accented by the dark pink yukata with small yellow stripes, held in place with a light pink obi (belt/sash).

I had really dressed up for the occasion myself. I had put on a dark blue formal samurai top with a deep purple hakama. I also wore a black haori jacket across my shoulders, tied with a very nice cord inlaid with genuine gold. My hands weren't in the sleeves, but resting on my wakazashi.

"No, you go ahead. I've got some work to do," I called back. That was only partially a lie, and therefore okay. Yeah, I'll just keep telling myself that. The important thing was that Naruto have ample opportunity to get Sakura to like him. It was kind of a consolation prize: Someone I liked would live out my dream for me, since I couldn't have it myself.

"'kay! See you later!" she called, running off with Naruto. I thought she tossed me a backwards glance, so I made sure to force a smile onto my face.

-

I immediately slunk toward the adult area, glaring at the guard when he asked me for identification. He didn't press the subject further. I was old enough to drink, and no one was going to question me.

I slid open a shouji paper door that led to a drinking/gambling hall. Gambling wasn't outlawed in the Leaf Village, but it was generally frowned upon. Thankfully, our leader enjoyed it, so it wouldn't be banned.

"5000 ryo to enter," called the tosei-nin to me as I entered. I kicked my sandals off in the pit near the door, picked out a cushion, and plopped down. I tossed the required amount on the table, accepted a cup of sake from a cute waitress, and took the chips given to me.

"So, you're here to party, too?"

I looked next to me. As this was a festival in which no one had a job, formality was relaxed a bit. You could call your boss an asshole, and it would be forgiven. Besides, the boss currently talking to me was already deep into the bottle, and wouldn't remember any mistakes I made tomorrow anyway.

"As to be expected from you, Lady Tsunade. I'm not here to party, I'm afraid. I'm just killing time until the kids call it a night."

I tossed some chips into the pit we were using for a simple game of Han or Cho (odds or evens).

Tsunade clicked her chips together, counting them as she stacked them in her hand.

"Really? Would it kill you to have some fun yourself?"

ka-chik. She tossed her chips down.

"Why take the chance it will?" I replied, without a hint of snottiness in my voice. I was aware that everyone else, save for the tosei-nin, was now watching every move I made. Someone dared argue with the Hokage?! Perish the thought!

"Hm. A sharp-tongued child! That's what you are!" she declared, seeming more amused than anything.

"Indeed," I agreed. I looked at the dealer. He was supposed to ask me my bet any time now...

"Han or Cho?" he asked, belatedly. He had been caught up in my conversation with Tsunade.

"Cho," I said instantly.

"Han," Tsunade replied. "Care to make another wager, Ryouko-kun?"

"And that would be, M'lady?" I asked mildly, my eyes on the game.

"If I win, you agree to have some fun tonight. If you win, then I'll give you something of Sarutobi-sensei's. Agreed?"

I felt like I was kicking a puppy. "Sure. I'll take the bet. In fact...All in on cho."

I pushed my chips into a pile. Sure enough, Tsunade matched me. She was all in on Han.

The dealer rolled the dice. Pair of threes. Cho.

Tsunade grumbled, but muttered “A promise is a promise. Tomorrow morning, I’ll have something of Sarutobi-sensei’s for you. And you get to stay miserable.”

“That’s all I ask, M’lady,” I answered, taking my winnings and leaving. I heard her click her tongue at my sarcasm, but oh well.

--

Naruto and Sakura wandered around the festival, keeping pace with each other. Naruto was wracking his brain, trying to think of ways to impress Sakura. So far, he had ‘impressed her’ by:

Spilling bean jam on his yukata
Telling a dirty joke
Completely sucking at the goldfish scoop
Eating too much food
Belching loudly

Now, he saw the dart throwing game. On top of the prizes, he saw a giant teddy bear. Immediately, he decided to win it for her.

“Hey, Sakura, check this out! See that bear? It’s gonna be yours!”

Sakura looked excited at the prospect. But then Naruto’s face fell.

“Eh...heheheh! I’ll be right back! I’ve gotta go hit sempai up for a loan!”

Naruto ran off, his fried squid on a stick landing on the back of his yukata. Sakura’s eyes twitched dangerously, as she had just about had enough of Naruto for one night.

But still, his heart has been in the right place. He’s been trying to act like a gentleman. I guess I can let him off the hook.

--

--

As I stepped outside the gambling parlor, a girl in a beautiful yukata tripped into me.

“Sorry! My zouri (sandal) broke!” she exclaimed.

“Right. And I suppose you think you’ll find a replacement in my pocket?”

I had my hand firmly around her wrist. Her hand was in my jacket pocket.

“Ugh! I’ve never been caught before! How’d you know?!”

I didn’t answer. Instead, I took out my winnings and placed them into her palm.

“Don’t steal from anyone else tonight, okay? You can keep that.”

I walked away, not really caring about the money I had just given her. I didn't have friends, so I made money. I could afford to give some away. But I hadn't made it far before I heard frantic footsteps behind me.

"Hold on a second!"

It was the same girl. She and I were now under the light of a lantern, giving me a good look at her for the first time.

She had long black hair, not tied up traditionally- it flowed freely behind her, halfway down her back. Her yukata was beautiful, and obviously expensive. It was a sort of deep red color with light blue flowers printed on it. The obi was a mix of two kinds of gold, with the center being a lighter gold. She didn't have the traditional snow-white skin either. It was still white, but with some kind of tan to it. She was clearly part foreign, now that I gotten a look at her. And the more I looked, the harder it was to tear my eyes away. The girl was a knockout!

"Sorry. I don't need your money. I just enjoy the challenge," she explained. Her eyes were dark brown, nearly black, and very deep. Pretty, too. They weren't teared up, but they were wide enough to be.

"...Well, okay. But you can't prove that's my money. So you keep it."

I tried to walk away again, but the girl seized my sleeve. I turned to face her, and found she was nearly my height. She was looking me in the eyes now, after having looked at the rest of me.

"...You aren't like the other boys. Your eyes...they tell a different story."

Ba-dump. Ba-dump. That was the sound of my heart as this girl talked to me. She leaned in closer and closer, as if she was going to kiss me. But she stopped once she got up close. Slowly, she raised a hand to my face, planting it on my cheek.

"...You're cute up close. And your cheek is burning. You don't have a fever, so it must be...ah! You're girl-shy!"

I nodded slowly, secretly liking the feeling of her hand on my face. She was a kunoichi, so she could have been just messing with me, but I felt a strange sweetness about the girl.

In the distance, I heard voices shouting. There were looking for someone, apparently. I was obligated to help, but I really didn't want to. I found I enjoyed having this girl talk to me.

"I've got to go..." she said suddenly, her voice full of regret. "It's me they're looking for. I'm something of a rogue ninja from the Sand."

I looked at her seriously. How could this girl be a fugitive?!

"...Are you going to turn me in?" she asked, worry in her voice.

“...Tell me your name,” I requested.

“...Azami.”

I shrugged. “Well, Azami, you’re a rogue from the Sand, and as such, you’re not a concern of my village. Besides, this is a festival, and I’ve had a bit to drink. Maybe I’m talking with a really beautiful hallucination...”

Azami blushed at the compliment, once again looking at my face.

“...Thank you. You’re a sweet boy...You take care. I hope I meet lots more like you out there.”

She took my face in both her hands, pulled my head down, and kissed me on the cheek. Then she took off running, her long black hair flowing behind her, dancing a tantalizing dance that almost made me follow.

...Too bad I'll never see her again. She was an interesting female. Now, I'd better just lay down and sleep off that 'hallucination'.

I laid down on a bench, wadded my jacket up under my head, and pretended to be asleep. I heard a group of jonin and chunin run by, chasing after the girl I had just met.

--
--
--

Naruto had been watching the end of this scene through the bushes. He saw Azami kiss Ryouko, then saw Ryouko clearly turn the other way as the hunt for the girl came closer. Naruto had never seen this kind of behavior from Ryouko before, and he had to call him on it.

“HEY!” he shouted, storming out of the bushes, his eyes round and completely white. His finger was pointed accusingly at Ryouko. “WAKE THE HELL UP!”

Ryouko opened his eyes and ‘woke up’. “Hmm? Naruto-dono? What is it? How long did I sleep?”

“You didn’t sleep, you faker! You just let that girl escape! What the hell’s wrong with you?!”

Ryouko rolled his shoulder- it had gotten stiff from him sitting on the bench. He made sure to keep his face sleepy as he got up to talk to Naruto.

“I had a gut feeling about her. Nothing more, nothing less. Besides, she’s from the Sand,- nothing to do with us.”

“Like hell! You lying perv! She totally kissed you!”

Ryouko’s eyes widened. “Just how long were you watching, Naruto-dono? Long enough to see things that don’t concern you, obviously. Well, I’ve got a few more years in the field than you. Allow me to share my experience with you...”

Naruto was taken aback by this sudden aggression from Ryouko, as his voice had turned almost nasty at the end. He had always known Ryouko to be mild-tempered. But in this case, Naruto had clearly overstepped some boundary.

“In my experience, you get a gut feeling about people. And sometimes, you don’t know the full story about a person. You have to trust your gut in that case. My gut tells me that girl isn’t a bad person. So I’m trusting my gut.”

Naruto sputtered for a minute, but finally spat out “What about that kiss, huh?!”

Ryouko chuckled. “Naruto-dono, I have feelings like anyone else. A girl that beautiful kissing me as a thank you...well, it was nice. It didn’t mean anything other than ‘thanks’, so you have nothing to worry about. Too bad for me, huh?”

Naruto still didn’t like that, but he could understand. That girl was a total babe. It occurred to him that Ryouko had spent the better part of the night alone. A few seconds of him enjoying himself couldn’t be bad.

“Yeah...too bad. Better luck to you next time! Make your move quicker and go to a hotel!”

Back to grinning for Naruto, and back to a stoic face for Ryouko. He let that lapse for a moment- he and a girl, in a hotel after having just met? That definitely wasn’t his style.

--

I finished scolding Naruto for prying quickly. Any speech more than thirty seconds long was lost on this kid. He had the attention span of the higurashi outside my window at night.

By now, Sakura was returning to join us. She had heard the commotion from early as the jonin ran by her, so she decided to do the smart thing and seek out other people who might help. Of course, her timing was bad, but that didn’t matter.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed something strange. The bushes were rustling. It was too big to be an animal. I turned to investigate it, but then I saw something else. Naruto and Sakura hadn’t noticed, but behind them was a ninja. I couldn’t tell his village, but since he was dressed in all black, with kunai in his hands, and sneaking up behind Naruto and Sakura, I took him as an enemy. I drew my sword and ran toward him.

--

It seemed to happen in slow motion. Ryouko ran towards Naruto and Sakura. He grabbed them both by the fronts of their yukatas and pulled them forward. He pushed between them, pushed the kunai away with his free hand, and stabbed with his sword hand. The short blade was just big enough to go completely through this enemy and exit out the other side.

-

“Ugah...” the masked enemy groaned. I gave my sword a twist inside his stomach.

“Bad move, freak. It’s your lucky night, though. I’m letting you live.”

I bit my thumb, made handsigns with one hand (something that made Naruto think of Haku), and summoned my own ninja hound.

“Get the nearest ANBU agents, please, Holly. I have a prisoner for them.”

-

Sakura yelped suddenly- there was a hand at her neck!

“Don’t move!” the voice warned.

Sakura didn’t- but Ryouko did. He blasted the intruder with a brutal genjutsu. Once he released his grip on Sakura, Ryouko tore toward him and took a huge swing. The punch connected right on the man’s jaw. That was enough to wake the man up from the genjutsu, but not enough to KO him. Ryouko was clearly trying to keep a low profile at this festival, so he was using taijutsu instead of ninjutsu.

Sakura, meanwhile, had sunk to her knees. Naruto rushed over to comfort her. They both watched as their sempai fought.

The larger man aimed a punch at Ryouko. Ryouko blocked it with his forearm. But his arm was snatched. He grabbed on, too, but he was thrown backwards over the man’s head. He landed on his back in a defensive fall, immediately spinning once he had hit the ground. He managed to land a kick to the back of the enemy’s leg. Knocking him off balance, Ryouko grabbed on and spun around the man’s waist. As he spun, his hands grabbed on and threw the man to the ground. But the man grabbed Sakura away from Naruto and put up a barrier ninjutsu.

“Now she’s mine!” he declared.

Ryouko tossed a small stick at the barrier. When he saw that the barrier didn’t make things burst into flames, he focused his chakra, took a half-step back to cock his leg, and then kicked it- through the barrier, KO-ing Sakura’s would-be captor.

Now ANBU arrived and began to make arrests. Ryouko just pointed out where they the two men had wound up after the fight. Beyond confirming that he hadn’t gotten any info out of them, he didn’t say or do anything.

--

Sakura started towards me. She had done this before. I guess she considered me a source of safety or comfort. For a minute, I opened my arms wide in an embrace.

What am I doing? I can’t encourage this anymore! There’s no chance of us being anything more than friends...I need to...

I reached out and grabbed Naruto’s sleeve. The material tugged him toward me. I pushed him in front of me, and into Sakura’s open arms. I heard her sound of shock. But I couldn’t keep letting myself be hurt.

So I walked away. I turned and just walked into the night, my sandals making a clacking sound below me. The festival was over, and the only sounds that remained were the breathing of Naruto and Sakura, and my own sandals.

--
--

I waited for Tsunade in her office since bright and early. Before Ojousama and Naruto-dono had even woken up, I was gone.

The two had fallen asleep next to each other on the floor in their big house. I guess the size of it was intimidating. Couple that with the attacks on Sakura last night, and I could understand why they would be together. I was rooting for them.

So why did it hurt to see them happy?

Stifling that thought, I stared out the window at the morning sky. It was a mix of orange, blue, and purple, and reminded me of the lights and sights from the festival last night. That, in turn, reminded me of that girl.

Azami, huh? Well, I'll have to see what info I can dig up on her.

I lit up a chakra cigarette, keeping my lighter's flame alive for a while, staring at it. It had a calming effect.

I had a few questions in my mind for Lady Tsunade first, though. So that girl would have to wait. Like I'd ever see her again.

-

The fitting of a key into the lock outside the door made me turn to see who was coming in. This early, it wouldn't be Tsunade. I wondered if it was Shizune, but then I thought: What if it's Sakura?

I hadn't explained myself about my actions last night. Naruto probably told her about that girl who kissed me. Not that she has any reason to get jealous, but she might. More importantly, I'd never refused a hug from Sakura before. No doubt she'd want to know what my problem was. The worst part was that I couldn't blame her. In all of this, both she and Naruto were innocent. I was acting like a prick. Orders or not, it was wrong to do that to my most loyal friends.

I owe her an explanation. Nothing more.

But to my relief, it was Shizune. She was opening the storeroom next door. The Hokage's office was a public thing, so it was never locked, except for emergencies. She wouldn't be surprised to see me anyway.

Shizune was easy to talk to, so maybe this was lucky. I could ask her a couple questions before Tsunade came.

--

Shizune made a sound of curiosity, seeing someone standing in front of Tsunade's desk at this ridiculous hour. She immediately knew who it was. It made her smile to see him here, but it made her

sigh to know that he wasn't here on good terms.

"Ryouko? You're here early. Is anything wrong?"

Ryouko gave her a look. "Plenty, Ma'am. But for now... I came to ask for a file. I've only got a first name and a village." I said the last bit in an apologetic tone, knowing it was hard to look up shinobi. But something wouldn't let me let this go.

Shizune went over to a drawer full of missing-nin scrolls. She invited him to continue.

"Azami; Sand Village."

While Shizune looked, Tsunade stumbled in, still looking very sleepy. Nights as a Hokage were short. Not to mention that festival made things much shorter. Although the site of Ryouko woke her up.

--

I tapped my used-up cigarette out on my boot, then took out another one of my chakra cigarettes, leaving it unlit in my mouth. I nodded to Tsunade by way of greeting, before saying aloud "Good morning, M'lady."

She returned my nod, immediately sighing. She was clearly dreading whatever it was I had to say. Well, tough. She was gonna hear it. Except she wasn't going to hear what she was expecting.

"I'm curious. If I could only protect one; either Naruto or Sakura- who, by your orders, should I protect?"

Tsunade clasped her hands under her chin, trying to blink herself awake before answering my question.

"Sakura first. She can heal just about any injury you or Naruto sustain. ..."

She paused, unsure of how to continue. I made no attempt to- if she wanted more answers, she'd have to earn them. But instead, she brought up the festival last night.

"Did you wind up having fun?"

I raised an eyebrow. "For about...two minutes. I met an interesting girl, and got in a couple fights. Naruto-dono and Sakura-Ojousama came first, of course. Hence the reason ANBU had to bother with me last night."

Tsunade gave me a small smile. "Well, you met a girl. How did that go?"

"Not as well as you'd hope. I caught her trying to pick my pocket. Then a group of angry jonin from the Sand came looking for her. She seemed genuinely fond of me. But I won't see her again, sad to say."

Tsunade's enthusiasm left as quickly as it came. She now understood that my being cordial this morning was duty; not leftover feelings of fun from last night. In other words, I had been miserable, just

as I'd predicted.

"...You're still upset, aren't you? About me making you serve those two? Naruto and Sakura?"

I shook my head. "No. I remembered it was a prophecy long ago, and that I'm only playing my part. I'm just...feeling lost, I guess. I can't have Sakura; I know that. So being teased by the site of her, in a yukata, hanging on another guy's arm...even if that guy IS Naruto...It's a lot to handle in one night. But it's not fair for me to blame you. And it's definitely not fair to Naruto and Sakura for me to be cold to them."

"Sakura came to me last night, you know..." Tsunade began, giving Ryouko a hard look. "She seemed very upset that you didn't seem to want her to hug you. Care to explain?"

As to be expected from Tsunade, she pulled no punches when she thought her apprentice slighted.

"For once, I did something for me," I said plainly. "I can't keep getting hurt. If I can't be closer to her than I am now, I need to make sure I don't encourage her. It's Naruto she'll need to trust. Not me."

"She can't trust you both?"

"Of course she can! But it should be Naruto she goes to first. I'm only a teacher and a servant. My presence in their lives should be small, and only in the background."

"What about your duties as their friend?"

My voice ran cold. "I can't be their friend, teacher, and servant. Do friends call each other by strict titles? Do friends bow to each other constantly? Do friends teach each other as formally as I have to teach them? No. I won't be a friend in name only."

Tsunade and Shizune were both shocked at my cold voice. But I wasn't done yet. I leaned forward, bracing my hands on Tsunade's thick desk, so I could keep my voice down, and maybe even intimidate.

"I have to watch someone else live my dream. To be legendary. To have Sakura. I can't have either one. My role is to be a supporting character to them. Friends or not...I just can't do it. Not to them, and not to myself."

"How can you just start treating them differently? Do they treat you differently? Just because of a title?!" Tsunade was trying to force me to rescind my statement. But instead, I put my sharp tongue and acid tone to use.

"Do people treat you differently just because of your titles? 'Legend'? 'Hokage'? At least those are respectable titles. I have neither one, and neither one will ever be in my grasp. Instead, I'll be a footnote...a stepping stone...a..."

I realized I was rambling, and cut myself off. I was angry again, and while it was understandable, it wasn't fair to Tsunade, and it wasn't right. So I dropped it. I looked at her, apologized, and excused myself.

“Hold it!” Tsunade ordered. “You won our bet last night. I owe you something of Sarutobi-sensei’s.”

I perked up a bit. That bet had flown out of my head, despite the prize I was really hoping for.

“Oh? That’s right, we did make that bet, didn’t we. So, what did I win?”

Tsunade clasped her hands in front of her, then rested her head on them, letting out a long breath.

“You know, I DO try to think of your feelings through all this. And I did my best to pick something that would suit you. Your combat gear is fine, and your knowledge is good. So I picked something that you might just treasure as a reminder of him.”

Tsunade handed me the Third Hokage’s helmet- the one he had worn in his fatal battle against Orochimaru. It was mostly undamaged, but it clearly hadn’t been cared for since it last saw action. I took the helmet quietly, saying ‘thank you’ in a low tone. I bowed and left, feeling tears welling up.

-

“Will he be okay, Lady Tsunade?” Shizune fretted, laying out the papers on Azami, should Ryouko come back.

“...I don’t know, Shizune. This time...I don’t know. It might be too much for him. He’s only human. Sometimes it’s easy to forget that.”

“Then take him off that assignment! My Lady, it isn’t worth it! What this is doing to him!”

“...I can’t do that,” Tsunade muttered. “I won’t, rather.”

“Why not?!” Shizune half-shouted. “This is hurting him!”

“I know. But can you imagine how he would react if I took him off this mission? Then he’s making a liar out of Sarutobi-sensei; it would mess with his honor; and after all that, he would feel lousy for deserting Naruto and Sakura. So it’s a no-win situation. (Sigh)...”

4 - "Captured" Arc- Chapter 4

Please note: This is one chapter that justifies the heavy advisory content I put on this fic. Please enjoy while keeping that in mind. If you don't enjoy parts like that, then read the next 16 paragraphs, then skip to the next chapter.

I decided to let Naruto-dono and Sakura-Ojousama sleep in today. That festival had been a lot for them to take in. It wasn't everyday that you got attacked on your own home turf. Even though they hadn't actually fought, Sakura had been taken hostage. That was a taxing situation. I hoped by leaving them alone, they would gravitate closer to each other.

For once, rather than fight to belong, I was pushing myself away. That was really hurting now.

I stripped off my clothes in the men's changing room, preparing for a dip in the hot spring. I was never one to let others see my body, but I found that today I didn't care. This time of day, the hot spring should be mostly empty. There were businesses to run and missions to complete. Since I didn't fall in either of those categories, I could have some quiet time.

Indeed. Time enough to think things through.

I stowed my clothes in a cubbyhole, grabbed my towel and washcloth, and made my way into the onsen.

The steam wasn't too thick, as the moisture from nighttime weighed it down. The water was perfect, though. But first, I had to get myself bathed at one of the taps lining the onsen itself. By experience, I knew to start with very tepid water. That way the onsen's almost boiling water would feel that much better.

After I washed my hair, I made sure my body was clean. My mind wasn't exactly on this task, and as a result I tripped over the bucket I had just used to dump water on myself.

**I had no idea I'd be shaken up this badly... Well, either way, I can think in the hot spring. That's why I'm here. ...
I'm not alone.**

I turned my head slowly to show I meant no harm to whoever was with me. Old warrior habits die-hard. And boy, was I thankful for that.

"Did you miss me?"

Before I finished turning my head and could get a look at whoever had joined me, I heard her voice. **'Her' voice? A girl? Wait... Azami!**

I spun quickly, covering my privates with one hand. I turned to see Azami lounging on the edge of the

onsen, only a towel covering her. She gave me a grin.

“What’s with you? After bending the rules for me last night, I didn’t think you’d be such a prude.”

I didn’t instantly have a reply. I was just shell-shocked. I never thought I’d see this girl again. Certainly not in the men’s bath! And I hadn’t expected either of us to be naked.

“Come on, relax!” Azami chided. “It’s nothing I haven’t seen before. Besides, two friends lounging in a hot spring isn’t a big deal, right?”

“Two friends of the same sex isn’t a big deal. When you start getting into the opposite sex, then it rarely stays lounging...”

“Oh, so you’re ‘experienced’?”

“No! er...” Damn, this girl was good. I had talked myself into a corner.

“I see...” she said, nodding. “You DO seem like the type to save it for your true love. You know what I mean by ‘it’, right?”

She was totally purring now, playing with me. Teasing me. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t enjoy it. But it felt like a guilty pleasure. I had to stay focused. She was just playing. Right?

“Of course I do! But that’s not the point. The point is... why are you here?”

She shrugged. “I dunno. Last night, you were...well, different. I haven’t quite been able to figure you out. And I’m the kind of girl that needs to know the answers to questions. I can’t leave a puzzle unsolved...”

She seems genuinely nervous. Or perhaps ‘curious’ is the better word?” Either way, that’s not the only reason she’s here.

“Why I’m the way I am? That’s what you want to know, right?” I asked. She nodded her head in the affirmative.

“Well...There are lots of reasons. But in this case, I didn’t sense you to be a bad person. You seem too...genuine, I guess.”

I doubted that explanation cleared anything up. It didn’t make much sense to me. But Azami seemed to be satisfied. That was about when I began to sense something else from her. I couldn’t tell what, and it reminded of just how much of an enigma this girl is.

“I think I understand now...Just what kind of man you are...”

Fwoop. My eyes widened as her towel hit the floor. She strode over to me, an arm across her chest. She was so casual about it! But that didn’t shock me half as much as when she cozied up to me. I was just a little taller than her, maybe two, three inches. That meant we were just about chest to chest.

She looked me square in the eye and giggled.

“You’re one of those ‘rule-happy’ types. You don’t just need rules- you LIKE them...”

I was standing military straight, not moving my head. Only my eyes followed her. Her hand met the hand in front of my groin. She pulled my hand away gently.

“...No need to be so...stiff,” she said with a wink. “Formal, rather. Just relax. That’s what you came here to do, right?”

She pulled me by my hand into the water. She settled down onto a narrow step, just big enough to sit on. She situated me next to her. Apparently sensing my trepidation/innocence, she slid her bottom closer to me, so we were hip to hip.

“Ahh! The hot springs here are soooo nice!” she commented, stretching her arms high above her head. She didn’t bother to cover up or anything. And yet, I didn’t think she was a whore or anything. She didn’t have that look to her. It seemed like she genuinely just wanted to hang out. Maybe it was my hormones talking, but that’s how it felt.

“...” I kept silent. I really wanted to just relax and enjoy this, but there was no way I could. I had never dated a girl. Never even flirted or anything. So all of a sudden this knock-out is hitting on me?

Azami gave another little giggle. “You are just too cool, you know that? You haven’t even looked at me. I’m not going out of my way to cover up, either. It’s totally fine for you to take a look. We all have those desires... Or maybe you need an invitation?”

Before I could protest (Yeah, like I was gonna protest. I’m a guy, I can’t help it), she pulled my head down toward her breasts. She was so incredibly gentle about it, too. I tilted my head up so I could look her in the eyes. She had one hand on the back of my head. But her other hand...

“!”

I gave her a shove high up on her chest as I twisted to the side. Where my neck had been a split-second earlier, now there a needle sticking out of the rock wall of the onsen.

“Very good!” she applauded. “Most guys wouldn’t have been able to dodge that. I can’t chalk it up to you not having an interest in me- you’re plenty interested, from what I see- so how did you know?”

I focused my chakra to my feet so that I could stand on the water.

“I’ve been stabbed a few times before. Call it a sixth sense about a knife aiming for my back.”

Azami slowed for just a split second. “...I see. Well, I’m really sorry about this. Just so you know, you’re the first guy I ever enjoyed doing the seduction bit with. I’m sorry I’ve got to eliminate you. You’re the first interesting boy I’ve met!”

She threw another few needles, moving into motion so gracefully and efficiently I was impressed even in the throes of battle. I dodged them easily enough, but I sensed another attack coming. This time from the water. I kicked backwards, skidding across the water, making handsigns.

“Water Style: Water Wall!”

Just in time, the water came up to protect me. Two water clones of Azami had leapt up to grab me. They hit the water wall and melted back into water.

Why is she trying to kill me?! Damn it! This makes no sense!

As if sensing my thoughts, she gave me an answer. Standing on top of the water, mist and chakra swirling around her, and a menacing-sounding wind filling the semi-enclosed area, she told me: “It’s nothing personal. You’re just one of my targets. But I won’t insult you by asking you to come quietly. I’d rather earn your respect before I finish this!”

I was unarmed, and that was bad. But I could rely on my jutsus. Especially genjutsu, my strong suit.

More needles flew toward me. I dodged them- or so I thought. Instead, I felt the skin tear high up on my left shoulder, and then one cut me just above my left nipple as I turned to let it go by. Instantly, I knew something was wrong.

Poison slowing my reflexes...no. This is...genjutsu!

I thought about grabbing a needle and stabbing myself, but that would be bad if they were poisoned. Instead, I forced myself to focus. As I performed the release technique, I felt the world speed up to it’s normal pace- and it just kept getting faster!

Genjutsu without handsigns...just like me. Wait...she used another one! Now things are too fast! Release! Damn it! A third? Release! How can she do that?! I’ve only ever done two without handsigns before!

-

Azami charged toward Ryouko, throwing punches and kicks. Ryouko dodged, ducked, and blocked, trying to figure out a way to counter.

“My sources were right!” Azami declared, her breathing not the least bit ragged as she kicked for Ryouko’s head again. “They said you wouldn’t strike a girl! And they were right, weren’t they?!”

This made things problematic for Ryouko, now that she knew that. He might have to break that rule. As yet another punch came in toward his head, Ryouko countered by pulling that arm forward. Azami’s other hand stabbed low, aiming for his groin, but Ryouko knocked that aside with his forearm. He stepped right through and clotheslined her, taking her down to the floor. She hooked his ankle and he crashed with her. And right on top of her!

“Don’t you know you’re supposed to ask a girl before you push her down?” she smiled and leaned up toward him. “How about a kiss?”

That made Ryouko hesitate for one split-second. Now a needle he hadn’t seen hidden on her naked body was at his neck. Azami was laughing yet again.

“You did very well. I’m impressed. But you know I’ve got you dead to rights...”

-

“Then kill me,” I told her. “You got me, fair and square. So finish it.”

Azami didn’t. Instead, she kicked me in the stomach to knock me backward and rolled on top of me, the needle at my neck. She laid completely dead weight on me, with one knee in between my legs. I laid still. It was her right, since she had won. More than that, I was waiting for an opening. That opening wouldn’t come yet, as she put her mouth near my ear.

“I like you... Maybe we can work something out. You arrange for me to live here and be safe in the Leaf Village. In return, I won’t kill you AND I won’t kill any more Leaf Ninja. Not even Naruto. He’s high on my hit list too.”

My eyes widened. But her knee against my groin warned me not to make any moves. She ground her knee in to make her point. I winced, but managed to catch the groan of pain/pleasure in my throat.

“Now, now, you behave! I don’t want to have to use force on you...” she warned, smiling again.

“Kill me,” I repeated. “Because once you do, all the pieces will come together. I looked up your records, right in front of the Hokage’s assistant. So that means they’ll know who killed me. And they’ll find you. And they’ll send someone ten times stronger than me. And as for Naruto-Dono and Ojousama...I’m only a teacher. My death will hold no sway with them, if you plan to use me to lure them out.”

“...You planned ahead, didn’t you?” Azami said mockingly. “Well, let me show you some of my power, then!”

5 - 'Captured' Arc; Chapter 5

Please note: This is one chapter that justifies the heavy advisory content I put on this fic. Please enjoy while keeping that in mind. If you don't enjoy parts like that, skip down six paragraphs. Please enjoy!
-NG

Keeping the needle at my neck, Azami raised her right hand. Without even one hand sign, in it was a flame. The flame looked normal, but I could feel its heat, even while I was covered in water. Gradually, the flame died down until it was simply resting on Azami's fingertip.

"This is what it means to have total mastery over your element of chakra. Now then, where should I put this? Hmm... I could burn your penis off. Singe your nipples. Crisp your armpits... Believe me, even someone as tough as you would feel it and beg me to stop."

She whispered all this into my ear, her voice both threatening and almost sultry. I suddenly felt a mix of things: Shame at being caught like this. Anger that I let myself get caught. Rage that I couldn't do anything about it. And even turned on. This girl owned me, and I enjoyed it. I had really liked her the night before, too. The 'sweet little girl' act was cute. Now she was stronger than me, and totally hot. This made me feel even more shame.

"Interesting to think that I feel like I know you. I feel guilty making somewhat sexual threats to you. You clearly are the chivalrous type when it comes to women. So where can I put this just to teach you a lesson without killing your sex appeal...I know!" she said happily. "Turn over!"

I did. Even knowing what was coming, I couldn't think of a way to escape. She had demonstrated that she was better and stronger than me. In. Every. Way.

Roughly, she pushed me up against one of the bamboo walls around the hot spring. I bounced off it painfully. Her powerful left arm held me against the wall roughly after catching me on the recoil.

"If you move," she hissed in my ear, seizing my hair roughly, "Things will get worse. You can take this pain. There are others in this village that can't, and they're much easier targets. Now, hold still."

I felt the flame lick my back, high up on my right shoulder. Her needle hand was over my mouth, so I couldn't scream. But I wasn't going to. I would take this like a man. If I was even a man anymore. I closed my eyes against my better judgment. The pain was that bad- I had to do something!

After a minute or so, Azami had 'branded' me.

"There now. That wasn't so bad, was it? Oh! Did I ever tell you why I took this approach with you to begin with?"

She pushed me into the water, where my back sizzled and my new mark of shame cooled. I couldn't tell what it was yet, but it didn't feel good.

“Why? Why not just kill me?” I asked. I felt tears in my eyes, and became angry that I couldn’t control my emotions anymore.

“Because...” she cooed, straddling me as I leaned against the wall. She put one hand under my chin, tickling it and teasing me.

“Because I wanted to see your spirit broken. I’ve shattered your resolve.”

It was true. I didn’t feel anything anymore. I hated myself. And yet, I didn’t. I couldn’t figure anything out. I had given up.

“Isn’t it nice to be able to just give up?” she asked me. “Isn’t it just so free? But I can still see a spark of fight in your eyes. That spark must come from that other girl? Or perhaps another reason you have to fight? Well, either way, I’ll put that spark out right now.”

She leaned forward and kissed me. It was a passionate, open-mouthed kiss. But with each bit of joy I felt, I felt an equal amount of shame. I didn’t even want to fight her anymore, and I knew that was wrong. I should have gone down swinging. Instead, I let an enemy take my first real kiss. I felt my resolve to fight shatter like a pane of glass.

I had never been so completely defeated and humiliated.

She seemed to sense that as she released my lips from hers. She stood over me, smiling at my helplessness.

“Now I own you. But I’m interested to see if you can come back from this. You’ve been called a great warrior. “Heaven’s Temper”; the “Dragon Boy”; the list goes on. Will you abandon those monikers? Or will you show me your fangs, ‘Little Tiger’, as your old master called you?”

I didn’t even say anything. I just sat there at her feet. Would it be so bad to just give up? To let her own me? I really liked her, and she was beautiful, and she even liked me. Why couldn’t I just submit to her? Would it be so wrong?

“You can give up now and become my property. If you do, I won’t kill you or your friends. You’ll just serve me, and be my husband. If you consent to this, bow to me and tell me that I own you.”

I froze. I was ready to give up and do anything she wanted. Maybe this was love? I really liked her. So maybe that kiss was okay? And all the abuse? I really found I wanted her to continue.

But something stopped me. The sight of Sakura-Ojousama and Naruto-dono in my mind. All the times we had fought together. My commitment, however hard to bear, to keep them safe. I couldn’t just abandon them.

But for once, I could only struggle to my knees. I had even forgotten I was naked now. I forced all my strength into my voice.

“In three months, I’ll fight you again. If you win, I’ll leave with you quietly, because I’ll have no business protecting people if I can’t even win back my own resolve. I’ll remember this humiliation,

Azami. I'll remember that I enjoyed it, and that I even really like you..."

I stood up, my fist clenched. I met her eyes. There was a small spark back in my own eyes.

"...I will remember all that, and cast it aside! I won't let you threaten my village, or my students, or my friends! I won't allow you to trample on me, or the Will of Fire! I won't stand for it! I'll stop you- even if my life is the price!"

Azami smiled at me, then patted my head. It was such a condescending gesture, but done so gently I didn't even think of reacting violently.

"Good luck with that. In three months, then. We'll battle on top of the Hokage Faces. That way everyone can see the outcome, and your humiliation and defeat will have thousands of witnesses."

With that, she disappeared. With her gone, my weak resolve crumbled. I fell to my knees in the water, then just laid down. As I laid there, shame all over me, I thought one more thing:

I can't let her win. Even if I might be in love with her.

--
--

That day in training, I was different. I had always worked hard. But today, I made things even harder.

I had a friend who could seal chakra. She was this beautiful Shinto Priestess. A Miko. Asuna was her name. With long, brown hair tied up in a ponytail, and clothed in a cosplaying otaku's dream costume, a Miko outfit, she was cute. She had dark, inquisitive eyes, and she was an incredibly strong female, mentally speaking. She and I had thought about dating, but after talking a few times, there was no spark. We were the dreaded 'just friends'.

She was almost tomboyish, but a sweetheart beneath her tough girl exterior. I was one of the few privileged to see that side of her. For now, though, I asked her to give me her worst.

"Seal my chakra. Please, Asuna-chan. I have to get stronger. My leisurely pace before...it's not cutting it."

Asuna could tell something was eating at me, but she was courteous enough not to pry for details. Instead, she sealed my chakra with one of her chakra wards. I wished I could learn that technique. Not that she hadn't tried teaching me; I just couldn't quite get it.

Sealing chakra was a painful thing. The tag had to be placed on your bare skin. Then it sizzled and dug into your skin. Kind of like an acid. After that, your chakra was gone. You could move, but you felt ten times heavier. It was perfect training. I, who had no time to lose, took this extreme method and hoped it would work.

"Naruto-dono; Sakura-Ojousama- attack me when you're ready. We'll spar like this for an hour. After that time, will you please jump in, Asuna-chan?"

"Asuna-*chan*? When did I say you could call me that? ...But, whatever!" the Miko said, going over to the side to stretch herself out. In her mind, though:

He gave me a pet name! No one's ever done that before...

--

Sakura didn't like this. Ryouko-sempai was never this serious about training. Not when it was with her and Naruto. By himself was different. After last night's deal with avoiding her hug, Sakura couldn't deny it any longer: Something was bothering Ryouko.

But he hasn't told Naruto or me. And no way he'd go to Lady Tsunade... ! What's that? On his back?

As Ryouko went to pull off his vest, his shirt pulled up in the back. There, Sakura had seen the burn Azami had given him. She decided she would confront Ryouko about it. And if he wouldn't tell her, then she would play hardball- even pull rank, if it came to that.

--

I just got my vest off and folded it up when Sakura came over to me. I gritted my teeth- I hadn't worked out my explanation to her yet. Not to mention last night's image of her in that yukata was still fresh in my mind. And of course, my humiliation at the hands of Azami was in there, too. My nasty little mind starting to imagine Sakura in Azami's place. I found that both girls were attractive to me, but in different ways.

"Hi Ryouko! Um...I've got a question..."

She was so cute when she was asking me like that! She looked a little timid. In her little skirt and vest outfit, she looked really cute. And she was so polite, too. A quality female.

Azami, on the other hand...she was sexy, worldly, and dangerous. Most guys would pick her over Sakura any day, in an instant.

"Sure, go ahead, Ojousama," I hear my self respond automatically.

"...That burn on your back. It looks like a tattoo. What does it mean?"

I gasped- I had forgotten about that! It hadn't hurt or anything since it was seared into my skin. And as for what it said...who knew? It was in a place I couldn't see without a mirror. I had spent the entire morning lying down, feeling defeated, depressed, and still a little turned on. But that was fading as I felt shame more predominately.

"..." I had already been naked in front of a girl today. So why not let this girl, one I actually trusted, take a look at my back. That in mind, I pulled off by blue jonin shirt.

"...Ojousama, can you draw the burn on the ground? I'll explain it later, but I need to know...what does it look like?"

Sakura took up a stick and began to pen out my tattoo in the dirt. I watched it take shape. My face paled. I could have cried. The tattoo read: (loosely translated from the katakana used to write it) *I own you.* -A (Katakana: Ai oun yu)

I buried my face in my hands. I just sat down on the ground, right there. This girl...each time I gained a

flicker of hope or resistance, she had my move pegged and knocked me down again.

“Who’s... ‘A’?” Sakura asked me. She made sure none of the others saw this. I was so touched by her kindness that I immediately told her the whole, humiliating story. Every last detail.

“...and she said that, in three months, we’ll fight again. If I lose, she owns me. If I win...I don’t know. I guess she doesn’t own me. But I’ve never been so utterly defeated and embarrassed! And worst of all...I...liked it...”

Sakura didn’t try to comfort me. I didn’t blame her. I couldn’t bring myself to blame her. But she did finally speak:

“...Tell me why you pulled Naruto in the way when I went to hug you.”

I looked around carefully. Naruto and Asuna were off by the woods, arguing about something. The two actually got along pretty well, but they both had strong personalities. When they were left alone, they tended to fight.

But that wasn’t important. What was important was me having to tell Sakura the truth about that. I had been so beaten today, mentally and physically, that I just flat-out told her:

“I couldn’t let myself get hurt again. You see, I’ve had a crush on you for three years now. But I never felt like there was a good time to tell you. And now that I’m your servant...it just didn’t seem right.”

I sighed heavily, and just bowed my head.

“And this isn’t the way I wanted to tell you how I felt...feel. But I’d rather you understand why I did what I did. This way, you don’t have to wonder if it’s something you did. Because I promise you, as lame as it sounds...it’s not you. It’s me.”

Sakura was clearly shocked, at least at first. But little by little, she seemed to understand.

“Of course! The blushing around me! The constant desire to protect me! I can’t believe I didn’t notice! But why didn’t you tell me?”

I looked away. “I’ve always been intimidated by girls. Even you, who was always so nice to me. What if you said you didn’t like me back? We have to work together. It’d be awkward for you and embarrassing for me. Neither of us needs to be put through that. And...I’m afraid of change. What if things changed for the worse? ...I’m a fool.”

Silence.

It seemed both of us had something to think about. Well, we could do that during training. I had a deadline to meet.

--

That night, I lay in bed bruised and exhausted. I had fought for a full hour without chakra. Then I sparred with chakra for another hour- against a tag team of Rock Lee and Might Gai, no less- but still only taijutsu. Finally, I spent hours on my ninjutsu. That meant that tomorrow would be a lot of genjutsu

training. Especially as I remembered how much better Azami was than me at it.

I needed my rest, but my body wouldn't accommodate. I jumped at every sound; every flash of light. I tossed and turned. I couldn't take anything, because I was a wanted man. If Azami came back, I couldn't even give her a fight.

But after a cup of tea and a cigarette (a real one, as opposed to my healthy chakra cigs), I finally drifted off. I'm not sure how long I was asleep for, but it didn't feel like more than an hour.

"Gotta pee..." I mumbled, kicking off my blanket and stumbling to the bathroom. I felt something around my neck. I thought it was just some straw from my mats, but then I felt some cold metal hit me in the center of the chest.

A chain? Wait...

My brow was suddenly heavy with sweat. I felt the chain with my hands. I followed it up to my neck- a collar?! As I tugged it, a piece of paper fluttered down to the floor.

"Huh? A note?"

I bent down and picked it up. My hands shook as I read it's contents.

It's three o'clock am. Do you know where your Ojousama is?

You'd better find her. Do not attempt to remove this collar. If you do, it will be your charges that will suffer.

-Azami

6 - 'Captured' Arc; Chapter 6

I began to shake. I wanted to sob and just give up. But I couldn't. Not when I had those two to defend. By itself, my life meant nothing to me. But I wouldn't let others suffer on my account. Even if it meant embarrassing myself like this.

Damn you, Azami. I'll make you pay someday!

I pulled my sandals on, threw my door open, and ran like mad to Naruto and Sakura's training home.

I hope I'm not too late!

--

There was a knock at the door. Sakura didn't wake up, but Naruto did. Straightening his sleeping hat and scratching his butt, he went to the door.

"Whaddaya want?! –huh?!"

Before Naruto was Ryouko. Only with a collar and chain around his neck. Naruto was in the opening stages of a dirty joke when Ryouko interrupted him.

"Naruto-dono, where's Ojousama?!" Ryouko demanded. Naruto had never seen the boy look so panicked before.

"She's been asleep on the floor since training ended. Why, what's going on?"

Hastily, Ryouko unfolded the note. He thrust it into Naruto's hand, looking all around, as he was worried about something finding him. That caused Naruto to read the note quicker. When he did, he immediately raced to get Sakura.

"Sakura! C'mon, wake up!" Naruto shook her shoulders, making her pink hair sway back and forth. She was miffed when she woke up, and decked Naruto as a consequence.

"What is it?!" she yelled, still half-asleep.

"Look, Ryouko's here! He's got this, like, collar on, so don't be shocked. But there was this note. It's from this 'Azami'."

"Oh, my God! That psycho dog from earlier! C'mon, we've gotta make sure he's okay!"

As Sakura got up, something fell from behind the note. It was a chakra cigarette. Without knowing why, she stuffed it into her waist pouch.

-

I stood outside, cursing at Naruto for not letting me in. It wasn't that cold outside during summer, but I was wearing this freakin' collar! If someone came by it would be really embarrassing.

That's when I felt it- breath on my neck. I spun around and swung my fist, but it was caught, and my arm was wrenched behind my back. I felt long hair brush against my bare back before a hand slapped my bottom.

"Well, well, you actually followed the instructions in my note? Be honored- I really enjoy your company."

Azami pushed me up against the house, tying another length of chain around my wrists. Once again, I couldn't fight her. But why? Was there something more than emotions stopping me? Or was I so desperate for female attention that I'd let myself get abused like this?

"Good. Now then, get on your knees, or I'll kill your students as soon as they open the door up to help you!"

This was it. I couldn't take it. My masters were endangered because of me. I wouldn't let myself be a bargaining chip in this stupid war! I opened my mouth wide and prepared to bite my own tongue off. I would drown myself with my own blood.

"Now, don't do that," she said, almost nonchalantly, having once more read my move. "If you kill yourself, I'll still kill them both. And we can't have your warning them either..."

Without warning, some ball of material was stuffed into my mouth, and another piece held it in place. A knee to the groin sank me to my knees. I would have sank farther, but Azami's gave the chain a sharp jerk, pulling me back up.

"Good boy. You just stay there, now. I'm curious to see how well you've trained those two in just a month. They've been lucky with instructors, haven't they? Kakashi the 'Copy Ninja', and one Sannin each teaching them... I wonder how you got to be next in line. Hmm, 'Heaven's Temper'?"

I didn't answer. But I also didn't feel so bad this time. I began to suspect something was up. This girl could have killed me any time she wanted, and then gone for Naruto and Sakura. She didn't need to humiliate me- especially not a second time. She had broken me the first time. So now, when there was nothing left to break, why do it again? And the message on my back. I cycled through it so many times in my head. She choose to use English loan words, rather than pure Japanese. Why? There had to be more of a meaning.

This girl is stronger than the Kazekage, Gaara. Wait...Gaara. Gaara! His tattoo! Ai! 'Love'! If I think of it that way, she wrote 'love' on my back, mixed in with 'owning me'. So maybe...Could this mean...

This psycho loves me?

I looked at the facts:

She hadn't seriously hurt me

There was such a thing as female to male domination

She even said that she liked me

But that still didn't add up. Why involve my students? Then it hit me: Sakura!

She's a bounty hunter and I'm a target. But she's in love with me. Sakura realized earlier that I loved her. I even told her so. Obviously, Azami hadn't left. So maybe she heard and decided to eliminate her rival? There's one way to test this...but I've got to get this gag off first...

After a moment, I realized how. It would mean humiliating myself again, but after tonight, that meant nothing. I had to save Sakura...er, Ojousama!

"mmp!"

-

Azami looked down. She smiled at Ryouko. He could see it now- warmth behind that smile! But not in her words.

"What's the matter? Are you trying to tell me something? Hmmm, little pet? I'll let you speak- but only after those two come outside. I can't let you warn them."

-

I gave her the cutest, most helpless look I could. I had seen love in her eyes. I knew what it looked like 'cause I looked at myself in the mirror every day and thought about Sakura. Especially when I kissed my image in the mirror and pretended it was her. (Like you've never done it!)

"I wonder what those two could be planning?" Azami wondered aloud. "They're certainly planning something good to save their dear teacher."

I just stayed still. She wanted a reaction. Well, there's no law that says everything has to go your captor's way. The more trouble you cause, the more they get upset. The sloppier they get. You yourself might die, but the next guy would have a better shot. That's what I was banking on. Of course, I had no plans to die, but in my position I could do little more than hope.

I guess Azami got bored because she took the gag off. I gasped in the fresh air- man, I had never appreciated something so simple so much before! My reaction was understandable, and also useful. I could have a minute to spring my trap. I just had to lead up to it.

"So, how did you get this collar on me when I was asleep?"

Azami smirked at me. "You didn't notice? How do you think you got to sleep at all? Your tea, genius. I slipped you a mild mickey."

"Well done. I didn't notice," I commented, mildly sarcastically. "So, tell me why a beautiful girl like you is doing all this. If I'm a target, why not just kill me?"

Azami looked a little downcast. She whispered softly to me.

"...You didn't enjoy it? But I thought for sure you would."

My plan had been to catch her off guard. Instead, it was me she had tripped up. I listened as she kept talking.

“...At the festival. You were so polite, and so nice! You didn’t try to chase me. You didn’t make any stupid passes at me. You just acted like a gentleman. When I looked into your eyes, the first thing I saw...it wasn’t lust, like the other boys. It was...well, almost sadness. Maybe regret. And...well, I am a girl! I can tell when a boy feels left out. The way you watched that blonde kid walk off with that pink-headed kunoichi... I could tell you loved her. And I guess...I’ve been hurt, too. You just seemed like...maybe you needed someone to help you. A kind of help you couldn’t ask for. Someone had to offer.”

I was completely taken aback. I hadn’t seen this coming. I immediately melted.

“That’s really sweet of you. But really, you didn’t have to do this BDSM deal. I just want someone who loves me for me. Like that sweet girl you seemed to be at the festival.”

Azami lowered her eyes. “You...liked that side of me? But I had heard you say you liked practical girls. Being a simpering female...how would that appeal to you?”

“It doesn’t. But I guess...every guy wants to protect his woman. There’s just something primal and wonderful about it.”

I could see shades of that sweet girl at the festival. Had she really done all this for me? I mean, it was sexy in a twisted way. And I had enjoyed it. But still...as fun and spontaneous as it was, maybe a little warning?

Azami got off me so that she could kneel down to my level.

“...Did you really buy all that crap I just spouted?” she asked sarcastically.

“Yes, I did,” I said genuinely. I looked her in the eyes, unblinking. “I think you did, too.”

“Oh, shut up!” she shot back, blushing furiously. Man, she was cute when she blushed! She stopped being cute when she put her cigarette out on the side of my face. It was too late, though. She had hesitated- that meant she really WAS in love!

Can I return that love? I wondered. ...**Even after all this...**

--

Sakura and Naruto walked out of the house. They both wore grim expressions. No tricks, apparently. I wondered just what they had planned.

“...What is it you want?” Sakura asked plainly. I mentally noted she was taking the lead. Good girl!

“...I want to see the future legendary students of the ‘Heaven’s Temper’.”

Sakura and Naruto exchanged glances. I hadn’t told them about my nickname. Even with the befuddled looks on her target’s faces, Azami continued.

“To think I captured ‘Heaven’s Temper’, and put him on a leash! You CAN tame a beast!” she exclaimed, tugging on Ryouko’s chain. Ryouko looked really pissed, but he didn’t make a move. That had seemed odd to Sakura.

He doesn’t need handsigns for genjutsu...so why didn’t he use it? Is it because he can’t? Or because it’s not effective? (eyes narrow) Either way, it means that he either can’t make a move, or is waiting for the right time. That means it’s up to me to create the right time. Or just flat-out win.

Azami pointed at Sakura. “You. I’ll fight you. Kunoichi to kunoichi. If you win, I’ll let this handsome little boy go free. If you lose...I get to keep him!”

Sakura tightened her gloves. “I figured as much. You can’t have Ryouko-sempai, sorry to say. He belongs to me and Naruto!”

Azami gave a hollow laugh. “All the times I’ve heard some girl defend her man! ‘He’s mine!’ But this is the first time a girl has ever said ‘he belongs to me and ‘so and so’! We’ll just see, then, won’t we? I think there’ll be a change of ownership tonight...”

Azami moved FAST! It was all Sakura could do to dodge back just enough to avoid a critical hit. Azami’s fist still connected, though just barely, on Sakura’s chin.

Azami straightened up, blowing on her fist. “Blondie can fight, too. Both of you at once. Oh, and one more surprise- if your sempai tries to get involved, or you try to rescue him...watch!”

Azami tapped her upper back, near her right shoulder. As soon as she did, Ryouko clutched his back. He could feel her burning his back all over again.

“Ryouko!” Sakura started towards him, but Azami repeated the movement.

“You should have healed that burn, instead of analyzing it. Now then...we’ll fight for a half-hour maximum. Every ten minutes we fight, I’ll burn him again. At the end of thirty minutes, the one with less injury is the winner. The loser gives up quietly; the winner gets to keep Ryouko.”

Whoosh!

Sakura had moved nearly as fast as Azami. Her punch didn’t connect, but it DID manage to knock Azami off balance. Naruto charged in with three Shadow Clones. Azami dodged and weaved between their attacks, looking as graceful as a dancer.

“Wind Style: Wind Blade!” she called out, swinging her right arm as though she held a sword. The shadow clones all disappeared in puffs of smoke.

Naruto, a wind-type chakra, could sense it:

She’s manipulating wind, like a sword! Man, I can’t even see it! I guess it’s best to attack from a distance for now. But that sucks! Sakura and I are both short range style fighters! What do we do? Damn it!

Sakura, meanwhile, was busy trying to figure out what to do. She couldn't just give up. She had to think of something to do.

I'll let Naruto's clones go in first. That way, I can pick out her attack pattern. Once I do that, I can find a weakness.

...

Wait! I've got it!

7 - 'Captured' Arc; Chapter 7

“Naruto, mob her with Shadow Clones!” Sakura yelled out. Naruto did, and the clones quickly swamped Azami from all sides. Meanwhile, Sakura made her move- she ran to Ryouko.

“Hold still, sempai! I’m going to heal you! Then we’re getting out of here!”

Sakura healed Ryouko’s burn, taking care to pull out any poison or anything else that might harm him. She found nothing, so she assumed Azami’s chakra had been involved somehow.

The burn was healed. But then something weird happened- the collar Azami had put on Ryouko yanked him backward. He tried to resist, but couldn’t do much since his hands were bound behind his back. The collar pulled him backward until he reached a tree branch. There, the chain wound around the branch and began to pull. Somehow, this collar had turned itself into a hangman’s noose!

“Predictable!” Azami crowed, destroying more clones. “It was so obvious you would do that. Now your sempai can suffer.”

Sakura just smirked back. A small breeze tossed her hair, adding to her confident look. “You really think that was all that was happening? There were a hundred Shadow Clones here. It would be child’s play for one to...”

Ryouko grabbed the limb, his arm’s free now. A grinning Naruto clone gave Azami the finger and a pulled-down eyelid, holding up the chain that had trapped Ryouko’s arms until just now. The clone then used a kunai to cut Ryouko’s collar off.

Ryouko just fell to the ground like a limp rag.

Azami shook her head. “Amazing. A simple trap like that is too much for you?!”

“What did you do to him?!” Sakura demanded, clenching her fists. It seemed like, no matter what, this damn girl had her beaten!

“That collar was a chakra restraint. In other words, it choked off his chakra. When you released the collar, the chakra left him. It’ll come back, don’t worry- but he won’t be able to fight. If the collar had stayed on, then his chakra would have diminished little by little. But now...it really is all up to you two.”

Sakura suddenly remembered- the chakra cigarette in her waist pouch! Azami saying chakra so many times in one sentence reminded her! She quickly took it out of her waist pouch, stuffed it in Ryouko’s mouth, and...how was she going to light it?!

Urk...didn’t plan for that!

But she improvised. An exploding tag burned for a few seconds before it exploded. So all she had to do

was stop it before it exploded, and the cigarette could be lit!”

“Naruto, stall her!”

Sakura helped Ryouko gulp in the good stuff from his chakra cigarette. He just had to get up! He didn’t have to fight- just run. That way, Naruto and Sakura didn’t have to keep worrying about him. They needed to focus on their own fight, and having Ryouko lying there like that wasn’t helping them.

“Just a reminder: If you lose, I get to keep him! And I promise you; he’ll be well taken care of- for a while. Then, he’ll become ‘just another’ object I own. He’ll live only to pleasure me and take care of me. If that’s not what you want for him, then you’d better plan something to save him!”

Sakura gritted her teeth, clenched her fist, and shouted: “You can’t have him! Even if he’s not ‘mine’, and I can’t lay claim to him...the likes of you won’t lay claim to him either!”

--

The worst part of all this for me was the wondering. Would it be so bad if Azami won? So what if she ‘owned’ me? She really seemed to like me. And, speaking as a guy...any guy would want an owner like her. I had seen both her sweet and sour sides, and both were damn attractive!

But on the other hand, there was Sakura. Kind, sweet, gentle, strong, and reliable. Azami was sexy in a worldly way; Sakura was more down to earth. To me, they were both the most beautiful women in the world. Azami had done nothing but abuse me, but all the same I could almost see that she loved me.

Sakura was out there, fighting a battle she might not win because she cared for me. But HOW did she care for me? The same way I cared for her? The way a student cares for a teacher? The way friends care for friends?

As I lay on the grass, my cigarette in my mouth, I realized how ashamed I felt. I had been defeated and humiliated so thoroughly that I couldn’t even get up and fight. I had been in worse positions than this and come out on top. But this time, I was just drained and willing to let fate take it’s course.

That’s the coward’s way out! Letting fate decide! If I do that, I’m no better than that smart-@\$\$ Neji Hyuuga! My position is clear.

--

“Sakura! You can do this!” Ryouko shouted. He had forced himself up against a tree, breathing heavily but staying upright.

I’ve long given up my own hopes and dreams. Since the Third Hokage told me what I would do, I always knew a day like this would come. I can’t let myself be selfish. I can’t do anything but support Sakura, and that’s all I should do. It’s my fight, but Azami involved Sakura. Now I’ve got to trust her skills.

Naruto grinned, an idea coming into his head. He whispered something to Sakura. She nodded, then turned away from Azami and cupped her hands. Naruto ran and vaulted off her hands, high up in the air.

Up there, he used his Shadow Clone Jutsu. They all began to scramble, making it all but impossible for someone to pick out the real Naruto.

“Fine then! I’ll just destroy you all!” Azami yelled, using her strange wind blade again. Clone after clone fell and disappeared, until only two were left. One was the real Naruto. So Azami would hit him with her next attack, at the latest.

Scwick!

Azami’s sword arm dangled limply at her side. Sakura’s glowing blue hand had cut through muscles and tendons, and was coming back for a return strike. Azami managed to block the return strike. Naruto came flying in with a Rasengan, but that was dodged just barely by Azami.

--

I listened as Azami played a nasty card- one that involved all of us.

“Do you care for the boy you’re defending that strongly? What kind of feelings might you have? If it isn’t love, then I must say- I have never seen a friend defend another friend in such a fierce way.”

Azami healed her arm. She held it up, flexed it, then nodded; apparently satisfied with her handiwork. “I’ve killed people with friends before. And they always say that they’d do anything for their friends. But when it comes to their friend’s lives versus their own, the first to die is the friend. Your life has been in plenty of danger, but you haven’t given a thought to your own life. Very impressive. The essence of a shinobi is to throw away emotions, and be that much stronger for it. But you seem to keep your motions and use them as a fuel of sorts...”

Sakura leapt back to Naruto and Ryouko, standing protectively in front of them. Both boys had just about zero chakra. It was up to Sakura.

“I love both these boys. In different ways. I won’t let you have either one of them,” Sakura said firmly. But her hands were shaking with emotion. “Why are you doing this? If you like Ryouko, why not just talk to him?! Why this elaborate scheme?! Why make him suffer?!”

Azami’s eyes widened as she smiled. “Isn’t it obvious? Little Ryouko there likes this. He would never get the guts to ask me out on his own. So, instead, I made it easy on him. I TOOK him. I broke his spirit. It makes him mine. He already likes me- now he knows what he has to look forward to. And I very much like what I see. Plus...Don’t you think it’s hot? To fight for your man, and your right to him? Don’t you want to say ‘this boy is mine, and no one else can have him’? It makes you feel strong, and it makes your man feel wanted. There’s no harm in it.”

Sakura was caught off guard. Azami was absolutely correct. Sakura liked to feel like she owned Naruto and Ryouko. She liked the thought that they might be dependent on her- like now, for example. But she also liked the thought of belonging to them, too. It was a joint effort.

“...Even though I see your point, Azami...these two boys are MINE. And they’re off-limits to you. You can’t have them. Even if Ryouko loved you with all his heart, I would oppose it with my very being!”

I've got to admit, I really didn't see that coming at all! Sakura felt like she owned me? And she loved me and Naruto, but in different ways? Which way did she love me? I really wanted to know!

Azami chuckled merrily, but lowered her weapon. "Alright, I'm convinced. I'll let you hold on to my pet over there. In three months, when I beat him, I'll own him fair and square. Then you can oppose it all you want, but it won't matter. That boy is a gentleman. And a gentleman always backs his word..."

Azami appeared next to me, her hand under my chin. I was frozen by her touch again. My head was working more this time, and I felt something:

A mild genjutsu. THAT'S why I froze up when she talked to me! And I felt the trick this time because my chakra was so low. To release a genjutsu, aside from physical pain, you halt the flow of chakra to your brain. With so little chakra reaching my brain, this became apparent.

But even more apparent was the feeling of pleasantness. I liked this girl touching me and teasing me. That part wasn't genjutsu. And the knowledge that, if I went with this girl, Sakura would oppose me...that made things worse.

Her hand still on my chin, she pulled me close.

"You're an attractive boy. It must be hard to watch two girls you like fight. Or maybe...maybe it makes you happy. Maybe you want us to decide who you go with. Maybe you want to be owned by one of us."

"Maybe I do," I shot back. "So what?"

Azami kissed me again, knowing I didn't have the strength to fight her.

"It's nice to just let me own you, isn't it? There are plenty of ways I can tell you're liking this. So why fight it? Besides- you can't fight it. You're at my mercy at any given time. So you might as well just make it easier for both of us. In three months, I'll be back to claim my prize- you."

With that, Azami was gone, and I was defeated yet again. This time, with only words and a kiss, she had broken the shattered remains of my resolve into yet more pieces. But now, glowing at the center of my being was a warm feeling. The feeling of when Sakura spoke of loving me in some way.

I had three months. In between time, I had more missions to complete. For now, it's best I let this go. But this story isn't over...

Not by a long shot.

--

Next: 'Comrades' Arc

8 - Arc Iii: Comrades- Chapter 1

Sakura and Sasuke stood across from each other. The ground was cracking with chakra, and it was already pockmarked from battle. The sounds of battle continued. Naruto continuously clashed with Kabuto, while Ryouko was fighting to the hilt with Orochimaru.

They were both in over their heads. But they did this to give Sasuke and Sakura time. Ryouko and Naruto both loved Sakura. She loved them, too- but in a different way. She had to know if Sasuke was the only man for her.

“Sasuke...it’s been so long...” she began, her words coming out soft. She wanted to scream at him, and hit him, and tell him how stupid he was. But she couldn’t do that. Not yet. There HAD to be a reason. “Just tell me why you left us, Sasuke. Why?”

Sasuke could only think of his brother. In his daze, he told Sakura the last words he ever thought he’d hear himself say:

“To test the limits of my own abilities.”

--

Ryouko and Orochimaru were now sword to sword, each struggling to gain an advantage. They pushed at each other, teeth barred in pure hatred. Their swords canceled each other out. It would be the wielder, not the weapon, that dictated the outcome of the fight.

“You...won’t win! You’re not even of shinobi blood!” Orochimaru crowed.

“You won’t win! I may not win, but I won’t lose! I’ll take you with me, if it’s the last thing I do!”

“Your little girlfriend is over there, talking to Sasuke. What happens when he kills her?” Orochimaru sneered.

Ryouko pushed harder, giving a fierce kick to Orochimaru’s leg. It wasn’t enough to topple the Sannin, but it made Ryouko feel better.

“I’ll kill you, then I’ll kill him. Then I’ll pray to God my soul be saved for murdering you both. But I think he’ll forgive me. Because by killing you and him, I’ll have saved countless lives!”

-

Naruto and Kabuto locked kunai, each pushing furiously.

“You’re good, Naruto! I’m surprised! But you still can’t beat me!”

Naruto responded by hitting Kabuto with a Rasengan. Then, before he could get up, a second Rasengan was buried in Kabuto’s stomach.

“Guess I proved you wrong, you four-eyed freak! And your sensei’s all tied up! Now...Sakura!”

--

Orochimaru grinned nastily for a moment, then opened his mouth. Out of it came a second Orochimaru, with another sword! It popped out behind Ryouko and stabbed forward. It was all Ryouko could do to duck under the strike. The Orochimaru’s swords kept stabbing at him, and he kept moving. But all the same, he kept them contained.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ryouko saw Naruto make it to Sakura’s side. Team Seven re-united.

Good. Now I just need to keep Orochimaru busy while they sort themselves out. I’m pretty sure my life is forfeit here, but if it makes Sakura smile...even just once more...

The Orochimaros bobbed and weaved. It was all Ryouko could do to follow them and dodge their strikes. They didn’t give him time to weave signs, and he couldn’t get his eyes locked one either one long enough to put a genjutsu out there. But there was the answer!

“False Surroundings Jutsu!”

Ryouko put the jutsu on the area around himself, rather than on Orochimaru’s senses. He released it almost instantly, but it gave Ryouko time enough to pull a quick Shadow Clone jutsu to even the odds.

--

Schunk!

My clone was skewered instantly, from both sides. The swords of both the Orochimaru’s met in the middle of my clone. As they were shadow clones, I sustained a measure of the damage, too, just below my right shoulder. Blood spilled out of my mouth as the Orochimaros both twisted their blades violently.

Something was wrong- my clone wouldn’t disappear. It just stayed there, trapped between the blades. That meant I felt each twist of the swords to some degree. I was going to die, unless I did something!

I rushed one of the Orochimaru’s. But from his sleeve poured snakes, forcing me back again. I didn’t dare use another clone of any kind. So I was virtually powerless.

--

“Sasuke! You’ve got to come home! Ditch this guy!”

Naruto was urging almost frantically, even grabbing Sasuke’s sleeve. But Sasuke tugged his sleeve away from Naruto. When Sakura stepped forward, she was slapped across the face. She dropped to her bottom, stunned by the gesture. As she fell, she saw Ryouko fighting out of the corner of her eye.

Ryouko met her eye, and shook his head once, firmly. It meant ‘do your thing, forget me!’

Sakura did, but kept glancing at the battle. She had just forced Sasuke out of her heart, and now here he was in front of her. It was all she desired...but not now. She had two other boys she loved. She had no room in her mind to sort through feelings for an old crush. Especially one that would just slap her.

“Sasuke...I don’t know what Orochimaru can give you that we can’t. But it can’t be good enough to forget us...” Naruto looked his old friend in the eye, almost desperate. “Come back with us. Make things like they used to be!”

Sasuke regarded Naruto with silence. After a moment, though he gave a hard statement: “Things can never be that way again. Instead of chasing me, chasing the past...go become Hokage. Chase down your future. I won’t come with you. Not now, not ever. If I return to the Leaf, it will be on my terms.”

“Damn it! I’ve had it with you!” Naruto growled, the nine-tailed fox welling up inside him. His face started to become feral as one tail emerged. Then two. Then three. “I’ll bring you back, even if I have to destroy you to do it!”

With a growl of rage, Naruto attacked Sasuke.

--

I looked from one Orochimaru to the other, trying to decide how to proceed. My options were limited, because I had to go face Sasuke next- at least, I felt there was a good chance I would. Right now, I was buying time. I either had to kill Orochimaru, or keep him distracted. I knew which was more likely. So I began to think of what I could do to rescue my clone.

A sword extended that far...it’s breaking point is likely where it’s weight changes...right around the middle, there should be a balance point. If I can just break one...For that, I’ll need a little help...

Ryouko unrolled a scroll as he ran. It flapped behind him as he dipped his thumb into his shoulder wound to get blood to draw with. Letting the scroll fly in the air, Ryouko moved forward at top speed. He hated to do this to a legendary sword, but it had to be done. It was life and death.

--

Sasuke tried to hit Naruto with his sword, the unblockable Chidori-laced blade. But Naruto’s demonic chakra just ate through hit, ripping the sword out of Sasuke’s hands. Naruto’s fist swung in and smacked Sasuke hard across the face. It was a killing strike.

Fhssshhhh.

Sasuke’s cursed seal was activated, and one of his wings had protected him from most of the demonic chakra just as Naruto’s fist was making contact. The same wing tried to hit Naruto. But things went from bad to worse, as a fourth tail grew from Naruto’s body. He now resembled the demon fox more than he did himself.

“No...” Sakura managed to utter, almost mouthing the word instead.

Without Captain Yamato here, there’s no way to seal that chakra! It’s going to consume Naruto!

Risking a glance over her shoulder, Sakura saw Ryouko still battling Orochimaru. Being smart, she began to think rationally.

If Lady Tsunade put him with us, then he must have some kind of weapon against Naruto’s

chakra! But that means I've got to help him halt Orochimaru first...I don't know if I'm good enough for that...

Sakura took a deep breath. Good enough or not, all three men in her life were about to perish. She had to save one of them to save the other two. It was hard to leave Naruto and Sasuke to fight, but Ryouko was the only one with any kind of chance of sealing that chakra.

But as it turns out, she would be beaten to it...

--

Orochimaru happened to look over to check on Sasuke. He didn't make that a habit- the boy was so ridiculously strong he didn't seem to need supervision most of the time. But right now, he was in just about over his head.

That four-tailed beast gave even me trouble. Sasuke may have surpassed me, but he's never fought demons as I have. Without Kabuto here, I can't get close...

Orochimaru swallowed his clone just as Ryouko's spectacular counter-attack happened. The scroll he had thrown released a sword. "Ten no Kishootsu"- in English, 'Heaven's Temper'. There was one blade stronger than the Kusanagi. Ryouko didn't have that. He had a blade that could rival the Kusanagi. It was so powerful that, unless wielded by a legend, it had to be sealed away. How Ryouko came to possess this legendary sword is a tale best left for another time. What matters is that he shifted his attack was wasted.

"We'll finish this another time, child," Orochimaru told Ryouko. "Right now, we need each other to stop that beast. Surely you know what will happen if he's not stopped?"

Ryouko reluctantly put away his sword. "Agreed. I can seal it...but you'll have to give me time. Not to mention get Sasuke to back off. If I can get in close enough, I'll only need a half-second... Sis Mea Pars!"

(Sis Mea Pars- Latin for 'You become a part of me')

Ryouko's clone, still in tact, disappeared. Ryouko received a measure of his chakra back, having used the obscure jutsu he had created by accident.

"One half-second is all I need," Ryouko repeated.

I looked to Sakura-Ojousama. It was plain to see by her face that she hadn't convinced Sasuke. It was a miracle we had even caught up with him. Really less miracle and more accident, I suppose.

It began earlier in the week...

--

--

I had trained every day. By myself; with Naruto-dono and Sakura-Ojousama; at the temple with Asuna-chan; with Gai and Lee; then weapons with Tenten. I had no master, and no sensei could make

time enough for me. Kakashi and Asuma were both helpful when they could be, but both had a lot of missions these days. They seemed to envy my position, because I got to stay home.

To hell with that. I was a babysitter. And even worse, I had to watch the girl I loved live with another guy. Even if it WAS Naruto, it still stung.

Then there was my fight with Azami in a couple months time. The burn she had given me had been healed by Sakura, but I could still feel that painful, humiliating moment when Azami declared she owned me. I was ashamed at being defeated, and even more ashamed at enjoying it to some degree. My feelings were conflicted for Azami as well, making things hellish. I simplified that by saying "I'll win. If I love her, I'll get her to stay here. If not, then I won the fight and she'll go away". I somehow forgot to tell myself that things are never that simple. Imagine that.

As my manner of service had changed, so had my clothes. I had fallen into a deep depression, as reflected by my choices in clothing. I kept most of my body covered. Long black pants, a short-sleeve black shirt, and black full-finger gloves. I had been told by Sakura that I 'didn't look well'. I shrugged it off and continued training. Like it mattered anymore. My appearance didn't concern me at the moment. All that DID concern me was getting stronger.

A messenger from Lady Tsunade arrived, calling me over to him. Things had changed- we had a solid lead on Sasuke Uchiha!

"Kakashi and Yamato?" I inquired. But the messenger shook his head.

"No. M'lady says this is your problem, Ryouko. Sorry."

With that, he was gone. And I had the unenviable task of telling Naruto and Sakura that there was a lead on Sasuke. This had happened before. I didn't know which was worse- investigating the lead to find out it was false, or finding out it was true and having to meet Sasuke himself, likely with Orochimaru, on the battlefield. Either way, I had to tell Sakura and Naruto.

9 - Arc Iii 'Comrades'- Chapter 2

Predictably, both of the remaining Team Seven members were excited to hear that there was a lead on Sasuke. They immediately began to plan. I held back, thinking carefully. But no matter what my thoughts, I had to say one thing:

“...Don’t get disappointed if this doesn’t work out, you know? I mean...” I shifted uncomfortably as both Naruto and Sakura stopped their planning to look at me. I had spoken so softly I wasn’t sure they had heard me.

“It could be a false lead. It could even be a trap meant for us. It’ll be hard, but try to consider those possibilities.”

I hated crushing their hope. I should have realized that Naruto could re-fuel that hope in an instant.

“If it’s a false lead, big deal! We’ve had a million of those! We’ll just go to the next lead! And one of these times, we’ll get Sasuke! We WILL bring him home!”

Sakura perked up, getting caught up in Naruto’s enthusiasm. He certainly had that way about him. You wanted to be his friend once you met him. You could have spoken two words to him, or vice versa, and you felt like you knew enough to be friends. Perhaps it was this that made me put my own problem on the back burner and focus on their’s.

“Okay, we’ll follow up on this lead. Be ready to go in an hour. I’ll be at the gate...”

I had one more thing to do before I left. A scroll that needed to come with me this time. I wasn’t sure why I thought this was the case, but why fight it? It couldn’t hurt to have it along.

--

--

Orochimaru, Kabuto, and I approached Naruto carefully. Sakura met my eyes and distracted Sasuke the best she could. That would catch Naruto’s attention, and give me a chance to make my move.

Orochimaru summoned Manda, his enormous snake familiar. That was enough to turn Naruto’s head as well. With so many threats, four-tails Naruto had no idea which way to look first. That was when I made my move.

On my right hand, there were glowing blue symbols above my fingers, which were alight with chakra. They were (From thumb to pinky): Earth, Wind, Heaven, Water, Void. On my left hand were more symbols (From pinky to thumb) Moon, Fire, Shadow, Past, Future.

As Naruto’s four tails lashed out at the other threats, I ran up the middle, my hands extended, ready to perform my ‘Ten Seals of Temper’.

--

“Hey, Ryouko, how come you’re called ‘Heaven’s Temper’? And how come we never heard of it?”

I rolled my eyes- Naruto insisted I didn’t treat him any differently than normal, yet he would make demands like that once in a while. This story wasn’t one I wanted to tell right now, but I couldn’t have him distracted by curiosity the whole trip.

“When I went to meet the Fire Daimyo the first time, I was told I had to meet a priestess. Not like Asuna-chan, mind you. This one inherits the name ‘Uzume’, and is incredibly powerful, and extremely clairvoyant.

“Clair-what?” Naruto’s face was screwed up with zero understanding in it.

“He means ‘pyschic’, idiot!” Sakura muttered, huffing out a breath. “I never really bought that stuff. I’m surprised you do, Ryouko!”

“I didn’t,” I replied. “She made me a believer that the right people might very well have these abilities. In fact, it was her who named me ‘Heaven’s Temper’. The event she foresaw, while hazy, depicted me somehow earning the name. It’s yet to come true, which is why I’m puzzled as to how that Azami girl knew the name...”

I rubbed the spot where she had ‘branded’ me again. It hurt every time I thought of her.

Could Azami have gotten to Uzume? It couldn’t be...not with the Twelve Guardians protecting her and the Fire Daimyo!

I shook that thought from my mind as I stopped in the path.

“We’re here...”

--

--

I jammed my left hand onto Naruto’s stomach first. The Seal took immediately, causing two tails to melt back into his body. My right hand took aim, but Naruto’s consciousness was still that of four-tails, and he spat out a ball of chakra at me. I had only one hand, and what popped into my head was what would help name me ‘Heaven’s Temper’:

“Fire Style: Fire Wall!”

I had made the signs for the complicated defensive jutsu with one hand- something I had never achieved successfully in practice before. The flames did something odd, though- they covered only me. They molded to my body, as if shielding me personally, rather than just being a jutsu I used.

Naruto’s tails were still knocking me for a loop. I quickly pressed the second seal. It took, and Naruto’s tails dissolved. He lay on the ground, injured badly with burns.

“Now’s the time to kill him! Come, Kabuto! Kill Naruto!”

Sakura wanted to go to Naruto, but she couldn't take her eyes off her fight with Sasuke. She knew that. So she entrusted his care to me. I wouldn't comprehend that until later. For right now, I just knew I had to drive Orochimaru off.

--
--

I sat in a darkened parlor, lined with wards and chakra seals. Smoke filled it, though it didn't seem to be tobacco smoke. I couldn't tell what exactly it was, so I was careful not to inhale too much.

"Please, sit, to-be-named Ten no Kishootsu."

*I obeyed, though I knew neither the voice nor the name. And I had to ask:
"How do you know me...and how do I address you?"*

From up on a platform (it was closer to an altar, but I couldn't think of it that way, as it seemed sacrilegious) came the voice. The voice belonged to a girl a little younger than myself- maybe eighteen years of age. She was cute, even all covered up in various traditional garments.

"You don't come here alone...Kimihiro."

She knew my real name?

"Your master, the Third FireShadow, still watches you fondly. He wishes he could have bequeathed to you a lifetime of teachings, rather than the one sure way to take life."

She knew that I knew forbidden jutsu?

"...I see you remain skeptical. Very well. You are torn apart by an illness. It tugs at your very soul, and it makes your life difficult. You refuse help, but you feel that you may not defeat this illness. And since you will know believe I deduced that only by physical signs, as did the medical kunoichi with whom you are infatuated with, I will tell you...she is not your goddess of good luck, so to speak. Your devotion to her will cause hardships. And yet..."

'Uzume' smiled. "...You will revel in these hardships. Your transformation has begun. Your life's path will soon be revealed, and your abilities as a warrior will begin to awaken..."

A sword lay on a low table next to Uzume. She took it from the table and handed it to Ryouko.

"This weapon is out of your control now. But when the time comes; when you are 'Ten no Kishootsu', it will reign in it's power and allow you to control it. It will respond to you- if you wish to kill, it will kill. If you wish to spare your enemies, it will fail to deliver a death blow. And it will read your heart, rather than your intentions."

I was speechless, of course. What do you say to that, aside from 'thank you'. I screwed up my courage to ask one more question:

"Will 'Ten no Kishootsu' become a legend? Will he ever be content with a happy life? Or will he be as Kimihiro is?"

Uzume smiled. "Though I can read the future, yours is particularly cloudy. That does include, yes, your love life. But based on your personality..."

Uzume smiled again, quite cutely I might add.

"You'll be okay. Just don't let yourself fall off this path. You aren't drawn to evil, but you ARE drawn toward defeat. Your defiance of that defeat is key. Do not lose it. And do not throw your life away carelessly. You will be wounding more than yourself if you do...no matter who you save..."

--
--

I drew the sword in my hand automatically. In my heart, there must have been killing intent, because I struck Orochimaru with a stab. The blade extended, and fire traveled along it, blasting Orochimaru away. It took only a glare to send Kabuto running to Orochimaru.

"No...not without Sasuke!" Orochimaru commanded, trying to get to Sasuke.

I kicking off, fire powering me as I leapt high- higher than I could have ever imagined- and aimed straight for Sasuke. His blade blocked mine. The lightning in his clashed with the fire in mine. That left Sakura free to go heal Naruto.

As I pulled back, creating sparks as the two swords pulled against each other's steel, a huge snake swallowed up Sasuke. I turned to pursue Orochimaru, who was already running. But I was grabbed from behind.

"Ryouko...settle down, please. Settle down..."

The fire receded. Sakura's warm touch calmed me. Before the fire faded completely, I used it's power to absorb the worst of Naruto's burns.

"He got away...sorry about that. It won't happen again."

That was all I had to say. Now I had to make a special trip of my own...

--

"Ow..."

The un-warriorish sound escaped my lips. I had taken on quite a bit of Naruto's burns, and it REALLY hurt with every little move.

"You two are idiots! Hold still!" Sakura demanded, forcing me to lie down next to Naruto. She began to treat us both. She had tears in her eyes. I asked 'why' with my eyes. She seemed embarrassed that I caught her crying. So she smiled despite the tears.

"It's just...Once, I told Captain Yamato that the only things I could ever do for Naruto were the little things. You just did a big thing for him. I've got to say, I'm jealous."

I closed my eyes, smiling hollowly. "Don't be. If I didn't have you to patch me up, I couldn't do such reckless things. I'm grateful. Your contributions aren't small. Naruto is proof of that."

Sakura gave me another small smile. "Well, all the same, I wish you two would stop doing stupid things. But I guess it's a male gene."

"Most likely."

I laid still, my head in the cool grass. I wondered about my surge of power, and where it had come from. It had been fire- had the Third Hokage somehow literally given me the Will of Fire? That didn't seem likely. But maybe he had passed something else on? Or was this power always there? There were so many mysterious ordeals that I had been involved in that I genuinely had no idea when I'd stumbled onto this kind of power. In fact, there was a great deal I didn't understand, despite being a high-ranking shinobi.

Light that firecracker some other time. For now, keep your mind on the task at hand.

10 - Arc liii- 'Protect the Future' Chapter 1

After our battle with Orochimaru, Sasuke, and the emergence of Naruto's inner demon, we had to rest in a small town just off of the Fire border. It was a friendly place, and very quiet. Everyone knew everyone, it seemed.

Had I not been so pre-occupied, I would have noticed that something wasn't quite kosher about this place. But my thoughts were on Uzume and what little I knew of her.

She's well protected, and by better shinobi than me...but it couldn't hurt to visit to tell her about the 'Heaven's Temper' thing that just happened to me.

I had given some thought to it, and decided to see if Asuna-chan would come along. Priestess to Priestess, maybe they could tune into the spirit world more accurately or something.

"Ojousama, please stay with Naruto-dono. I'm going to get Asuna-chan to join us. I've got a small side trip to make, and it might involve her."

Sakura was tending to Naruto, so she was only half-listening. She looked up, sounding a little surprised, but nodded her ascent.

-

"Summoning Jutsu!"

The elder monkey king, Enma, the Third Hokage's familiar (now my familiar) appeared before me in a puff of smoke. He had grayed since I had last seen him, and his breathing was more labored than last time.

"Elder, I'm sorry to disturb you. But there's a potential problem concerning Uzume."

Enma immediately knew why I had summoned him.

"You need to visit the priestess? I can reach the Fire Daimyo quickly and grant you an audience. But you're not keen on the occult, boy. Why Uzume?"

"I believe she's in danger. That, and one of the prophecies she's made concerning me may have just come true. I would like to verify that." I couldn't explain the feeling, but I just felt certain that something was going to happen to Lady Uzume.

Enma inhaled deeply, trying to steady his breathing. "Understood. I will act as your go-between."

"Thank you, Lord Enma. If I may make a further proposal..." Ryouko broke into a small grin. "We should exchange sake cups, now that I'm old enough. I know it's mere formality, but if you're interested..."

Enma smiled in return. "Sake...a wonderful thing...let's partake."

--

The temple of the Fire Daimyo was burning, and terribly fast. The Twelve Guardians scrambled to put out the fire, but it seemed there was no way to quell it.

“Save the miko! Save Uzume!” the Fire Daimyo shouted, still sitting behind his special screen. The screen had been made by Uzume, in fact. It was intertwined straw mat and chakra seals, plus some wards, as the Daimyo was a little on the superstitious side. The material looked thin, and vaguely like tatami, but it was a hundred million times stronger, and had been shown to repel attacks with both kunai and jutsu.

So losing Uzume was not an option.

“Daimyo! Elder Enma is requesting an urgent meeting with you! He says it can’t wait, sir!”

The Fire Daimyo snarled, but refusing to meet Enma was out of the question.

“Send him in, Shinmaru!”

-

Enma hobbled in as fast as he could, having surveyed the situation outside.

“Daimyo, if you’ll permit me a reverse-summoning... My human familiar has a bond with Uzume. She is the one who predicted his change into ‘Ten no Kishootsu’. He just achieved that state, and is on his way to meet Uzume. He was worried for her safety.”

“It seems his worries weren’t unfounded. Summon him, Enma. I’ll send a retainer to fetch his comrades.”

--

I was dazed as I was suddenly yanked away from Sakura and Naruto. Both of them could only guess at what had happened, so they were on the defensive. Meanwhile, I had found myself at the Fire Daimyo’s mansion. The first thing I saw was the fire. I had to do something about that, and quickly!

If Uzume dies, I’ll never know for sure...

I needed water- anything! Even a little bit! If I had a little bit, I could multiply it enough to create a water wall. But there was nothing! That gave way to a strange idea. Blood is made up of a few things- one of those being water. So I sliced my left arm from shoulder to hand on the outside of my arm. Blood flowed out- not enough to kill me, but it gave me a little material to work with. Using my remaining hand, I used the ‘Water Style: Water Wall!’ Jutsu, aiming it at the burning temple.

--

-

I had probed Uzume further about her prophecies back then. She mentioned that someday my blood would give way to some kind of creation that would save lives. I assumed that meant I would have children, so I asked as much. Rather, I asked about my love life.

Uzume only smiled at me a little candidly and told me that she couldn't discuss such things. One's love life was a complicated thing, and it was both rude and 'against the rules' to attempt to direct those relationships; even with permission.

I let the matter drop.

-
--

My blood, though thinned as I had focused on the water content of it, washed over the temple. That put out a good part of the fire. I couldn't repeat my trick, but I could use Shadow Clones to help start spreading dirt on the remaining fires. It was important to keep the fire contained, and the trenches the clones dug while scooping up dirt would be helpful.

"Master Ryouko! What can I do?! Please, let me help!"

A young monk studying to be one of the Twelve Guardians eagerly awaited some instruction. A few of the Twelve had told him to leave the situation to the adults, but I saw no harm in letting the kid help.

"Water. Lots of water. Put it in the trenches my clones are digging. Get anyone else you can to help, okay?"

The young monk nodded, kicking off his sandals so that he could run faster. A group of boys and girls his own age, most studying as priestesses or monks, were watching from not far away. When the young monk shouted that they could know help, they all ran to gather water, or to help in other ways. I was impressed with their teamwork, and wanted to say as much. But later. Right now, I had one more thing to do.

SPLASH!

I dumped a bucket of water on myself, took a moment to memorize as much of the temple's layout as possible, then plunged in through the open door. The flames shot up.

--

"What the hell's going on?!" Naruto demanded, shaking answers out of anyone who would listen. He had since arrived via reverse-summoning as well. Moments later, Sakura joined him. She questioned more calmly, and therefore received the answers, as people could understand what she was saying. As it turned out, it was the young monk Ryouko had commissioned to help who answered her.

"...and Master Ryouko went into the temple to get her out! He hasn't come out yet!"

Sakura requisitioned two tables, two blankets, and any bandages or ointment on hand. If they came out, Ryouko and Uzume would be burned to a crisp.

Or at least Ryouko will. He'll see that Uzume makes it out as close to unharmed as possible.

Times like these made Sakura both admire and despise Ryouko's heroic tendencies.

Naruto could resist getting involved: "Well, I'm gonna help, too! Multi Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

The hundred Naruto's that appeared immediately began to help with gathering water, digging trenches, or spreading dirt. They really sped up the quenching of the fire, and the fire didn't spread beyond the trenches. Gradually, the fire was restricted to the temple. One of the *Tori* gates had begun to burn. Leading to the temple, there were nine of them. If the fire reached the final gate, the temple, which was encircled by trees and rocks, would be completely isolated.

Sakura just set up a medical area and waited. There were minor burns here or there, but nothing major.

-

Looking out from his curtain, the Fire Daimyo smiled.

"The future of the Land of Fire is well protected."

High praise. The one guarding the Fire Daimyo presently, a bald man named Shinmaru, nodded his agreement. He thought back to his fight with Ryouko, back when they were both trying to qualify to be one of the Twelve Guardians. Ryouko had lost, thanks to Shinmaru's secret techniques- but Shinmaru had acknowledged Ryouko as a worthy opponent- a first for Shinmaru.

"I hope that one...Ryouko...can save Uzume-hime. And himself, for that matter. It would be a tragedy to lose both to a fire. Ryouko deserves nothing less than a death in battle. And Uzume-hime herself...as close to a pure existence as any mortal can get. And as pure a death as well."

The Fire Daimyo chuckled a little bit, belying his ominous presence.

"You have sensibilities that have long since lost value, Shinmaru. You're a rare link to the past. Now, let's pray that our links to the future and to other things not of this world are not severed."

--

Burning beams were all around me as I navigated the smoke-filled corridors of the temple. I had to work mostly by feel. The bucket of water I had dumped on myself had all but evaporated by now. My chakra was low after all the stunts I had pulled.

I'd better get something over my face, or I'll die from smoke inhalation.

I tied my waistcloth around my face, over my nose and mouth. The material was breathable, but just so, so that I wouldn't suffocate myself.

I crawled on the ground as the smoke rose, using my hands to feel my way around. When my foot hit the wooden steps that led to Uzume's special sitting area, I began to climb the steps, keeping my head low.

"Lady Uzume!" I called out, barely choking the words out over the smoke. I heard no response, but that's not what I was looking for.

There's a theory that, when you're unconscious, your senses still work to some degree. If that was so, then when Uzume heard her name, her chakra would spike, even if she couldn't answer me. That's how I hoped to find her.

My own chakra is red, if I had to put a color to it. Uzume's is more...not white, but close. A light yellow...

I felt it- a small surge of chakra, and it was just a few feet in front of me! I crawled faster, feeling my head start to get light from the smoke.

There she was! Clothed in her normal black robes, with the special jeweled prayer beads, and her hair tied ceremonially, she was sprawled on the ground, having toppled off her cushion. She had minor burns on her arms, which were over her face. She had been conscious enough to shield herself.

Lady Uzume! Hold on!

The cloth on the low table in front of her was caught under a heavy beam, so my plan of wrapping her up and carrying her out that way was destroyed. So, painfully conscious of what would happen to me, I shrugged off my shirt and vest. I tied my shirt over her nose and mouth, and I threw my vest over her head.

FWOOM!

The flames leapt up in front of me. Instinctively, I put an arm up. My left arm, which had still been bleeding, stopped as the cut was now seared closed. That probably saved my life, though at the time it just hurt like hell.

I put Uzume across my shoulders in a fireman's carry and began to negotiate my way out of the burning building.

11 - Arcliii 'Protect the Future' Chapter 2

I was spotted right away. But my journey wasn't over yet- I had to run through four *Tori* gates that were on fire. The fifth one caught just as I started my run. I could hear the others encouraging me, and I could also hear warning for everyone to stay away.

My run ended as the ninth gate caught fire. It collapsed.

Shortly after that, so did I.

--

Sakura laid Ryouko and Uzume on the tables she had asked for, tending first to their obvious injuries. Smoke inhalation had been an issue with both, but Ryouko had kept his face covered, so it was less of an issue. He had passed out from exposure to the heat more than anything. Which was a blessing, really. If he had passed out any later, his adrenaline would have worn off, and he would have felt the effects of his heroism.

"He's got burns on one-third of the left side of his upper body. Mostly his triceps and rib areas... Those are second degree burns. They're going to hurt when he wakes up if I don't treat them quickly."

"And what about the girl? What's her name? Uzuma? Uzu...something?"

Predictably, Naruto didn't know the girl's name.

"Uzume," Sakura told him with strained patience. "And she didn't suffer any burns, aside from a couple minor burns on his arms. She must have shielded her face. Her clothes kept the rest of her safe."

"So she'll make it?"

Sakura looked to the other table, surprised to see Ryouko's (unfocused) hazel eyes staring at her hopefully.

--

"So she'll make it?" After all that, I really hoped she would!

Sakura wiped her hands on a cloth that was blackened with soot. "Yes, she'll be fine. But you're not off the hook yet yourself. There's still the matter of that weird scar on your arm."

My arm? Huh? I turned my barbecued left arm over to find a white scar run down it from shoulder to wrist. It took me a moment, but I realized that that was where I had cut myself to get blood to flow so I could use that Water Wall Jutsu.

The fire seared it shut. Crude, but effective.

"It's fine. Must have gotten cut somehow and the fire closed the wound. Lucky thing..."

Sakura could hear the borderline desperation in my voice. I guess she could understand that I couldn't

get close to her; but I doubt she knew why. It must have been hurting her feelings. But I just couldn't bring myself to hurt myself. I'd already made so many sacrifices. I couldn't do it anymore. It felt wrong and selfish to push her away; but at the same time it was for the best.

Sakura gave my arm a slight tap. In the time it took for me to wince with pain, she had healed the scar. She didn't say anything else; she just went back to check on Uzume. Man, I felt like a jerk. But I still couldn't bring myself to just tell her why things were like this between us.

I heard a sound next to me- Lady Uzume getting off the table. I found that I couldn't move.

"Sorry for the suppressing jutsu I had to use on you. But it's the only way to make this tolerable for you. Ryouko, you've reached the 'Ten no Kishootsu' state of power. But there is yet more room for you to grow. And I see a lot of trouble coming. Rather, I can assume, given what's happened to you already. So, agree to come with me, quickly and quietly.

I gave her a look that said 'yes'. She undid her jutsu, and I got up and followed her.

--

Inside the burn remains of the temple, Uzume had Ryouko pull his shirt off and sit in the middle of a summoning circle.

As she finished the circle, Uzume explained what was going on.

"You see, you haven't learned to tap all of your chakra yet. It's rare to obtain the ability, and it takes years- usually more than a lifetime. That's why others find second sources of chakra. It's also the reason it's mentioned only to those with the potential to tap the full extent of their chakra."

Ryouko shifted a little. "How will that help me? I don't have a lifetime to get more powerful. The danger is here and now."

"This jutsu is going to allow you to tap your latent power- at a cost. Don't use this unless you become desperate. Desperate enough to save yourself from certain destruction. Those two out there...they need you."

Ryouko sat still, not sure what was being done to him. He only felt a curious pulling sensation moving around his lower abdomen.

"Why? Is there trouble coming?"

Uzume shrugged. "I don't know. You are particularly difficult to read." She sighed and smiled. "But they'll be sad if you die; even in defense of them. You don't have it in you to make those two cry."

Then she sagged, exhausted. Ryouko ran over to catch her as she toppled over. Holding her carefully, Ryouko checked Uzume's pulse.

"I'm fine," she said instantly. "This jutsu can only be performed once. The second time, the life of the caster is taken. This time, I'm only a bit fatigued. The fact that you can touch me despite my protections...it means you're 'safe'. And definitely the best thing for those children. Don't let yourself be separated from them. I know you don't have it in you to make them cry."

-
-

I don't have it in me to make them cry...

I let Naruto lead the way back to the village. I stayed quiet, bringing up the rear and trying to not seem too melancholy. Thankfully, after my ordeal, being tired was expected, so Sakura would likely chalk this lack of energy up to that.

Even now that I know what Lady Uzume did to me...I'm still not entirely sure how 'desperate' qualifies as 'desperate enough'. And I still don't know what it'll do to me... Well, I can say with certainty I'll likely find out against Azami. No matter what, I don't want to leave with her by force. If I leave with her, I want it to be because I WANT to.

"Naruto, let's head for Kekkou-Ji temple," I piped up. "I should drop in on Asuna-chan once in a while, and I'm just about due. I can't say I'm eager to face M'lady again anyway. I'm pretty sure I broke a rule or two back there."

Putting it mildly. Letting someone else alter my body's structure would REALLY piss M'lady off.

Then I realized just what Asuna-chan was going to do to me. Sakura was protective of me, but usually reserved physical abuse for Naruto. Asuna-chan had no such reservations when it came to me. There was no way she'd let this stupidity of mine, even if it 'was' bravery, pass without me feeling even more pain.

Friends, huh? Can't say this is how I imagined it would be.

NEXT CHAPTER: ARC II: FIGHT!

12 - Arc II: Love and Combat- Chapter 1

It was eleven pm. Ten minutes since Ryouko had last looked at the clock. Time crawled during the night; it felt so slow it was almost painful.

In ten minutes time, Ryouko's fight with Azami would begin on top of the Hokage stone faces. There hadn't been a match like this for Ryouko in a long time. There had been times that, had he lost a match, he would die. And he wouldn't allow himself to be taken prisoner unless he could do damage.

In this case, it was a girl who wanted to own him. He would be just another one of her possessions. But even that wasn't causing Ryouko's hesitation. What bothered him was a simple question:

Do I want this?

Ryouko had done what he could to make sure Naruto and Sakura become something more than friends. He didn't know if it worked; not his business. But he couldn't very well make a pass at Sakura. Hence his hang up with the beautiful, worldly, and very dangerous bounty hunter known as Azami.

There had been a strange chemistry since they had met; there was no disputing that. But what kind of chemistry? Love? Companionship? Understanding? Deep hatred hidden beneath formality? There were so many options that it was a baffling subject to ponder.

--

I heard a knock at my door. Being this late, it was either urgent orders, or Naruto and/or Sakura wanting something. Either way, I had to answer the door. I opened it to find a casually dressed Sakura on the other side.

"Good evening, Ojousama."

Sakura rolled her eyes. "I ORDER you to call me 'Sakura'. Just for tonight, okay? I know you've got orders to obey, but right now I need to talk to my friend Ryouko- not the one who's teaching me."

So I dropped the formality. An order was an order.

"You look nice tonight. Going out?" I asked pleasantly.

"I WAS, but that bonehead doesn't have any money! Hmph! Idiot!" Sakura crossed her arms, relaxing her shoulders a bit. Seemed like she had held onto this frustration for a while, given how she exhaled when she finally relaxed.

I chuckled to myself, rummaging through a drawer as I was using my other hand to put tea on. "You're too pretty and too young to be staying in on such a nice night. And you got all dressed up, too. It'd be a shame to waste that preparation."

Sakura had dressed in a regular pleated skirt tonight, with a grey and black plaid pattern on it. She wore a white blouse with thin straps that was emblazoned with 'Broken Hope' in black letters. To me, she was a beauty normally. That cute little outfit really scored her some points in my mind. I had to conceal my thoughts of longing as I tossed a wallet with a good amount of ryo in it to Sakura, telling her to slip it into Naruto's pocket.

"Thanks!" she said gratefully. But her smile didn't last long. "That's not why I came, though."

"Oh?" I replied over my shoulder. "There's something else, then?"

The tea kettle whistled, and I reached for it, pouring two cups of a green herbal tea into two mugs. I invited Sakura to sit, but she declined.

"Ryouko...tonight's your fight with Azami, isn't it?"

I took a long gulp of my tea. "Yes, it is..."

She didn't say what I expected next.

"Well...I know you'll go with her if you lose, because you're a man of your word. And I want you to know that, if you DO lose, I'll finish her myself. And one more thing..."

She turned her back to me, walking to the door. As she opened it, she stopped, and turned her head toward me. She held a serious, yet sweet look on her face.

"Don't dodge my hugs anymore. It hurts my feelings. Whatever reason you have...you know. Just don't."

I nodded once, and wished her a good night. She left with a little wave and smile.

--

--

Azami was waiting for Ryouko on top of the Hokage rock. The moon was sickle shaped tonight, and it cast a beautiful, pale light down on her. The sheen on her hair alone made her tantalizing enough for any man; if her thoughtful yet somber look wasn't enough.

She didn't seem attired for battle. Rather, she was wearing a white gown with gold trim. It revealed a modest amount of her considerable bust. On the sides, there was a slit in the gown that went clear up to mid-thigh. With her figure, it was a site to behold.

It's such a nice night. I wish it wasn't a fight I've come for. One more bounty to add to my reputation; and to my shame. I always tell myself 'this one will be the last'. But it never happens. Maybe I AM an evil girl...

"It's a beautiful night, isn't it?" A familiar voice rang out. It wasn't a rich baritone, but neither was it nasally. Somewhere pleasant in between from a powerful person.

Azami smiled grimly. "It is. Hello, Ryouko."

Ryouko stood next to her, looking up at the moon. “Almost too beautiful a night to fight. So how about we drink instead? We’re both adults, and our reason to fight isn’t going anywhere.”

Ryouko raised a pitcher of sake, picking out a rock to set it on. He poured two cups, then plopped down on one side of the rock.

“You aren’t dressed for combat. Though you really do look beautiful tonight.”

Azami blinked, and for the first time, she seemed to be out of her element. Ryouko’s keen eye picked up on that, and he ran with it.

“It can’t be that I intimidate you by treating you like a lady, can it? Sure, our respective careers don’t leave much room for the likes of chivalry, but you’re an attractive girl. If anyone should be intimidated, it’s me. You’re way outta my league.”

Azami shook herself out of her daze and went over to Ryouko, folding into a sitting position carefully, so as not to flash Ryouko.

“You aren’t dressed for combat either.”

“Oh, you noticed?” Ryouko chuckled. He had dressed himself in a white tshirt, long-sleeved black shirt, a silver cross around his neck, and black semi-dressy pants. “Well, I was hoping we could drink instead of fighting. Or, at least, before we fight. You know, no hard feelings.”

Azami took a sip of the sake, commenting on it’s quality and taste.

Ryouko nodded, agreeing with her. Their small talk continued for a while, exchanging brief stories and comments about the weather. Finally, Ryouko looked down at the village, and he stood up.

“Say, how about we drop this and go down there? Get some food or something. It’s no good to fight drunk. And maybe we don’t need to fight at all.”

Azami balked, nearly spilling her drink. “Say what? Are you chickening out?”

Ryouko laughed, and offered her a hand up. “Nope. Just thinking that we’ve gotten along so well that maybe I ought to see if I can get the guts up to ask you out.”

Azami, again, looked out her element. “Is it common practice for you to ask out your enemy?”

“It’s not common practice for me to ask out ANYONE. But why not start with you? We’ve kind of hit it off, haven’t we? Besides, it can’t be so strange for a guy to ask a hot little number like you out.”

Ryouko gave a daredevil smirk that would have made Jiraiya proud.

Azami was befuddled. **Damnit! He’s too nice! What’s he thinking?! I thought I’d dazzle him with this dress, and then take him hostage. But instead he’s being all civil, and he’s actually in control! The worst part is that I really do want to go out with him. Would that be so bad? We’re both adults, and...well...there is a kind of attraction... I keep saying I want to get out of the bounty hunting game and into a real life...**

Ryouko decided to push the point a little further. “Hey, if you’re gonna turn me down, don’t drag it out,

huh. It's not like you're going to shock me if you say no. I've already put my cards on the table. And you can't honestly think I'm good enough to trick you while keeping my own wits about me, right?"

Azami analyzed every word Ryouko said, and decided that it made sense. He had approached her as a gentleman; not a warrior. Therefore, it was her duty to answer as a lady; not a bounty hunter. So she surprised herself by actually blushing and taking his outstretched hand.

"Well...I guess it's okay. I mean, yeah, let's go for it."

-

So it went well for about two hours. After eating food, walking around the village, and talking in general, Azami and Ryouko soon found they had a great deal in common. They had both studied relentlessly, and as a result hadn't quite formed their personalities when it came to dealing with others outside of combat. So that bit of shared awkwardness led to them talking about their studies. Azami told a funny story; Ryouko laughed and told one of his own. Azami giggled, and made the bold move of grabbing his arm. She looked him square in the eyes. Her dark eyes were big and begging; yet they could see right through Ryouko. She pulled him close and told him something she'd never thought she'd say to an enemy; words she'd never spoken before.

"...I want to go to a hotel. Right now. With you."

13 - Arc II: Love and Combat- Chapter 2

I had no idea what to do. I let her lead me to a hotel, but I was clueless. I mean, a guy has his sources to learn about sex. But sex with a girl who tried to kill you and your students? All of a sudden she's hot for you? How do you deal with that?

Especially when you might have feelings for her?

You let it happen, I decided. I was an adult, and I liked this girl. Sex couldn't hurt, right? It was a natural thing when a man and woman were attracted to each other.

"I'm...going to take a shower now."

I nodded vaguely, thinking of how to make this work in my mind. I was as clueless as I seemed in this case.

--

Azami got into the pretty tiled bathroom, immediately turning the shower on to let it warm up.

Strangely, she walked over to the mirror, looked at herself, and said something odd:

"I can do this. For the mission. And a little for myself, too."

She pulled the top of her gown over her head. Her tanned upper body showed in the mirror looked healthy and, to the male eye, tempting. The white bra she had worn today just barely contained her voluptuous breasts. They were completely real, too. They attracted so much attention that it made Azami hate how shallow people could be. And yet, they came in handy against even the craftiest male opponent. And she had learned to fight without them hindering her.

Next the bottom of the gown dropped. Low-rise white bikini-cut panties were beneath them, leaving little to the imagination. Her figure was as shapely on the bottom as it was on the top, with toned, tight buttocks and a tight core beneath her navel. She dropped her panties and stepped into the shower.

--

Ryouko fidgeted nervously, remembering to take off his cross. It just didn't seem right to have sex with this girl while wearing a religious symbol. He tucked it into his pants pocket.

The bathroom door opened, steam accompanying Azami's entrance. She was entrancing, wearing only her underwear.

She snaked her way over to him, gently sitting on his lap and kissing him. Her hands began to unfasten the buttons on his shirt.

Soon, both his shirts were off, and Azami was on top of him, feeling his chest while teasing him with her own chest.

After that, both more or less lost their restraint. Hands were everywhere, removing any clothing, until

both were completely naked. It was the moment of truth. Azami was laying there, and Ryouko was looking at her. She looked ready. But Ryouko...

What am I doing?! This is...wrong! I don't know why. It felt right until just now. But now I feel like there's a genjutsu on me...Why didn't I notice before?

"...I'm sorry. This isn't right."

Azami sat up, looking as though she had been shaken awake from a trance herself.

"...You're right. And...well, let's get dressed. No point in staying naked if all we're going to do is freeze."

They got dressed in silence, not looking at each other.

I...wish I was a scumbag sometimes. Then I would have just had sex with her, without this restraint. But that's not who I am.

Ryouko pulled on his black shirt, leaving his tshirt off. He was still feeling a little hot after that. But more than heat, he could sense something heavy. And it was coming from Azami. He finally turned to face her.

"I felt like I broke a genjutsu. Did you feel it, too?"

Azami pulled her top on, then turned around. "You aren't going to outright accuse me? You'd have grounds to..."

Ryouko nodded. "I know. I was just hoping I was wrong. I really do like you, and the thought that you were just using me...that really hurts. Especially in such a personal way..."

"...I'm sorry. At least let me say this: You know about 'Shin no Ippo', yes?"

"A mind control technique, thought by many to be legendary. Myself included..."

--

I gave Azami a shocked look. "You can't be telling me that you used Shin no Ippo on me..."

Azami shrugged with a cute little grin. "Well, yeah. Except I used it on myself to make sure I'd come on to you. And then you somehow broke it without knowing it. Was it the shock of a woman lying naked in front of you? Did that shock you into freeing yourself?"

I let anger seep into my voice. I couldn't help it- this was infuriating!

"Maybe it was. Or maybe I just realized that no girl so far out of my league would pull this. Not that she would NEED to. We've got nothing further to discuss, Azami. I'm leaving."

Azami grabbed my shoulder. For a minute, I thought she was asking me not to.

"I really do like you. You're the most interesting boy I've ever met, and you'll go far in life. You took

me completely by surprise. No one with a bounty on their head has ever been civil, and hardly any guys have ever treated me like a person. You didn't look at me like a piece of meat. It means a lot to think that there IS a compassionate man out there. You'll be a strong ninja, and you'll be a lucky catch for some girl someday."

As I looked at her with shocked eyes, she finished her sentence.

"You WOULD be, anyway. But tonight, I'm going to own you. Or did you forget our fight?"

I saw her kick coming, and I could only cross my arms in front of my chest to cushion the blow. The force of her kick knocked me out of the second story hotel window. Falling with the glass, I righted myself, landed, and hit the ground running.

I saw her easily matching my pace. I tossed a kunai over my shoulder, not really having any faith it would do anything. It didn't. She caught it between her fingers, grinned at me, and gunned it back at me. I threw my left arm in the way as I ran backwards, deflecting the kunai with a hidden bunch of throwing needles inside my sleeve.

We've got to get away from the civilians!

I gave myself a hard push, feeling my leg muscles protest the sudden strain. I hooked myself on a telephone pole and spun myself down a small alleyway. It was short and narrow, giving me a second to toss a delay tactic backwards while I decided where to go.

"Earth Style: Mud Wall!"

The mud didn't even slow her down. She barreled through it, the same fire that had burned my back cutting through my wall as if it were just the wind. I didn't learn anything about that jutsu either. Basically, I had just wasted valuable chakra on nothing.

I saw, up ahead, the telltale green gates of the Leaf Village. Just outside them would be a safe place to battle. I just had to lead her there. Even though I made this up on the fly, part of me felt like she knew what I was doing before I did it.

--

Sakura and Naruto followed at a safe distance, watching Ryouko lead the girl out of the village. Naruto was in front; at Sakura's insistence. Their plan had been to tail Ryouko from the start; for appearance's sake she had to dress like she was going out. That meant that leaping from tree to tree with Naruto behind her wouldn't work. He'd have an excellent view up her skirt if she went first.

"I don't know if he can win this one..."

Sakura wasn't even aware she said that aloud. Naruto couldn't help but correct her. Somehow, he had the uncanny knack to say the right thing in crunch time.

"No worries about him! This is Ryouko we're talking about! He hasn't even shown her the most basic of what he can do. If you're gonna worry for someone, worry about the girl!"

Sakura allowed herself a smile; he was damned convincing about this kind of thing.

“Yeah...but that burn on his back...I hope he’s not thinking of letting her win. He can’t be that desperate for a girl...”

Naruto shrugged. “Even if he WAS, you really think he’d leave us to fend for ourselves? He’s been sacrificing since this thing started; he’s not going to half-@\$\$ it and quit now. There’s no way.”

Sakura still wasn’t reassured, and it showed. So Naruto dropped back next to her, put an arm around her, and gave his famous grin.

“If he tries, we’ll drag his @\$\$ back!”

NOW Sakura was reassured.

14 - Arc II: Love and Combat- Chapter 3

Ryouko finally burst through the green gates, now outside the Leaf Village. He took up his stance and let Azami catch up.

“We’re out of town, so now you want to fight? Really cute that you care so much. But what’s to stop me from turning around and going back in?”

Ryouko didn’t break his gaze with Azami. “Because that would mean turning your back on me. And no matter how good you are, you KNOW that even I could stop you if you did that. You’re not here on a suicide mission. That’s MY role.”

They began to circle, their chakras shifting into ‘battle mode’. It was similar to when Kage spoke to each other; they had to hold back or their collective chakras were crushing. In this case, neither one had revealed the full depth and development of their chakra.

When they did, it was impressive.

The ground began to dry up and crack; the trees losing their leaves began to exude sap their bark began to peel. The leaves themselves disintegrated if they got too close to either combatant.

As though some unspoken signal were given, they both attacked. Their taijutsu was fierce and impressive. Ryouko punched; Azami kicked. Their strikes crossed in mid-air. Ryouko kicked low. Azami dodged and tried to sweep his legs. Ryouko leapt; Azami followed. Their shins crossed in mid-air, colliding with a ‘thwack’ sound. Ryouko ducked in toward Azami and grabbed her waist. She tried to hit him, but he hung on and spun around her, succeeding in getting behind her. He punched, aiming for the head, but Azami’s well-toned leg slashed up in a block. Ryouko let himself fall backward with the force of the blow, snapping his leg out toward her leg, aiming to destroy the limb. No luck, as Azami was suddenly behind him again. Ryouko faked a low kick and swung with a backhand. All in barely two seconds. They might have been feeling each other out with taijutsu, but that didn’t mean they were holding back in the least.

As they fell back toward the ground, they both punched. Their arms crossed. Each one suddenly turned their punch into a block, so their wrists smacked each other.

Leaves shot up; dust kicked up. Their stalemate stood, both looking at each other across their arms.

“Chinese martial arts? Impressive, Ryouko! I didn’t know you studied so broadly! The ‘Way of the Intercepting Fist’, correct?”

Azami smiled widely, knowing she was in the catbird seat. A bead of sweat shot out of Ryouko’s right temple.

I have to go back farther...but maybe I can confuse her a little...

“Flamma Succendo!” (Fire that lights from Below)

Ryouko gave his foot a quick stomp into the ground. Fire shot up from underneath Azami's feet. Ryouko pulled back his arm to avoid being scorched himself.

"What the hell? No handsigns?! You ARE interesting!"

Ryouko reached deeper into his bag of tricks and pulled out an old one. He stepped into a low, narrow stance, focusing his center of gravity in the process, and punched Azami as hard as he could in the stomach. Not only did his punch connect, it's power was doubled. It knocked her backward hard, causing her balance to be disrupted.

All from a stance change?! How did his power double from that?

--

I wasn't done yet. I charged in toward Azami, drawing my left fist back. I saw her look at it, ready to block. So I punched with my right first. From it's weak position so close to her, it would be easy enough to hit her; but there wouldn't be any damage.

At least, until I felt my fist hit her cheek. Before she could dodge away from me, I turned my first inward sharply. I felt some skin tear off on my knuckles, and I saw the blood come from the wound I had made just under her left eye.

"Cutting punch," I told her, walking toward her, thinking up my plan while I talked to buy time. "If anything was drilled into me in my old training, it was that the sword is an extension of your body. ANY weapon is. And a blade cuts, so shouldn't a fist be able to do the same? Hence the 'cutting punch'."

Azami got up, wiping the blood off her face. "I see, I see. You really are an interesting boy. Not only do you pass up sex with me, you manage to surprise me. Even after all my study, too. Allow me to surprise you, then..."

She held in her hand the same flame that tattooed my back. I put a hand back there without thinking. There was nothing there; Sakura had long since healed that burn. But still, being a veteran of combat, I should have known better than to focus only on what was apparent.

SCHUNK!

I was suddenly sucked into a shadow. As I fell, I focused my chakra and clasped my hands, just as the Third Hokage had done to prevent Orochimaru's reanimation jutsu on the Fourth Hokage from being completed. I was stuck just below the knees. And now my hands were useless- If I let go of the handsign, I would sink even further. Even worse, I was already starting to strain under the pressure; she wasn't even batting an eye.

I blinked once.

SchUNK

One cut appeared on my shoulder, Azami's blade perched on top of it. She held it there, leaning close to me.

"It's pointless to fight, you know. I can do anything I want to you, and there's nothing you can do."

--

I snapped at her with my teeth, having no other weapon. She just smacked me with the pommel of the sword in the forehead. I nearly fell backward into the shadow, but managed to right myself in time.

"You're right. Maybe. But I won't let you have me this way. Not until I've exhausted every option I've got!"

She came in for another strike. This time, I met her eyes. I had her.

=

Genjutsu

The ground cracked below Azami's feet, dropping her into a crater up to her waist. I stood above her, smiling nastily.

"Sorry to end it this way."

I dropped a scroll made of exploding tags and walked away. The explosion went off. But I felt it...

That's not right...in my genjutsu, I shouldn't feel anything...She couldn't have...!

I felt a tug on my left arm. A black chain coiled itself around it, pulling my arm out from my body. I felt similar sensations against all my limbs. I fought against them, but I was trapped.

There was Azami, standing placidly in front of me.

"I keep telling you it's hopeless. Why can't you listen to reason? Do you not want to go with me that much?"

I tugged at the chains, trying to get at her. They creaked, but didn't let me pass. "If I leave this village, it will be of my own volition!"

I bit my lip hard enough to draw blood.

End Genjutsu

--

I was still caught in her damn shadow trap, and I was running out of options.

There IS one more option...But I need time to prepare it. That means distracting her...From here, clones make sense. She'll kill them quickly, but I just need a few seconds...

I let go of my handsign and performed the fastest Shadow Clone jutsu I could. I sank to my thighs as a result, but three clones made their appearance. They knew what to do. Normally, I joined them in this attack, but since I was unable, I used a third clone.

"Sickle Moon Dance!"

The three clones hit their top speed rapidly, changing direction and position constantly. Even those blessed with eyes like Sharingan had a difficult time keeping up with this jutsu.

Azami watched, apparently not fearing anything that could come of the attack.

“Fascinating. This speed is amazing. Remarkable. Especially for you. I’m guilty of underestimating you again, aren’t I?”

The clones had drawn swords. I myself used one hand to keep my hand sign in place. The other hand was placed over my stomach. I made a pulling motion, and I felt my insides protest.

Azami batted the first clone aside with her fist; the second one received a dismissive kick. The third came from above, and he swung mightily with his sword. His sword bit into Azami’s forearm a little as she put it up to block. But that was it. Her fist had smacked him squarely in the stomach, destroying him.

“Fire Style: Dragon’s Ember Jutsu!”

A brilliant flash of fire emitted from behind Azami. She turned away from it, dodging to the side, barely getting her hair singed in the process. She smacked the clone in the face with an open palm to the nose.

“A fourth clone I didn’t see. You’re every bit the tactician I dreamed,” Azami stated calmly, licking the cut on her forearm. “Those extra months of training I allowed you were clearly well spent. I didn’t imagine I’d take any damage at all.”

Azami had every reason to be cocky. When she looked at Ryouko, she saw him sweating- horribly. Abnormally.

“Are you so scared? Don’t worry, I won’t kill you...”

Then she was blasted with hot air of a chakra unlike she’d ever felt. She could only cross her arms in front of her face and try to weather the surprise storm.

He’s sweating because of the pain? What did he just do? What could have changed him so much in just a few months?

--

Thinking back to an illustration I had done a couple years ago, I had always accepted that things would be hard for me in a way others could not understand.

The picture I drew, (or, rather, attempted to draw. My art skills are anemic, at best) was of myself in chains. Thick, black chains; unbreakable bonds. At the point where my despair hurt so much it could drive me to tears, I would look at this picture and remember that I was better off now than I was before. That there was hope.

Around my neck is a chain made of the word ‘anxiety’. It is the tightest chain; constantly constricting me. Even breathing is difficult.

Around my left arm is ‘self doubt’. What reason have I to trust myself?

Around my right arm is ‘medication’. I shouldn’t need it. Why can’t I stand on my own two feet?

My left leg is bound by ‘thoughts’. My constant thoughts that never seem to work. They hinder more than help.

My right leg is bound with 'truth'. The facts of the matter as I see them; not necessarily the truth for anyone else.

Finally, around my stomach, there is a chain whose link is weakening. "Acceptance" is something I've felt in small quantities. The chain has loosened a little.

But it doesn't matter Removing all these chains...is it possible? Do these 'chains' keep me from reaching my potential? Is it possible for me to exist at my optimum efficiency? They sound like mechanical thoughts. But they are my reality. Part of my reality.

The part of my reality I want to shatter into a million pieces.

But I can't. What is the reality I MIGHT have is worse? So bound by the chains I stay, fighting them off a little at a time, hoping to find my answers on the way.

--

I yanked at my stomach, finally pulling out a length of black material. It looked like the wrapping on a sword. Inside me, it was wound around my tenketsu, restricting the flow of chakra. This had become necessary to control myself- I had advanced to 'Ten no Kishootsu' prematurely. My body wasn't ready for the strain.

Now, in my hour of need, it would have to be.

I tugged the length of material out. It uncoiled, dropping into a pile at my feet. I felt my chakra surge, and some part of me registered it as four times my usual chakra.

15 - ArcII: Love and Combat- Chapter 4

Ryouko yanked himself out of the shadow, resting on one knee for a moment. His head was down, and he looked tired. But he snapped his head up and attacked.

Fast! Azami had time to think before Ryouko flew into her at top speed, a punch grazing her stomach. The material on her dress shredded, exposing a large gash across her stomach.

That much destructive force...is it a tailed beast? Is he a jinchuuriki? ...No. I could have sensed that. What I sense is his own chakra. There's just more of it. Too much! He can't possibly control that!

Ryouko kicked himself backward; a cloud of dust rose up as his foot left the ground. He landed twenty feet away, his handsigns already finished. BOTH sets of handsigns.

"Fire Style: Fire Dragon- Release! Earth Style: Earth Dragon: Release!"

The earth dragon, made of the ground around Ryouko, rose up in the air and began circling. Azami created her blade of wind, watching it carefully. She glanced at Ryouko. He had made the sign of the tiger, and he inhaled a big gulp of air and chakra. He began to blow outward through his clenched hand. A dragon formed. It kept coming and coming, circling Ryouko three full times before it was done. It whipped around Ryouko and headed straight for Azami. She got her wind blade in the way, blocking the dragon as it plowed into it at top speed. A dark shadow covering her and a lot of the surrounding area reminded her:

The earth dragon above me! But I can't let go of the wind sword! And there's no way I can take a hit from that thing!

Azami looked around wildly. She saw Ryouko already beginning to show fatigue. She guessed that this was a new thing to him. So she made a move that both infuriated Ryouko and made him realize that he was really out of his class.

In a flash, Azami had grabbed the newly-arrived Sakura and Naruto, and put up a barrier jutsu.

"Surrender or I kill them!" Azami shouted. "Attack this dome with those creatures, and all three of us perish! What will you do now?"

Ryouko made eye contact with both Naruto and Sakura. He knew what he had to do. His chakra began to suppress itself, and he let himself sink to one knee. His dragons faded and disappeared.

"Good boy. Now, admit your defeat..."

Sakura couldn't stay quiet anymore. "SCREW THAT! Ryouko, get over it! You can't let her take you away! You and Naruto...I love you both! In different ways! I won't let either of you go! I'll kill her myself!"

Ryouko couldn't have been more proud. He had never said 'I quit'- this fight was still going. And his chakra was back in his body. So he stood up, backed up a step or two, then ran forward, charging the dome. He leapt high, chakra in his foot, and he shattered Azami's barrier.

==

Azami couldn't believe it. Not even as Ryouko grabbed her by her gown and held her up.

"No more. I won't go with you. Not like this. Not after you nearly tricked me into having sex with you. Not when you threatened Naruto-dono and Ojousama. I should kill you..."

Ryouko set her down, and gave her a hug instead.

"...I can't kill you. You're unfortunate in the same way as I am. You know what I mean, I think. So, go, and chalk this up to experience: Involve my students again, and I WILL kill you."

Azami hugged back, whispering her consent.

"Ryouko...there was no genjutsu on you. You stopped short of having sex with me of your own volition. You have more character than anyone I know. Don't lose that character, okay?"

Ryouko gave her a little tug closer. "If I was really in love with you, then sex would have been the wrong thing at that point. Neither of us need to make that kind of mistake. Despite our careers...we have morals and personal codes. Though they really suck sometimes."

Azami turned a sigh into a laugh and squeezed back. "Yeah. Oh well. It's odd to think of myself as an upstanding person. It's even more odd to think that someone else thinks that of me."

Azami made a handsign. One of her shadows came and began to swallow her up.

--

As Azami disappeared, I began to feel the effects of unleashing my curse bindings. It began as a small cut on my cheek. Then it spread, until blood was everywhere. At each tenketsu, an 'X' of my blood was placed. That meant hundreds, if not thousands of red X's began to pop up all over my body. I began to get dizzy from blood loss and fell to one knee.

Blood dripped from my head, matting my hair down and turning my world a hazy red. Soon my left eye was covered with blood so much that I couldn't open it. Blood crisscrossed my arms, turning my black shirt crimson.

"Wha-what's happening?!"

Sakura fell backward, landing on her bottom, her jaw slack with shock. In all her studies, she'd never even HEARD of something like this.

Azami slowed herself, even getting ready to get out of the shadow. Naruto warded her off with a kunai.

"Just go. Sakura is the best medical ninja our village has. He'll be fine."

Azami looked a little hurt, and even a little guilty (Since she pushed Ryouko so far), but she agreed and left in silence, giving Ryouko a worried glance as the shadow swallowed the last bit of her up.

I just let myself kneel there, staring at where the shadow had been. Something inside me just snapped. I felt hopeless; helpless. It's the worst, most useless emotion a warrior can have, and here it was, hitting me at a horrible time. But I couldn't help it. It was all just too much.

It took...this much? And I still barely won? How powerful is that girl? How weak am I? Ojousama...Naruto-dono...they almost died...because I couldn't protect them. The one thing I'm supposed to do, above all else...and I couldn't do it. I couldn't do my job. And what Sakura said...I don't understand.

"...I'm fine."
Did I say that?

"Just help me up. The bleeding's stopped."
That was true, but still...

"Good bluff back there, Sakura."
Bluff? Risking your life is a 'bluff' suddenly?

"Naruto, you too. She had one eye on both of you, so she didn't see me coming."
Yeah? Way to take credit, big guy! What a hero.

Naruto got under my shoulder, helping me to my feet. But Sakura stayed back. She was absolutely shaking. My concern took over. Naruto wanted to take a look, too. He knew that look all too well, and he was ready to run for it. When Sakura got like that, he usually got hit.

But Sakura strode over to me and grabbed me by the shirt collar.
"If you EVER try to do something that dangerous on your own again, I'll break all your bones, heal you, then break them again! You hear me?!"

Now I was the one who was slack-jawed. Her grip tightened, and she actually lifted me up onto my toes, then into the air.

"You hear me?! You and Naruto, and Sasuke, always doing stupid things by yourselves! I'm not the weak little girl I was! You don't have to do something like that anymore! I can help!"

I only noticed the tears now. She was crying over worry for me. It felt both good and bad; sweet and sour. But it was just letting her close to me again. Wait, she had said something about loving Naruto and I in different ways.

No. No! I've sacrificed too much to make sure they get together! I can't let her start to love me! Not now! But I wanna know what she meant. She loves us 'in different ways'.

My voice trembled, either with emotion or from bloodloss. "You said...you loved Naruto and I...in different ways. I...don't get it."

Sakura was a little surprised that I would ask so directly. And she didn't have an answer. I could see

she was fluster, and had no idea what to say.

“I saw the commotion from the mansion and I-”

Lady Tsunade and several jonin had come running. They just froze. All they saw was Sakura holding me in the air, her hand in a fist, and me bloodied almost beyond recognition. (At this point, Sakura dropped me painfully onto the ground)

“Sakura! You went too far! He’s not Naruto!” Tsunade yelled, plucking me from the ground.

I had to laugh at the irony. In my head, anyway. Out loud, it hurt too much. Definitely hurt a rib or six.

“No, M'lady, she didn't do it. It was an old grudge that I settled. That's all.”

I laughed at myself. I still felt so useless; things still felt hopeless. What could I do but laugh at myself?

I need to take some time to think. Well, this injury gives me an excuse, anyway.

“Lady Tsunade, I'd like to take some time, and go heal myself somewhere. I'll be happy to tell you what happened, but I'd really like to rest first.”

Sakura glared at me. I folded immediately.

“I'll make it a business trip, and take Sakura and Naruto with me.”

--

This was victory?

16 - Arc Iiii- Internal Conflict: Chapter 1

Naruto and Sakura sparred casually, making sure not to smack each other around too much. Not that their 'teacher' was around to see it.

"Why would he do that on his own?" Naruto growled, punching at Sakura.

Sakura dodged, then replied. "It was his battle. I was just mad he got himself so beat up."

Naruto dodged Sakura's low kick, then backed off entirely. "He's been messed up for two days now. He might as well not even be here."

'Here' was a temple. Kekkou-ji temple. Ryouko had a friend here, and he had chosen to come here to heal. But it didn't look like he'd healed at all. The blood was gone, and the bruises were fading. But mentally, he was absent.

--

I stared at my feet, sitting up against a shed wall. Asuna-chan had been in and out, trying to talk me around. I couldn't explain why I was being like this. It just felt like it was necessary. There was so much to think about; so much to worry about. It was horrible, but I felt this need to bear it alone.

--

A carriage was pulled up to the temple; it was carried by four men, and there was one on each side of the carriage. The monks and priestesses all stopped what they were doing to see what was going on. They were a small, unimportant temple that happened to be favored by one of the Leaf village's shinobi, despite his coming here not being a religious thing at all.

Out of the carriage stepped Uzume. The priestess all the young miko's admired. Kind, beautiful, clairvoyant- she was everything they hoped to be. It was said that she could bring the Amaterasu out of the Sharingan.

"I'm told you have a...Ryouko here. Lady Uzume needs to speak with him immediately!"

One of the carriage's escorts spoke up, sounding gruff, and even annoyed. Uzume hopped out of the carriage herself, lightly touching the man on the shoulder.

"Yoshimaru, there's no need for that attitude. I know who I need to speak to. I know who he has spoken to. Please guard me from here."

Uzume walked toward Asuna, stopping to give her a kind smile and nod.

"If you please, Asuna-san, show me to where Ryouko is. I need to speak with him. I've caused some of his pain indirectly, and I may be able to ease it."

Tongue-tied, Asuna lead the way.

--

Ryouko looked up when they came in. It immediately became clear to Uzume that Ryouko had put himself in a protective genjutsu.

“Asuna-chan, can I count on you to guard my body? I’m going to enter his genjutsu to talk with him. Please don’t take it personally that he’s been unresponsive to you. That he looked up when you walked in meant he trusts you enough to relax his genjutsu.”

Uzume made handsigns, and entered Ryouko’s genjutsu.

--

Genjutsu

It was a veritable library. Books and scrolls of every kind were all over the place, stacked precariously. That went on for a while. Uzume looked at the books; all shinobi materials. She smiled.

Dedication

The next section was an empty field. Beyond it, Uzume could see a dark area. But she had found Ryouko, in the center of the field. He was surrounded by weapons; he apparently knew a great deal about them and their uses. For a time, Uzume silently observed him.

Graceful. He must have more natural ability in this genjutsu world. He’s not far from this in real life, though. I hope he’ll be able to talk with me. If he put himself in such a tranquil genjutsu, that must mean he’s suffered an injury that would corrupt his mind somehow.

-

Ryouko stopped working out, bowing to Uzume deeply.

“It’s an honor to meet you here, Lady Uzume. Though I regret you’ve now seen one of my sins.”

Uzume smiled serenely. “Sins? Vanity, for allowing yourself extra powers here?”

Ryouko nodded. “Yes. It’s what I dream of- power to protect against any threat. It’s my role. Or, at least, the role I wish.”

Uzume pointed to the dark area behind Ryouko.

“What’s over there, Ryouko? What is it you’ve held in such strong chains, yet you let into this ideal world you’ve created.”

Ryouko looked a little saddened- Uzume was surprised that he allowed himself to feel that in this ‘nexus’. But she knew him well enough to know that he had to give himself a reason to leave this place eventually.

“While we walk over, I can tell you why I’m here to begin with. I can open that darkness to you, Lady Uzume. It might do good to bare my soul to someone else.”

Uzume followed Ryouko. He explained that he was so paralyzed by pain in real life that he couldn't move his body. He was going out of his mind. He had hoped this genjutsu would keep his mind safe while his body recovered.

"Kind of like putting myself in a coma. I know Naruto and Sakura must be worried sick...but I couldn't even tell them. I can't let Sakura close to me."

They were almost to what Uzume could now describe as a large gate, padlocked and sealed with blood. There was a little more time before they reached it, so she asked more questions.

"Kimihiro..."

Ryouko hadn't heard his real name spoken in a long time.

"...Don't you desire a life for yourself, beyond study? A girl, maybe? Or a business? Or a position of prominence?"

Ryouko smiled a little forlornly. "I like to keep my dreams realistic. That which is unattainable in real life...well, I do my best to leave that out of here."

Sakura...I see, Ryouko. You don't know your other love interests yet. There are so many girls who would want you. But your chosen one is your chosen one. I look forward to seeing who you choose as 'yours'.

They were at the gate now. Ryouko opened it, ignoring the locks and blood.

So this security system is meant to keep things in...not others out...

Uzume covered her mouth with her hand, stunned beyond words.

It was Ryouko, in chains. Thick, black chains that came from every directions in the void. A circle of light kept Ryouko visible. It wasn't the same Ryouko that was next to her. This Ryouko was beaten up; his body was cut up. Right in front of Uzume's eyes, it seemed like the wind kicked up and cut him again; blood ran down his face from a new cut on his cheek.

"It's gruesome, I know. But this is me, Lady Uzume. These chains are the things that hinder me from reaching my full potential. 'Worry', 'Guilt', 'Natural ability', 'Fear', and the one around my neck- 'Anxiety'."

Ryouko looked at himself sadly.

"I want to shatter those chains. But I can't reach them. Not even in this genjutsu. Feel carefully."

Uzume put her hand out.

Glass?

"The real world is past this pane of glass. I don't know what the glass represents. Until I do, I can't break it. And I'm stuck on this side- not being 'one of them'. And not even being myself."

Uzume didn't answer. She couldn't. That was the kind of answer one had to find out for oneself. Instead, she gave Ryouko her kindly smile.

"Will you allow me to heal your body? Using the cursed seal will become easier after this. The pain will recede faster. And you won't be helpless- you have two wonderful people who think the world of you. I know you won't let them cry. You'll cry their tears for them. That speaks volumes about your character."

With that, Uzume was gone from this paradise Ryouko had created for himself.

Genjutsu

--

Uzume's eyes opened in real life. Her first vision was to see that Asuna was standing guard, a naginata in one hand, chakra seals in the other. The miko's fierce dedication was impress.

"You must be a talented young priestess to wield those so efficiently. Weapons were never my strong point." Uzume kindly smiled. "If you'd like to help me now, you're free to do so."

Asuna wasn't going to miss an opportunity to learn from her hero. She walked over and knelt next to Uzume.

"I'm not going wake him up- he'll wake up on his own when he senses his body has mended. Asuna, you'll be able to do this for him the next time he undoes his curse bindings. This time, please observe."

Uzume's hand was glowing with a silvery energy. She reached toward Ryouko's stomach and drew out the cursed bindings. She made a motion with her hands, as if doing a cat's cradle. The curse bindings sunk back into Ryouko. Asuna could see into Ryouko's chakra network, and watched the curse bindings wind their way around his inner chi point, three inches below his navel.

"There. He'll be in a little pain when he wakes up, but it will be manageable."

Asuna was in awe- seeing her idol work right in front of her, and making such a complex operation look so simple.

"Lady Uzume...you're amazing!"

Uzume shook her head. "No, not at all. My powers have nearly peaked, and I'm still very young. What I've foreseen concerns me. Perhaps my mind would be more at ease if I took on an apprentice... Asuna-chan, what about you?"

--

Ryouko woke up, finding himself alone. He was in a state of controlled panic at first. That was normal for waking up from a genjutsu. That was why he never made his genjutsu worlds any kind of a perfect paradise. He always kept reminders that there was more for him to do in real life.

The chains and the glass...this time, the glass felt weaker. But why? What has changed?

It didn't matter. Right now, he had profuse apologizing to do to Naruto and Sakura for making them worry.

--

"You scared the hell outta me!"

"Tell us next time!"

"What were you thinking?!"

"I'm going to kick your @\$@ if you do that again!"

"I can't believe you!"

"Don't you trust us?!"

Ryouko expected all that, and more. He took it in stride, sheepishly deciding to treat them to a night at the hot springs once they checked in at home.

"Sorry. It was just a personal thing. You know, we've all got secrets. That kind of thing."

"Yeah, well...!"

Naruto stopped in mid-sentence. Ryouko stopped period. Sakura walked into Ryouko, her eyes trained on the view in front of them.

"The gates of the Leaf...locked? But that's...never happened before!"

17 - Arc Iii: Internal Conflict- Chapter 2

Ryouko walked toward the gate, a stick in his hand. The stick burst into flames when he reached for the gate.

“Naruto-dono, try walking a shadow clone into the gate. I want to see something...”

The clone walked toward the gate, but it just walked into the solid wood.

“So they just don’t want foreign objects...Leaf Shinobi are fine. What does this mean... Sakura, did Lady Tsunade mention any security measure like this?”

Sakura thought hard, then nodded, her face ghostly white. “Yeah...she did. If the Leaf is under an attack, is surrounded, or is being attacked from the inside and is near imminent destruction...the gates of the village will be locked to all but Leaf shinobi...”

Ryouko pulled a throwing needle out from a pouch on his arm, tucking it between two fingers and his thumb.

“You two stay here. Follow me after five minutes, unless you see my hawk summon in the sky. If that’s the case, go to Sunagakure and send reinforcements.”

Ryouko opened one of the massive Leaf gates and went inside. It snapped shut behind him with a loud ‘thud’.

“Sakura...” Naruto began, his voice getting caught in his throat. He didn’t need to continue.

“I know...we aren’t surrounded, or under attack, so it must be something wrong inside the village...”

“But who? Grandma Tsunade’s pretty popular.”

“Danzou. That elder. It has to be him...”

Sakura didn’t like this one iota.

--

I walked into the village, my guard up from the start. The streets were absolutely clear; no shops were open. At this time of day, that was an indicator that something was very wrong.

I realize I’m not alone only microseconds before four people swoop in on me. I stayed rooted to the spot- for the moment- to see my attackers. I gasped in shock.

ANBU? Damn, not good. This isn’t a routine check, either. Not with their weapons draw. They’ll hit me with paralysis genjutsu if they think I’m a threat...but I can’t attack them first!

“ANBU? Good. Someone can tell me what the hell is going on here,” I said aloud, my voice full of

friendly intentions. The four agents suddenly look like demons in those masks.

“Hmm...Ryouko. I see...The Elder mentioned you by name. You aren't worth much, but he said you'll be a pest, so we should kill you.”

I chanced a glance behind me. No good. I was surrounded. Looks like I was going to have to fight. “Well, pardon me for saying so, but I don't think you should kill me. You aren't the people that are supposed to kill me. What has Elder Danzou done?”

The masked agent I had picked out as the leader didn't make a move. “He's taken the Leaf for it's betterment. If you don't resist, you'll have a place of honor on his council.”

“Honor?” I cocked my head. “You speak of honor? Well, I'll decline. I only want things that exist. And a council run by Danzou cannot have a place of honor. So I'll pass.”

“I figured as much. You are nothing if not predictable, Ryouko. And loyal to a fa-oof!”

I smashed the ANBU agent in the chin, shattering his mask. Grabbing the remnants of the mask, I threw them at the approaching attacker. The porcelain cutting across his arm made him look down for a fraction of a second when blood that was his splashed in front of him. My fist rocketed off his jaw as well; my other hand took his short ANBU sword and swung it around to meet another ANBU sword just in time. While our weapons were deadlocked, the other ANBU agent still moving tried to attack from behind. Timing it, I used a Replacement Jutsu. His weapon met only a thick log. He used a thrust strike at me, so the wood caught his blade long enough for me to bring the butt end of 'my' sword down between his shoulder blades, knocking him to the ground with a 'thud'. That left one more agent, who was going to run for reinforcements.

“Hold on, don't leave yet!” I protested, sounding sinister. I had decided on throwing the ANBU sword. It twirled end over and finally stuck between the man's legs, cutting them all to heck. It one more second, I had snapped both his arms, blindfolded him, and tied him up.

“There've gotta be others who think this is ridiculous...but I can't let Naruto and Sakura join in yet. We need reinforcements anyway. SUMMOMING JUTSU!”

A summon of mine, Yo-O was a giant, majestic bird. His name meant 'Hawk King'. I asked Yo-O to take the captured ANBU agent in his talons, and fly to Sunagakure so that he could be interrogated by their staff.

“And please, allow Naruto and Sakura to fly with you. Take the necessary precautions to continue your summons, in the event of my death.”

Yo-O flew off grandly, meeting no resistance, to my relief. That left me to continue into the village deeper. The obvious place would be to head for the Hokage building. I was concerned for Lady Tsunade's safety; but going in there by myself was a bad idea. Someone would know about the four defeated agents soon. I wasn't convinced I could handle another onslaught. My best option was to try to find some allies. And it had to work oppositely of the normal security protocol.

The academy...they might be holding the children and teachers hostage. Iruka might know

something.

--

Naruto and Sakura saw the giant bird. Immediately, they planned to head into the village, despite Ryouko's instructions. However, Yo-O put paid to that thought by snatching them both up and flying them off to Sunagakure.

It was the right move. Someone had to stir up trouble inside the village and clear a path for the reinforcements.

--

Ryouko stared grimly at the school from behind a tree. The students certainly looked panicked. He could see Iruka's face, staying solid for the children, but to Ryouko's trained eyes, he was panicked as well. Time to liberate the school and get them all out of here. Children didn't need to be casualties of war.

"Hey! There he is!"

Ryouko cursed- he'd been spotted! All the kids and teachers looked out the windows, no doubt either very happy or very confused.

"Get him! Paralysis Genjutsu!"

Ryouko snapped his hands together. "Release!" he shouted, before making handsigns of his own. "Fire Style: Dragon's Pulse Jutsu!"

Three successive bursts of fire emanated from Ryouko, each one exploding violently in front of the agents. Ryouko paused a half-second to see what effect he'd had. A kunai whizzed at him from the smoke. More followed it. Ryouko snagged it and used it to deflect the other kunai.

"I won't let you do this! I don't know what made all of you swear your blind loyalty to that man, but I won't let it go unpunished!"

Ryouko threw the kunai high in the air. Everyone looked up- Bam! There it was!
"Hell Viewing Technique!"

Without handsigns, Ryouko had gotten at least one agent under a brutal genjutsu. It was a testament to ANBU training that the man didn't black out immediately. He foamed at the mouth and clawed at his own throat before finally succumbing to whatever horrors Ryouko caused his mind to conjure.

That left his partner. This one was the senior agent, and was already keying up his field mic to call for more help. Ryouko threw a kunai so that it smashed the ANBU agent in the hand manipulating the mic. The second kunai smashed him in the mouth. Ryouko used a Replacement Jutsu to appear behind the agent, a hand over his mouth. In his other hand was the field mic. Ryouko crushed it.

"Now, we'll just have you be quiet somewhere. I can crack your mind, or you can sit in the dark. Take your pick!"

The agent reached for his sword and tried to draw it, but Ryouko's hand was over the hilt, preventing it from leaving its sheath.

"Sleep."

Ryouko smacked him in the chin, shattering his ANBU mask and KOing him.

His enemies dispatched, Ryouko turned his attention to the school.

--

Iruka and the teachers had sent all the oldest and most advanced students home. They condensed the rest of the students and teachers into two classrooms.

"Good move. For now, we can only assume the worst. Iruka, what happened? And do you have any idea where Lady Hokage is?"

Iruka shook his head. "It happened very quickly. Elder Danzou appeared in each place of importance and declared himself the leader. Anyone who objected was killed. That included children. So we've been doing what he says."

Ryouko clicked his tongue; an idea had struck him.

"Alright. Then make this look good, Iruka. You're going to have to do some damage to me..."

"I get it!" Iruka declared, smacking his fist into his open palm. "Make it look like you're the enemy to us so they won't target us! Perfect!"

"Okay, but for this to be good, you're going to have to hit me with a couple kunai. Avoid my nose, groin, and chest, please. I think the back would be best. And you'll have to give me at least one punch to the face. My chakra shield will take the worst of it, so don't hold back too much."

Ryouko heard a clatter from downstairs. He was on the second floor currently- where the students had gathered. He cursed audibly- his plan had a flaw in it. If he was injured at all, ANBU had a good chance of killing him. He had been lucky so far in that they had underestimated him. That would come to an end. They had to have realized the threat he posed by now.

They should be at Sunagakure now, if Yo-O hit his top speed. That means almost at hour until they reach the gates. And that's IF Sunagakure will help us. A request for help coming from anyone short of the Hokage usually takes a while for them to process.

"I'm going to have to do something a little distasteful. Iruka, please put your students at the top of the classroom, in the corner away from the door and windows. That should keep them out of the line of fire. Then I'll need your help..."

18 - ArcIlii: Internal Conflict- Chapter 3

The ANBU agents burst through the classroom doors to find the entire group of kids cowering in the corner. In the front of the room, there was blood. In the corner, Iruka was holding a kunai to someone's neck.

"I captured the intruder. He's not dead yet," Iruka managed around gasps. **That kunai I put in my leg is really hurting. It's gotta be hurting Ryouko worse, though. But just a little closer...**

The ANBU agents both stopped.

"Shameful, Iruka. Did you think your trap would catch us? A B-Ranked Ninjutsu at that?"

Iruka narrowed his eyes. "What? The Four-Square Bomb Release? Don't be ridiculous!" Iruka indicated the four seals on the floor. "Against ANBU? I tried it against Ryouko! He stepped around it."

"I don't buy that, either. Ryouko's too smart for that. So tell us- how DID you capture him, Iruka?"

Both agents fell at the same time, their heads smashed together. Ryouko glared at their limp forms, not feeling at all bad. If they were traitors, they had it coming.

"Nicely played, Iruka. We'll have to move ahead with my plan. I can trust you to get the kids to Sunagakure; that much I know. But I'm interested in the information you have, first. Anything at all..."

Iruka thought hard. But finally, it struck him. "Anko! Genma and Raido, too. They're in the Forest of Death! I doubt the ANBU agents went looking in there yet. They might know more. I just know that Danzou assumed power a day ago, and that Lady Tsunade hasn't been heard from."

That didn't bode well. Tsunade would never take such a thing in silence. And on top of that, she didn't disappear without a trace. She couldn't have.

"Iruka, assume the worst. I'll create a diversion to give you time to get out. Don't trust anyone in ANBU, and take anyone who isn't at least a mid-level chunin with you. You should be meeting Sunagakure troops halfway here, if they agreed to help."

Ryouko looked around, seeing the scared kids. He looked at them, seeing a few steady sets of eyes staring back at him. Eyes that didn't waver. The eyes of strong, young up-and-comers.

"You three!" Ryouko pointed to two boys and one girl. "Your job is to take care of your classmates. In fact...boy, Lady Tsunade would hate this...but..."

Ryouko threw all of them a kunai knife and a chakra cigarette.

"Don't use it unless you have to. Keep yourselves and your classmates safe. Move quickly."

Ryouko reminded Iruka to stay here until he heard the explosion. What THAT meant worried Iruka.

--

“There he is, get him!”

“No, he’s over there!”

“Stop him!”

Ryouko’s three Shadow Clones bounded around the village, drawing all kinds of attention to themselves and just being a pest in general. So far, they had burned ANBU agents with cooking oil ‘stolen’ from Ichiraku, with well-placed fire jutsus to add that crispiness; They had smashed windows of the most corrupt places in the village. Ryouko knew where Danzou lived, and he deliberately had a clone go there and take a page out of Naruto’s book. There was now a giant and incredibly nasty caricature of Danzou.

Ryouko’s himself was in the Forest of Death, ready to meet with three Special Jonin who could help him out. He was surprised to find that they weren’t alone- Shizune was with them. To his surprise, he found that the four wanted him to be in charge.

“You got a good look at the village- we’ve been cooped up here,” Genma muttered, kicking at a tree.

“Yeah. It’s just like last time!” Raido snarled, punching a rock.

Ryouko remembered that they had been there with Lord Third Hokage, and they had been helpless that time, too. He could understand their frustration. He felt it himself. Shizune was the only one here who outranked him, but she didn’t seem to be in any condition to make decisions. She just kept murmuring about how she should have protected Tsunade better. That left Ryouko, the youngest and least experienced, to control the situation. First order of business...

Ryouko pulled Shizune into a tight hug, stroking her back and muttering kind words.

“Calm down, Shizune. It’s fine; we’ll make this work.”

The lack of honorific stunned Shizune- as Ryouko had meant it to. He was usually such a stickler for rules that him leaving an honorific off was a good enough surprise to stop Shizune’s tears.

It was at this point that Shizune began to see Ryouko’s potential. He wasn’t falling apart when things got hairy. He was checking on the others, making sure they were okay. And he had already struck a blow to Danzou.

Now I understand why he’s supposed to protect those two...

But if their protector has this kind of strength...and those two are supposed to surpass him...How strong will they be? Naruto and Sakura...

“Alright, there’s really only one option here. The way I see it, we need Lady Tsunade to show up- once the village knows she’s alive, they’ll support Danzou less. That’ll force Danzou to act. And from there, we can stir the pot and cause more unrest. Add a few more people to our cause. And once reinforcements from Sunagakure arrive, we’ll make a strike at Danzou himself.”

Shizune had been the last to leave. It was still fresh in her mind:

“Go, Shizune!” Tsunade ordered, surrounded by her own ANBU agents. One hand glowed with a blue energy- chakra scalpel. The other hand was balled into a fist- deadly force.

“I can’t leave you, Lady Tsunade!” Shizune protested, reaching for the hidden string in her sleeves. Once she yanked that cord, needles would fire from a hidden pouch on her wrist. After that, she’d have time to spout her poison jutsu.

Tsunade gave Shizune a glance. “Go. Now. I can take care of myself. It’s the village you need to protect now. Get your squad and go! NOW!”

Shizune gritted her teeth and closed her eyes. Ryouko was right- she had to get a hold of herself. Ripping her hair out and sobbing wouldn’t do anyone any good now. And for all she knew, Lady Tsunade was still alive and well. She couldn’t forsake that hope yet.

“Right. So right now, I’m the biggest pest to Danzou. So I’m going to irritate him a little more.” Ryouko looked back toward the Hidden Leaf. “One of the agents I knocked out told me that Danzou really doesn’t like me. That means he is at least a little worried about me. So the best way to do this...”

Using a Shadow Clone Jutsu, Ryouko made two of himself. From there, the clone transformed into Shizune.

“I’m coming, Lady Tsunade!” the clone said in a perfect imitation of Shizune.

Raido lit up, finally getting it. “I get it! That clone is going to play Shizune, trying to rescue Lady Tsunade! And then Ryouko is going to go another direction while the heat’s off him.”

Ryouko nodded. “You got it. Now, Sunagakure should be-! Ah, there’s their answer!”

Ryouko bit his thumb and used a summoning Jutsu. Instantly, Yo-O was in front of him, in a compact form.

“Sunagakure reinforcements are en route. They will arrive in one hour’s time. Your two charges are closer, approximately twenty minutes away. With them are two Sand Jonin.”

Ryouko considered his options, using a kunai to mark the bark of a tree.

“So if I move now, I have to last twenty minutes until I let them capture me...IF I can do that. That’s not good enough odds... With the Shizune clone, that’ll cut the time a little...still too close. And I don’t have any safe way of...! Perfect!”

Ryouko dug into his pouch, extracting a small scroll. He quickly inked down a message.

“Give this to the Fire Daimyo. After that fire (see previous chapters), I think he’ll help. And if it’s his forces coming to the rescue, the Sand helping us will get a boost. And, finally, Danzou will have messed with someone he can’t win against. You can bet he’ll see to it that this little coup de tat is kept quiet- we can’t have people thinking the Leaf or their leader is weak.”

He thinks like this, but he's not even a field commander? If that plan works, we'll avoid a public relations nightmare! Impressive he could think of that in the heat of battle. I'll have to make sure he gets a desk job, at least...

Shizune smiled, thinking of how frustrated Ryouko had been for years. How frustrating things had to be for him now. And yet, now his dedication shown through more brightly than ever.

He's grown up so much. I wish things would work out for him.

"No...that won't work," Ryouko muttered. "If the Fire Daimyo finds out Lady Tsunade was overthrown, he might remove her from power altogether. No, this will have to be our fight... Shizune, I DO have a friend who can help. Yo-O, take Shizune to Kekkou-Ji temple. Shizune, all you need to say is: I need to speak to the Miko, Asuna. It's a matter of life or death for the 'Heaven's Temper'."

"Huh? That makes no sense!" Shizune protested. "Tell me what you're going to do first!"

Ryouko reached inside his own stomach, holding the knotted end of a black cord.

"You have a right to know that much, at least."

--

Naruto, Sakura, Kankuro, and Temari raced at top speed through the forest that connected their two villages.

"No traps yet...we're lucky."

"Ryouko's probably given them something to think about," Sakura commented. "I had a bird's eye view of his clones kicking the crap out of a good number of agents. But that won't last..."

"This is so messed up!" Naruto protested, kicking extra hard off a tree branch. "I mean, we might have to kill our own villagers? Why would people just change like that? And why when we left?"

"It must be that royal couple crap."

Naruto was shocked to hear that. "They're taking that seriously? I wasn't even taking it seriously!"

Temari kicked off a branch, deep in thought. "Wait, didn't you say they made Ryouko your teacher?"

"Yeah, that's right," Naruto replied.

"Then they're going to gun for him, first, before coming after you," Kankuro finished for Temari. "I don't care how much he's improved- no way one guy can hold off a village."

They all hurried up after that. Kankuro had no great deal of love for Ryouko, but his sister treated the boy like something of a cousin. Temari's friend's were Kankuro's friends.

--

Shizune and the others recoiled a little, having just heard what Ryouko was going to do to himself.

"It can't be helped. And once I'm caught, I'll give them something to think about. Something to worry

them. By then, reinforcements will have arrived.”

“But that’ll kill you! And you don’t have that priestess to heal you, either!”

Ryouko nodded. “I know. It’s a risk. But there’s also the chance that Lady Tsunade will be wherever they take me- IF they catch me. Either way, it’s our only chance.”

Ryouko left them at that point, before one of them could protest again. He couldn’t let anything, not even the most sensible argument, slow him down. He had one chance to make this work, for the village’s sake.

19 - Arc111: Internal Conflict- Chapter 4

KA-BOOM!

Ryouko's curse bindings were removed. With a little practice, he had learned to make the effect an explosive one. With him in the center of it, an explosion spread outward, smashing windows of one building, burning up another tree. He hated to destroy the Leaf at all, but he had to make a point.

WHOOSH!

At a speed he didn't believe possible at his skill level, he whipped around the village, finally seeing an ANBU agent. He reached into the eyeholes of the agent's mask and threw the porcelain thing away. The shocked ANBU agent couldn't even go for his sword as Ryouko's hand planted itself on his face. A second later, his head cracked into a building, and Ryouko was gone.

Intruder alerts sounded all over the village. Those who had kept quite when Danzou stole power now erupted- they had no idea who was helping them, but they were relieved! A few found courage to fight; nurses got beds ready for the injured agents, along with restraints to keep them in custody.

--

"GET HIM!"

Ryouko had danced around the worst of the conflicts, picking at lone ANBU agents or groups of three or less. Even in this state, he wasn't a match for more than four. And these were the emotionless, unshakeable Foundation agents. That made reading their moves impossible.

Running down a street, Ryouko threw kunai and shuriken at the windows from which he was being attacked. Once he reached the end of the street, he leapt up high and used one his best attacks.

"EARTH STYLE: EARTH DRAGON QUAKE!"

The street tore itself up as Ryouko's handsigns were finished. The buildings broke from their foundations and rose up, tipping the evil ANBU agents out of their hiding places. They saw Ryouko start the descent from his insane leap, but they were busy running for cover. The jutsu wasn't over yet.

The dragon rose up, going past Ryouko. Ryouko landed, immediately kicking off down the street, dodging swords and leaping in and out of agents.

They were easy prey for the dragon once they were distracted. It went right down the street, smashing into the agents. It followed Ryouko until he stopped. It kept going and smashed into a wall. You could hear cries of pain even through the earth.

"Release!"

The dragon swelled and burst violently, sending agents falling from the skies. They didn't move this time.

--

Naruto ran through the gate, opening it from inside. When he turned around to look, he saw the horrible destruction. And yet...the Leaf people were happy. No vital areas were harmed, and aside from bad agents, no casualties in the street.

Then the Earth Dragon rose up and tore up a street.

"That's Ryouko! Come on!"

--

Tons of had been damage caused; any rogue ANBU agents were either searching for Ryouko or were battling the suddenly-alive Leaf Village.

Ryouko himself lay slumped at the foot of a tree, the bloody 'x's covering his body again. He was just going to lay here, eyes straight ahead. He had done all he could. Reinforcements would be here soon. He would probably miss them. He glanced at the bridge across from him. Sure enough, here came the ANBU agents. With a smirk or satisfaction, Ryouko detonated the exploding tags on the bridge. Considering the attackers were falling into a foot of water tops, he doubted he killed anyone. He didn't want to kill anyone anyway.

Scatter...like cherry blossoms. The blossoms are pretty, even as they fall, aren't they? I wonder if my death will be like that?

Ryouko looked at himself, still smirking.

Not one cut, but I'm covered with blood. I just ran around and caused problems, so it's no wonder no one could touch me. No, my death will be boring and unseemly- like my life. Oh well. Naruto...Sakura... All the best, you two.

Ryouko closed his eyes, just planning on sleeping through the rest of the pain. The exhaustion he felt was almost in the background amongst the chaos he had started. He hadn't planned on getting the other Leaf Ninja so riled up. But it all worked out. The only thing he hadn't done was find Lady Tsunade and free her. Well, the reinforcements could do that.

...It's kind of fitting. Dying under a cherry tree. I wonder if it's symbolic? The tree blooming so beautifully, and the beautiful girl it represents to me...does this mean she'll find happiness? I hope so. I'd like to think this was all worth it.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Sorry for the length of this chapter. It's a small 'bridge' chapter, meant to get us to the next arc. So, please keep reading!

-NG

20 - ArcIIII: Saving Grace- Chapter 1

The battle raged on in the Leaf, but the tides had turned dramatically. Those in favor of Tsunade had begun to dominate the battle, driving back Danzou's followers. Lady Tsunade herself hadn't yet been found, but hopes were high.

Despite that, there was talk of who would succeed her. Few knew about her connection with Naruto. Most hoped Jiraiya would take over, should the worst come to pass. A Sannin had to be the best choice.

Meanwhile, Sunagakure reinforcements arrived, and they began to clean house once the barrier keeping them out was lifted by two good ANBU agents. Naruto and Sakura burned through some of the traitorous Leaf's, both searching for the two missing people.

They had met Iruka-sensei and the kids halfway here, and had heard about Ryouko's plans. They also knew that Tsunade was missing. So it was agreed that they would search, and leave combat to the others whenever possible.

"Damn it! I had no idea the Leaf was so close to this kind of civil war!" Sakura burst out, smacking an intruder hard enough to shatter his ribs.

"Huh? There was something like this going on at all?" Naruto absently stuffed some goon in the gut.

"...Yeah. But don't tell Lady Tsunade I told you. There's been an increase in those who support Danzou. Wealthy, older veteran shinobi who aren't happy the Leaf isn't prospering like it was before Orochimaru's attack. They don't think Lady Tsunade is up to the task of making the village better. I knew they had support, but to go this far..."

A burnt building caught Sakura eye. Two injured people staggered out of it. Instinctively, Sakura went to help them. Naruto decided it was best to watch her back.

Ryouko's fine. I can't leave Sakura alone. He'd just insist I go back after him.

--

The area around Ryouko was all quiet. The sounds of war were dying down. Or maybe it was just bloodloss that was sending Ryouko into shock. Either way, he decided to manipulate the dregs of his chakra to form a protective genjutsu. It was one of the few ways that Lady Uzume had taught him to deal with the pain of the curse bindings being released.

His head fell to the side; his mind now inside a 'safe place' while his body healed.

-

Ryouko walked around his genjutsu semi-paradise, absently pulling books from a library area, but not really reading them. His eyes kept being pulled toward the dark area where his real self was kept.

No...not my 'real' self. The self that *COULD* be real if I don't break the chains. I need to free that

'self' of his inhibitions...and do the same to the real me...I've just got a feeling I should take a look...

-

Ryouko looked at the version of himself in chains. The figure looked back at him. It had never done that before. It pulled at the heavy chains on itself, dragging itself closer to the glass between the two.

Ryouko walked up and put his hand to the glass, making eye contact with himself. That self was bleeding, too. Cuts appeared and disappeared on it's body. Just like always. But there was less blood this time.

The chained-up Ryouko put his palm to the glass, too, across from Ryouko's palm. Bound by the chain on it's neck, it couldn't speak, but it could communicate through thoughts in this genjutsu.

"The seal on me is weakening. Don't let up."

"How can that be? I'm as miserable and hopeless as I always was...only now, I'm waiting to die.

"Then that's the key. The key that can unlock these chains. Capture this feeling of 'letting go'. Then, we can go beyond this point. The barrier has begun to crack."

The chained-up Ryouko could only reach the glass with his palm, but at it's press, the glass cracked in one place. Ryouko felt a new emotion- hope. In his mind, he pictured a golden key, floating towards the lock of the chain around the neck of his other self. It fitted itself into the lock, turned, and the chain loosened. There were four more locks on the chain, but Ryouko could feel the change in his own breathing- this 'other self' could breathe easier, too.

"It's such a relief...it's a battle you won after fighting hard...what doesn't kill you only makes you stronger. Next time you visit me, make my breathing easier."

--

Ryouko opened his eyes, feeling an adrenaline rush of pure happiness. He'd never had a reaction like that to genjutsu. For some reason, it felt like hope. As if things weren't so bad.

I gave up on a girl. But that doesn't mean I can't make something of myself. There are other girls, if this one doesn't work. And there are others goals- such as to surpass the Hokage. To come from nothing and be someone! To have the power it takes to swat down injustice like this. But I need to live.

To live, I need to stop bleeding.

To stop bleeding, I'll need help.

Help...Sakura, of course.

Maybe this cherry tree WAS the sign I was looking for.

"They're withdrawing! The Foundation is withdrawing!"

Ryouko heard the shouts. He smiled a little, allowing himself to feel proud for the moment. He hadn't done much in this war, but he had helped spark a rebellion. That was good enough for him; at least for

now.

After all, that's my role. To protect. The spotlight belongs elsewhere.

"Ryouko!"

Finally, Ryouko let himself calm down. He calmed down until he could feel pain again. It was only now he noticed that a kunai was embedded deep in his shoulder.

Feelings are the problem AND the solution. I can't make them go away- I need to learn how to deal with them.

Sakura began to heal him, already telling Naruto to send a messenger toad to Kekkou-Ji temple. Sakura could heal Ryouko's combat injuries- it was his internal injuries that were the problem.

Those curse bindings...I still don't understand them. What do they do for him? Is there a monster inside Ryouko, too?

Ryouko looked up at Sakura, chancing a grin. "I guess you shouldn't let me out of your site anymore. I've made a mess of things...and myself."

"huh!" Sakura drew in a breath, shocked to hear that. She accidentally dug her chakra scalpel in too hard, and caused Ryouko to protest.

"Sorry! I just...you were talking to me like normal..."

Ryouko leaned back against the tree, controlling his breathing as he did. "Well, you know how told me to call you by your name, instead of 'Ojousama'? Well, I guess having one near-death experience too many made me think 'to hell with the Hokage's orders'."

Ryouko smiled charmingly.

"It's YOUR orders I'm supposed to follow, not hers."

Sakura pulled her hand back, a little stunned. "Huh? What's gotten into you?"

"I wish I knew. But it feels a little better than the usual stuff. Almost like there's some reason for me to get up one more time..."

"...Did they poison you or something? It's not like you to be so dramatic..."

"I'm starting to wonder..."

--

It took Ryouko a few hours to recover. In that time, Naruto summoned a tracker toad so that he could find Jiraiya. Right now, he was needed here. If the worst happened to Tsunade, someone had to take over.

Sakura focused most of her energy on healing Ryouko. He wasn't critical- but he was in pain, and in a bad way somewhat. His Tenketsu were strained from the prolonged time he spent without his curse bindings on.

Ryouko was busy thinking. As usual, they weren't happy thoughts. They were productive, though-inducing thoughts. The only thing that could make Lady Tsunade disappear against her will was death, or some kind of quick capture that didn't allow her to unleash her strength. That sounded like ANBU, on both counts.

Jiraiya arrived shortly after, looking much less jolly than usual. He excused himself to talk to Ryouko alone. They were both privileged when it came to Naruto and Sakura, and the time to exchange information had come.

--

"I'm going to be frank, Ryouko. If you're going to continue this kind of work with those two, you need to find someone to pass 'it' on to."

"...I know. I've been putting it off. I can't pick someone. There's no 'child of prophecy' involved when it comes to my decisions. That gives me more options. But how many could stand up to the threat that we're facing. 'It' isn't an easy thing to bequeath."

"True, true," Jiraiya admitted. "And you haven't quite gotten to that level where decisions like this are second nature. Maybe we need to push you to that level..."

Jiraiya removed a picture from the inside of his clothes. He passed it to Ryouko while he rummaged in his sleeves.

"That is a picture of an orphaned boy from our borders. Now, where did I...ah, here it is!"

Ryouko studied the picture. It was a pretty sad sight. The boy was clearly undernourished- his ribs were poking through his skin. He wore only a tattered pair of pants, and a broken pair of sandals. His long hair fell across one eye. The other eye was interesting.

"Master Jiraiya...this boy is blind!"

"In only one eye," Jiraiya told him, distracted by some envelope. "The other eye has compensated with excellent vision. Beyond excellent, in fact. He's inherited a rather odd trait. You could call it a kekkai-genkai, except that it's actually a learned skill restricted to one bloodline."

"I'm sorry, could you clarify that?"

Jiraiya chuckled. "Yeah, it's odd, I know. Unlike the Uchiha clan's Sharingan, where all members of the family can attain a basic level, this skill isn't present in ANY of the clan members. It can be learned at any time- provided the person learning it meets a few unique circumstances."

"And those circumstances?"

Jiraiya grinned. "Here. Lady Uzume asked me to pass this on to you. She seemed to think you and this child might be of some help to each other. Oh, but you can't adopt him. This eye- called 'Issekigan'- must be honed while the user is asleep, and in the complete darkness at night. So, if you choose to help him, he'll be staying with Lady Uzume."

“That’s great and all, but I don’t see how I could help him. And I really don’t know how I would get all the way to the Fire Daimyo’s palace and back often enough. I can’t neglect those two...”

Jiraiya smiled a little and ruffled Ryouko’s hair. “You’re a good kid, aren’t you? I know it’s eating you up, watching those two together. And I’d never say it to Naruto, but he needs this kind of stability. I can’t provide the stability, even though I’m his master. Sakura may be able to give that to him.”

Ryouko couldn’t quite meet Jiraiya’s eyes. “...I know. And you’re right. It’s killing me. But maybe it’s better this way...”

“?”

“...My parents already know the risks of my life here. I can’t just go visit them- they’d be targets. For Danzou. For the Akatsuki. For Orochimaru. If I’m alone like this, then I won’t hesitate when the time comes to make the necessary sacrifice.”

Jiraiya scratched his head, not sure how to deal with this.

Minato was always optimistic. Naruto doesn’t even know how to be melancholy. This kid’s got enough depression for both of them. But I don’t get the sense he’s asking for pity. He’s asking for validation that he’s correct. But even if he IS correct in thinking like that, I shouldn’t encourage it. He might make a stupid sacrifice, instead of the right one.

“Well, you just leave that to us legends for now. No dying- Lady Uzume told me to remind you of that, too, come to think of it. There should be a letter from her in there, too.”

Ryouko stored the letter in his vest.

“Later. For now, finding Lady Tsunade should be top priority...”

Jiraiya got the sense there was something Ryouko wanted to say. So he waited. It took Ryouko a minute, but he finally said it. Without turning around, he made a request of Jiraiya:

“...I think I know where she is. If I’m right, the second I go in, I’ll be ambushed. Danzou will then try to have someone make a move on Naruto and Sakura. We won too easily. The Foundation never attacks straight on. They mess with you. But I’ve got their game figured out.”

“...”

“And I’m asking you...to please watch Naruto and Sakura. Especially if I don’t come back. I don’t know what kind of help this maniac has, but it may be too much for me to handle alone.”

“I can do that,” Jiraiya told him. But there was more.

“...Don’t tell them anything we’ve discussed, please. Especially the part about me not coming back. They don’t need to know.”

“And if you don’t come back? What do I tell them? They’ll want to know...”

Ryouko turned to give Jiraiya a small smile. “Tell them not to worry about it. They don’t have to attend my funeral. I doubt you’ll ever find my body anyway. It would be un-Foundation like to leave my remains

lying around. Just make sure my parents are notified, and assure them I didn't die for nothing...even if I DID."

Jiraiya sighed quietly, watching Ryouko go. This was the hard part of being a teacher (especially when you were indirectly teaching someone)- the part where you have to let them sink or swim on their own. Ryouko wasn't at one hundred percent, but Jiraiya knew when a man was fighting for a personal reason. And Ryouko was relaxed about it. So there had to be something different about this fight. Something that made him confident.

This time, he's not leaving those two in danger. He's got someone watching his back.

21 - ArcIIII: Saving Grace- Chapter 2

Tsunade opened one eye wearily. She was underground somewhere. It was dark and damp; like a sewer. But the only prominent smell was that of dirt and tree roots. In the dim light, she could make out a few huge tree roots jutting out through the soil. She could also see the hallway with loose wooden planks for flooring. That was the source of the light. The room she was in was maybe fifty feet all around; upon further inspection Tsunade noticed it was a perfectly circular room.

Damn...last thing I remember was telling Shizune to close the village gates due to an emergency. The elders stopped in, and they were telling me something...something that made me angry. So angry I needed a drink. Ugh...from the headache I have, it must have been my sake they drugged. I was so mad I didn't even taste the sake. I just gulped it down. What was I thinking? I am a prominent figure of a prominent village; I can't afford to drop my guard like that!

Tsunade could feel a chain attached to her leg. That was child's play to get rid of. Her first instinct was to rush out of here. But without knowing the full effects of the drug in her system, it was risky to move.

I've got to leave it to the village. There are so many capable shinobi that I can sit here and get bearings without worrying. Now, I've got to focus on healing...

--

--

Jiraiya sat around patiently, jotting down some notes. Unlike the normal circumstances, he wasn't writing down anything having to do with girls. Instead, he was working on a special scroll. This one would go to Ryouko; but it would really be for Naruto's benefit.

And that child...the Issekigan. It's an odd kekkei-genkai- it's abilities aren't perfectly apparent, and the name itself is dodgy... ("Issekigan='Discerning Eye')Ryouko might have an easier time of it. The one time I met this kid, he was as gloomy as Ryouko is. They seem to be the same type of person. And there's another similarity that I can't quite put my finger on...

"HEY! PERVY SAAAA-GEEEE!"

Naruto and Sakura were finally up again. Sakura had needed to rest after healing Ryouko's wounds and forcing the curse bindings back on. Naruto had just stayed to be with her. It pleased Jiraiya to note that Naruto was having much better luck with Sakura than Jiraiya ever did with Tsunade.

Thought she might inherit ALL of her teacher's bad habits...like punching guys into orbit for innocent peeping!

"Hey, there you two are! Have a nice rest? DID you rest?"

(Sakura smacks Jiraiya)

“Ha ha, you really ARE just like Tsunade! Ah well. So, here’s the deal kiddies- I’m babysitting for a while.”

Naruto looked around. “Huh? Where’d Ryouko go? And why’d he leave this old perv?”

“I’m right here, you know?” --’

“He shouldn’t be moving around! That procedure was tantamount to surgery! He needs to rest!” Sakura protested. “Next time I’ll break his legs so he’ll stay still!”

Oh yeah, she’s got Grandma Tsunade in her, all right. If I see her get that dot thingy on her forehead, I’m outta here! Unless she also get’s Grandma’s ra-

(Sakura smacked Naruto)

“You were just thinking about my breasts, weren’t you?!” Sakura demanded, looking mighty offended.

“No! I was thinking about Grandma Tsunade’s breasts, and I’m wondering if YOU’LL ever learn that jutsu-OWW!”

Jiraiya shook his head. **Idiot. At least I knew when to quit!**

All three of them suddenly whipped their heads around toward the mountain. There were two familiar figures standing at the base. Their cloaks were black with red clouds; they both wore straw hats with paper strips hiding their faces.

The shorter one had glowing red eyes.

“It’s been a long time, Master Jiraiya. Nearly three years since we last met, correct?”

“Wh-what?!” Naruto managed weakly. He was always looking for this guy- but showing up here? And how did he get into the village.

“And you, Naruto...you’ve grown both taller and stronger. Shall we assess that strength?”

--
--

Ryouko stared blankly at the entrance he had been told about. It paid to be in his position some times. You could make the right friends.

--Memory--

“Huh? The Foundation? Why do you want to know about that organization? They disbanded a long time ago...”

Ryouko shrugged. “I’d like to think so, too. But I have my doubts they’re completely erased from history just yet. And besides, those who don’t learn history are doomed to repeat it, right?”

Inoichi Yamanaka had to concede that point. “Well, makes sense. The scrolls for them are...”

“Actually...I’m more interested in their current residence. Rather, Elder Danzou’s current residence...”

-- End memory--

And here I am...This is where my research led me...

Standing at a large, yellowish rock, Ryouko felt around with his hand coated in chakra. He felt the rope first, then the seal that was attached to it.

“Alright, that’s a start...Now, I’ll need to remove this seal...and seal up the seal, as it were. Should I call for back-up?”

I’ve got no time. More people is more noise. I’ll have to be enough. And if I’m not, I’ve left enough clues so that someone else will find out where I went.

Ryouko opened up one of his newly-healed cuts enough to dip his thumb in. Blood on it, he made the handsigns and pressed his palm to the ground.

“Summoning Jutsu!”

A wheezing, aged old monkey landed on the spot Ryouko had indicated.

“Lord Enma. I’m sorry to disturb you yet again...”

“I’m old, Ryouko. Retired. What do you want with me?” the old monkey managed to say around deep breaths. It was hard to believe this was the ‘Monkey King’; Lord Third’s familiar.

Ryouko narrowed his eyes toward the rock. “It’s an old grudge. It goes back to the Third Lord...Do you remember ‘The Foundation’?”

Enma transformed into the Adamantium Nyoï.

“Say no more. I’ve a duty to see this threat ended. You have my support.”

--
--

“Sakura...step back, please. I’ll need you to heal us, if this doesn’t work. Naruto, back me up.”

Jiraiya strode forward carefully.

“Seems you’ve got his attention now, Itachi. But won’t he be trouble?”

Itachi’s eyes narrowed. “It doesn’t matter. Last time, we learned a great deal about Lord Jiraiya. Enough to combat him this time.”

Kisame’s hand was resting on the giant sword slung across his back.

“Is that so? Don’t tell me I have to sit this one out...”

“No. Please keep nine-tails and the girl busy. I’ll deal with Jiraiya.”

Kisame drew his sword; the legendary 'Samehada'- Sharkskin.

"I wonder if I don't spoil you, letting you have your way all the time, Itachi. We let your little brother live, and look at all the trouble he caused for us..."

Itachi didn't bother to look at Kisame. He kept his eyes on Jiraiya.

"I meant to kill him. Jiraiya interfered. I made an error in judgment- one I will correct. I can't let my foolish little brother continue to be chased by these pests."

-

Jiraiya had a plan from the get-go. The one sure-fire way to talk to Itachi. And it would give Naruto an instant, too, if things didn't work out.

I need to make it convincing...

"Alright then, you criminal scum! Feast your eyes upon the legend; the most honored sage of Mount Myoboku; the white haired lady lover; the one and only sensation of the Leaf..."

Jiraiya smacked the ground, summoning a toad directly underneath his feet.

"Jiraiya!"

He struck a comical pose, waving his long hair around.

Itachi and Kisame were unimpressed, apparently. Itachi just closed his eyes, masking something that seemed dangerously close to a chuckle. Kisame just shook his head.

"First I get that 'Might Guy' idiot; Now I find out that one of the 'Great Sannin' I've been wanting to fight...is nothing a dirty old man peddling perverted trash and striking up stupid poses."

Kisame leveled his sword at Naruto.

"And nine-tails is the disciple of this fool? This'll hardly take any time at all!"

Naruto and Sakura nodded to each other. They leapt in opposite directions, heading into the forest at the base of the mountain near their new home. Kisame gave chase- there was no missing his massive chakra.

Itachi and Jiraiya held their positions, letting the others go, keeping each other in check.

Itachi stared past Jiraiya and into the forest.

"You must have great confidence in Naruto to let him fight Kisame alone. I wonder..."

Itachi's eyes seemed to grow more menacing.

"...Could he have changed that much in a few short years? The last time we met, he was a cowering little whelp with nothing but an unfounded belief in himself..."

Jiraiya smirked a little. "You don't know Naruto as well as you'd like to think you do. You only know about the 'jinchuuriki' Naruto. Naruto the shinobi is another story. He's got one thing going for him- guts. And he uses it to the max. So no, he's not the same kid. He's not some little brat who's only claim to fame is vandalizing the village. He's a shinobi of his own right. And you'd do well to remember

that.”

“Kisame will decide that. If those kids dispatch him, I’ll agree with you- he’s become formidable. For now, you and I need to pick up where we left off...”

Jiraiya tensed up- this felt weird. Looking directly into Itachi’s eyes was a death warrant. And yet, the amount of intelligence to be gained...It was too great to ignore.

22 - ArcIIIII: Saving Grace- Chapter 3

Ryouko finished putting his seal on the rock's special barrier tag. His 'Five Elements Seal' glowed on his fingertips for a moment, then faded.

That'll have tripped an alarm or two. Now to bait the trap...Shadow Clone Jutsu!

Three clones appeared next to Ryouko. The four moved as one; Ryouko himself in the center.

I may have to kill my way in here...Can I deal with that?

No time to wonder. I'll have to. Lady Tsunade is in here. I know she is. And I know the Foundation is no damn good. If I'm lucky, I'll only need to bloody my hands on one person- Elder Danzou.

Ryouko and the clones ran inside. Their feet clanged on some kind of metal grate, occasionally hitting wooden planks thrown down. Every few feet, they were hit with a genjutsu. The clones released them automatically; with trap genjutsu, they were 'blanket' genjutsu- meant to snare all intruders. With the clones around to dispel the traps, Ryouko didn't need to stop moving. He could sense his clones, and they could sense him. That was the perfect teamwork.

A sword slashed out of nowhere. One of the Ryouko clones used a replacement jutsu as he dove in the way. The sword strike still hit Ryouko, but it was far from a critical hit. The same clone that had used the replacement jutsu to put the log in between Ryouko and the enemy knocked this enemy unconscious with an elbow to the head.

"Take the mask and clothes and scout ahead. I'll deal with the enemy."

The clone did just that. Ryouko reached down and grabbed the unconscious man's face. He trapped the man in a looping genjutsu in which the man would be brutally dismembered in a variety of ways. If he was conscious, he would have been screaming at the top of his lungs.

--

The clone that took the ANBU agent's gear slipped into the room where he felt the most powerful chakras. He had stumbled onto the very place his original needed to be. He waited a few moments, until the original was close by to take advantage of the diversion he was going to cause.

Out of nowhere, the clone attacked one of Danzou's aids. He incapacitated him, but was destroyed by Danzou's sword.

"A clone?! Everyone, defend-!"

BOOM!

A long staff with a golden tip extended into the room. Out of the end popped two clawed hands that

grabbed Danzou and held him to the wall.

“Good! Please hold him, Lord Enma!”

Ryouko came flying down the staff, two kunai drawn as he ran. Four agents jumped him; two on each side. Without hesitation, Ryouko cut them down. He didn't stop running until he reached Danzou. He plunged the kunai into both Danzou's arms, high up at the shoulder.

“Don't kill him!” Tsunade yelled, trying feebly to get up.

Ryouko had produced a third kunai and was an inch away from Danzou's throat.

“...We've been at war, M'lady. For a full day with his men. We thought the worst...with you dead, we'd have no chance of recovery. I just killed four men...my first kills. They're terrorists. Tell me why I shouldn't end this horrid life!”

Ryouko twisted the kunai in Danzou's shoulders, his teeth barred in a snarl.

“That's not Danzou. The rat bastard ran for it as soon as you came in. This is some brainwashed idiot-one who might have information.”

After a tense moment, Ryouko withdrew the kunai.

“Adamanitum Prison Jutsu!”

Enma fashioned himself into a prison, containing the new capture. Ryouko made a shadow clone to lead the way out while he himself propped himself under Tsunade's arm.

“...I'm sorry. I should have come here first...”

Tsunade didn't say anything right away. She just let herself think. But she knew she couldn't ignore Ryouko.

“No...protecting the village comes before protecting the Hokage. Especially the Hokage who got jumped and should have known better.”

Ryouko tensed up suddenly.

“My clone just got killed. My Lady, did they poison you or anything?”

“Huh? No, they just sealed my chakra...”

“Good. Then please hold on. I wanted to get out of here carefully, but whoever got my clone killed that option...”

“Wait a moment...” Tsunade was more steady on her feet now and went to check on the four agents.

“You didn't kill them. They'll live. As I suspect you intended...”

“...” Ryouko didn't meet Tsunade's eyes. “I...I'm no killer. This time, I meant to kill them. I guess my muscle memory had other ideas.”

With that, Ryouko grabbed Tsunade and used the body flicker technique, putting all his chakra into it. If he aimed right, he and Tsunade would appear right inside his cottage.

--

Naruto and Sakura dodged in patterns that made allowed Kisame to follow them. He knew he was being led- but why?

These kids are too full of themselves. Time to end this chase!

“Water Style: Water Shark Bombs!”

The powerful water attack struck Naruto and Sakura hard in their backs, knocking them out of the trees they had been scampering across.

Bwoof Bwoof

“Clones?! Then where-!”

“OODAMA RASENGAN!”

Naruto plowed into Kisame from behind. A swirl of blue chakra, larger than four Kisame's, blasted into Kisame. The sound of his yell was drowned out by the powerful sound of the chakra's rotation.

The second the Naruto clone helping guide the attack disappeared, Sakura fell from above, her fist extending toward the downed Kisame.

KA-BLAM!

The ground shook horribly; it cracked and fissured at her touch. Trees uprooted and fell.

Naruto landed next to the still-crouched Sakura.

“Did that do it?”

Sakura reached down and felt Kisame's neck.

“He's alive. But I think he's a fake. He went down too easy. He should have been able to dodge us. And this amount of chakra is a fraction of his normal amount.”

Naruto didn't like the thought of having just blasted some potentially innocent person into oblivion, but there hadn't been a choice. This man had been a very real threat just seconds earlier.

“Then we'd better capture him and bring him to ANBU or something. He might be able to answer some questions.”

Sakura took out a length of rope and began to tie the man up. But she saw Naruto grin a little out of the corner of her eye. She wondered what he found so interesting. Not another perverted fantasy, she hoped.

“What’re you grinning about over there?”

Naruto kept his grin in place. “Nothin’ much. Just...remember what a hard time we had with those fakes last time, chasing after Gaara? And this time, we beat them like nothing.”

Naruto clenched his fist, staring at it for a second.

“We’re getting stronger...way stronger!”

--

Jiraiya let himself fall into Itachi’s genjutsu. But it wasn’t what he expected. It wasn’t the nightmare realm of Tsukuyomi. Instead, it was a normal genjutsu. No, not even that- it was Itachi standing across from Jiraiya.

“...You gonna tell me what’s going on here, Itachi? Or should I say the person who’s impersonating Itachi.”

Itachi closed his eyes. “Very good, Master Jiraiya. I’m speaking through a vessel right now. I feel the need to warn you- the Akatsuki will not stay in the shadows forever. Nor will I be able to pass on information forever. The Akatsuki will make a move soon. It’s in your best interests to prepare any and all weapons you have for war...”

“You mean Naruto, don’t you? Get to the point. Why are you helping me?”

Itachi met Jiraiya’s eyes. “Don’t leave Naruto in the care of that boy any longer. He can’t teach Naruto anything more.”

“His job isn’t purely to teach. It’s to see to Naruto’s needs. And he’s done an excellent job of that.”

“Have you told Ryouko that he’s nothing more than a sacrificial piece if the Akatsuki attack?”

“I’ll tell him no such thing! It’s not true!” Jiraiya snarled.

“If he dies, the avenue for the Akatsuki’s attack becomes wider. As long as he possesses a Jutsu that could kill almost all of us, he’s a threat. But he’s merely a torch you’re waving at us, as if warding off a snake. You’re guilty of overestimating him.”

“And you’re guilty of underestimating him,” Jiraiya replied, smiling a little. “They’re ALL grown, Itachi. Naruto and Sakura more rapidly and obviously, but Ryouko...loyal almost to a fault, not afraid to get his hands dirty, and yet he’s compassionate...I couldn’t have asked for a better caretaker for those two kids. None of them will die easily.”

Itachi just stared for a moment, pausing his speech. Apparently, he was appraising the situation somehow.

“...Very well. I won’t underestimate a sannin’s judgment. But by the same token...think what I’ve said over, and be honest with yourself: If he is the last line of defense for those two, is he enough? His presence as a torch will diminish, and sooner than you think...”

--

Jiraiya found himself standing alone. Itachi had left in the time it took Jiraiya to rouse himself from the genjutsu.

He's still amazing. All the more reason I need to really think over what he said...

--

POOF!

Ryouko landed first, with Tsunade holding tight. They landed on Ryouko's makeshift bed in the corner-right where he'd aimed.

"Are you alright, Lady Tsunade?"

Tsunade got up on all fours- just as Jiraiya, Sakura, and Naruto came in to see what the commotion was about.

"MY LADY!" (Sakura)

"Noooo!" (Jiraiya)

"Whoa! Way to go, Ryouko!" (Naruto)

Tsunade was still on top of Ryouko. In his bed. This looked bad.

THWACK!

"Ow! Why'd you hit *me*?!" Ryouko whined, holding his head.

"You didn't deny their accusations!"

"Give me two seconds to answer next time!"

"Answer faster, idiot! You're slandering my good name!"

"WHAT good name?! Legendary Sucker?! OWWW! Sorry! It slipped out! OWW!"

Three good lumps on Ryouko's head later, Tsunade was still ticked.

"Stop saying things that sound bad, you idiot! Now just lie there quietly!"

Lying down like that, Tsunade noticed something- a big blood stain on Ryouko's vest. She could tell by a glance it was fresh.

"Hey, when did that happen?!"

"...Down there. They got me when I first went in. One of my shadow clones used a replacement jutsu to put a log in the way. Otherwise I would've been cut in half. It actually didn't hurt until you mentioned it."

Sakura went to the area and began to heal it, while Tsunade continued her verbal barrage.

"Your clones are more sentient than you? I've never heard of a clone being smarter than the original."

“You’re welcome, M’lady,” Ryouko said brightly, eliciting a chuckle from the small crowd that was in my cottage. “You know. For saving your bacon and all.”

Another good chuckle. But this time, Master Jiraiya moved quietly outside.

What Itachi said bothers me. I trust Ryouko- I’d trust him with my own life- but is there a weak spot on him that the Akatsuki don’t know about? The best way to find out is to just test him. Sorry, Ryouko, but we’re going to have to fight a bit. I know you’d understand- those two come first, and need to be protected.

23 - ArcIII: Seperation- Chapter 1

Ryouko let himself collapse onto his futon face-down. He was absolutely drained from using so much chakra and getting so badly hurt. He had helped stop the village's destruction. Danzou was on the run, and many of his agents had fled with him. His Coup de tat had failed. The Akatsuki had been thwarted (As he learned later from Naruto).

So many battles in one day was tiring, and just about impossible to believe.

Knock knock.

Ryouko glared at the door, as if the door itself was at fault. He REALLY didn't want to get up right now. But the knocking persisted, so he saw no alternative.

Sliding the door open, Ryouko found Master Jiraiya on the other side.

"Do you have some time, Ryouko?"

You didn't say 'no' to a Sannin who wanted to speak with you. Ryouko bowed and slid the door open wider to admit Jiraiya.

--

Naruto was also laying in his bed, but he found he wasn't the least bit tired. After a few more minutes of tossing and turning for some reason he couldn't figure out, he decided to see if Sakura was awake. Maybe they could go out or something.

He dressed quickly and padded down the hallway. He was about to knock on Sakura's door when it slid open on it's own.

"Oh! Naruto! Geez, you scared me!" she said around deep breaths. Once she regained her breath, she asked him "So, you couldn't sleep either, huh?"

Naruto lowered his head a little. "Yeah. I guess with all that went on...And even more than that, I just feel something...I dunno, it's just..."

"Like something's missing? Or it will be missing?" Sakura finished for him. At his startled nod, she bowed her head and closed her eyes. "I'm feeling it, too. Like we're about to lose something. Or maybe someone."

"Maybe we're just overreacting. It wouldn't be the first time," Naruto pointed out. "How about we go get some tea or something? I'm really wide awake."

Sakura smiled a little. This was uncharacteristically thoughtful of Naruto.

"Sure. I'm wide-awake, too. Let's go."

--

Jiraiya wasted no time. He laid down the law for Ryouko. He told him everything Itachi said about him, and he told him of his intentions.

Ryouko remained silent, but it was obvious he was seething with anger. He had just been told that he wasn't good enough at his job, despite all his success. That was just about the biggest slap in the face you could give him.

"Did you read your letter? From Uzume?"

Ryouko just nodded quietly. He decided it was his turn to cut to the chase.

"Master, if you have to test me, let's just do it. Present your test, and I'll try to pass it. If I can't pass it, then I'll go care for this boy with the Issekigan and train myself until I CAN pass."

Jiraiya nodded for Ryouko to follow him, directing him outside. It was nearly daybreak.

"We'll have to spar. But I warn you now- I will hold back a minimal amount. Just enough to not kill you. Beyond that, I won't give you any advantage."

"I wouldn't accept any advantage. I've always wanted to test my mettle against a legend. Win or lose, this is a dream come true for me."

Jiraiya gave Ryouko a small smile. It was a good answer, after all.

"Fine. But rest for a couple hours first, and smoke a couple of those chakra cigarettes. If we're going to fight, it should be with both of us at full strength."

Two hours would pass very quickly.

--

--

Naruto and Sakura made their way outside. But they stopped almost immediately. The spectacle before them defied any logic they could process at the moment.

Jiraiya was seated on top of one of his toads.

Ryouko had summoned Enma and was standing in an offensive stance.

"W-what are they doing! Ryouko can't win! We've gotta stop them!"

Sakura started toward the field where the fight was taking place, but Naruto grabbed an arm and dragged her back.

"We can't. Something's going on. We've got to let it play out."

"How do you know?!"

"I don't know HOW I know. I just know that I DO know. Please...trust me."

Naruto didn't want to tear his eyes away from this scene. His Master on top of one of his summons; his

good friend and protector wielding a fierce, old weapon that the Third Hokage had used. The scene didn't have the horrible feeling that went with blood feuds.

[b[So maybe it's just a sparring match? No, Pervy Sage wouldn't just spar. There's something else going on here.

--

Ryouko rushed Jiraiya, his tonfa flashing out of his sleeve to attack. Jiraiya whipped his hair around and snared Ryouko's outstretched hand, pulling him in. Ryouko replaced himself with a log and tried a strike from behind. Jiraiya used his hair to fling the log at Ryouko. Ryouko deflected it with his tonfa, aiming a low kick in Jiraiya's direction. Jiraiya leapt over it, and Ryouko swung with his tonfa. It made a dull 'thunk' against the log Jiraiya had replaced himself with.

"Pretty good, kid! Not bad at all! Now then..." Jiraiya disappeared. "Ready to get serious?"

Ryouko nodded. "Yes." He disappeared as well.

Two clones had just dueled it out in a high-level taijutsu battle. The real Jiraiya and Ryouko hadn't moved until their clones disappeared.

Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique! Ryouko made the half-tiger handsign. Once he felt the genjutsu hit, he ran toward Jiraiya.

Genjutsu is his weak spot; I've never seen him use it. This might give me an opening...

Ryouko aimed Enma at Jiraiya. The long staff extended. Jiraiya was still under the effect of the genjutsu somewhat, but still dodged just enough. Ryouko planted Enma in the ground at an angle as Enma grabbed the toad Jiraiya was on. Ryouko ran up the staff at full speed, making handsigns as he ran.

"Fire Style: Dragon's Ember Jutsu!"

A single burst of explosive fire hit Jiraiya. Ryouko knew enough not to pause, but he wondered if he had seriously hurt the Sannin.

"Fire, eh? Too bad. It's ineffective against my particular style of Jutsu."

Jiraiya had coated himself in the 'Toad Mouth Trap' jutsu. He and Ryouko were in the stomach of a toad with fireproof innards.

--

Naruto and Sakura marveled at the fight. It was rare to see Jiraiya fight against an enemy he was so clearly superior to. The two were impressed with Ryouko as well- he was holding his own so far. Even if Jiraiya was half-serious at the most, it was no small feat to keep up with him.

But it was Naruto who wound up impressing Sakura the most. He was calling out the moves each person would use- or at least something close.

"Fire jutsu by Ryouko...Pervy Sage will use that toad stomach, like he did on those Akatsuki guys..."

How far have you come, Naruto? You can watch and react to a battle so well now? How strong ARE you?

It was rare for Sakura to feel so proud of Naruto. She promised to reward him later, so he would further his training. But at the same time, something niggled at her.

Rewarding him reminds me that there won't be any reward for Ryouko. And that feeling I had earlier...Master Jiraiya wouldn't kill Ryouko, would he? No, they aren't fighting for real...I'll just make sure Ryouko gets something after the fight, too. Besides medical treatment.

--

Ryouko stared at Jiraiya, thinking out his moves. Enma was trapped outside the stomach. Ryouko considered ending the summoning and re-summoning, but Enma hadn't been much help against Jiraiya. And Ryouko couldn't afford the chakra. Perhaps a less powerful summon? No, summons weren't working. And there was no way he could out-summon or out-seal someone who had mastered both those elements. So the obvious answer was genjutsu. But the obvious answer would be the wrong one. Jiraiya could spot it a mile away.

Jiraiya could see Ryouko thinking. He didn't see any frustration, but he knew that the longer this match went on, the worse it would be for Ryouko. Maybe it could be avoided.

"Hey, listen kid. This doesn't mean you can't protect them- it just means that you wouldn't be their chief protector. Let's just call it quits..."

"I can't do that. It would be an insult."

"Isn't insulting yourself better than shaming yourself?"

"...I'll pretend THAT didn't insult me," Ryouko said judiciously, knowing Jiraiya meant no harm by the comment. He looked at the 'ceiling' of the toad, but saw nothing to his advantage. "It's not just that. The Third Hokage made a prophecy that I would protect these two. I've sacrificed a lot to see that prophecy realized. My shame means nothing compared to the guilt I would carry for letting Lord Third down."

Jiraiya could appreciate that. But he still had to be frank with the younger man.

"If those two died on your watch, could you live with it?"

That hit Ryouko like a jutsu. He had considered his own death and failure, but he had never thought about it he had lived and the other two died.

I...would be shattered. I could never recover as a warrior...

Ryouko dropped to his knees, his head bowed in defeat.

It was so effortless on his part...am I really so underpowered? Why? Why can't I hate Jiraiya for this? Is it because he's right? No...no. I won't leave like this! One of us must draw blood, at least!

Ryouko made three clones and had them charge Jiraiya. He reached for his stomach and prepared

himself for the pain and discomfort...

Bam.

Ryouko looked down. Jiraiya's hand was against his stomach. His clones were gone.

"If you'd gotten that off, you would've hurt yourself...and me. It's pointless, Ryouko. You'll need to be much quicker than that. Enemies as dangerous as the Akatsuki won't allow you time to use a weapon like that..."

Ryouko coughed up saliva, sinking back to his knees. He felt himself blacking out.

From one strike...

24 - ArcIII-Seperation- Chapter 2

The toad's stomach disappeared. Jiraiya was standing on top of his toad, holding a limp Ryouko. Naruto and Sakura could just stare. There wasn't even a scratch on Jiraiya. Heck, there wasn't one on Ryouko!

Jiraiya approached the two and laid Ryouko at Sakura's feet.
"Revive him. He needs to be awake now that I've calmed him down."

Sakura looked as though she was going to punch Jiraiya. Her fist tingled with anticipation. But he met her eyes with a stern gaze that left no room for argument. It actually scared her. She had never seen him so serious. Reluctantly, she tapped Ryouko just the right way to wake him up.

Jiraiya stood over Ryouko, his gaze hard. Ryouko stared back, his face unreadable.

"You aren't ready for this kind of assignment. I think you understand that now."

"..."

Jiraiya picked Ryouko up by his shirt, holding him on his tiptoes.

"You're angry. You've let your emotions betray you. I think it would be best for you to pass on your considerable knowledge to that boy we discussed. You're obviously better equipped to be a parent to the boy than a protector to these two."

Even Naruto was momentarily speechless. But only for a moment.

"Pervy Sage, what are you-"

"BE QUIET, NARUTO!" Jiraiya snarled, giving Ryouko a shake. "He's put you in danger from day one, 'protecting' you. You two are more talented than him, and have no need for someone to slow you down. You need to be with people BETTER than you... What you DON'T need is someone like this chasing after your heals."

That was all Ryouko could take. He snapped his elbows down on Jiraiya's arms, breaking the grip. He kicked for the stars, narrowly missing Jiraiya's head. After that, neither made a move to attack.

"I...will not...ever be insulted like that! Not ever!" Ryouko shouted, glaring daggers at Jiraiya. "I've been beaten, battered, broken, and destroyed for these two. I would have done ANYTHING for them. My life was theirs to command! For you to say what you did...it's unforgivable! I looked up to you, Jiraiya!" Ryouko was really cooking now. Sakura and Naruto both grabbed an arm, holding him in check. His chakra was so agitated there were burns forming on Ryouko's skin.

"I looked up to you, despite you being a lazy pervert! Never again will I admire someone so...so shallow! You bastardize all shinobi by demeaning someone less powerful than yourself! You're a disgrace! You're a disgrace! ..."

Ryouko's breathing returned to normal for a moment.

“...And so I am.”

Jiraiya made sure to keep his face stern. He couldn't show the pity he was feeling right now. Or the guilt at having to push the boy this far. It made him feel evil and dirty. But one does as one must. If the Third was to be proven right, it had to come to this.

Ryouko suddenly bucked like a bronco. All it had taken was the thought of being at Jiraiya's mercy, and his chakra boiled. Burns kept forming, but one formed in a nasty, painful way. It actually elicited a scream of agony from Ryouko.

“YAAAGGHHHH! (huff huff, huff huff) AGGHH!”

A burn boiled to the surface on the back of Ryouko's neck. Sakura's quick action kept it from spreading further, but she couldn't stop it from forming. Thankfully, that seemed to stop Ryouko's chakra cold.

Ryouko's arms and head went limp as if a puppeteer had been controlling him. But what had really happened was that the fight had left him. Naruto and Sakura let him go.

“...”

“Are you done having a temper tantrum like a spoiled little brat?” Jiraiya asked, a mean tone in his voice. “If you are, it's best if you follow my advice. Even if you hate me.”

Ryouko didn't say anything, He just opened a scroll, used a summing jutsu to give himself a change of clothes. He folded his vest and headband up and dropped it onto the scroll, sealing it again.

The coat and hat he'd summoned lay on the ground in front of him. The long, black trench coat fell to his ankles; the straw hat covered his head and eyes.

“...I'll do...as you say. And I'll train endlessly. And I promise you, Master Jiraiya- if I return here, I will have the ability to beat you. No, not even that- I will stand at much less than your equal and play at satisfaction. I've set the bar. If I can't leap over it, you'll never see me again.”

This wasn't what Jiraiya was expecting. He had told Ryouko to leave because he thought Ryouko would defy him. He really believed Ryouko would train in private somewhere in the village, and manage to work with the boy Lady Uzume had suggested. For Ryouko to go this far...

I did more than bruise his ego. I shattered it. I went too far. But I can't step back and take it back. He wouldn't accept it, and it would have an even worse effect. But I'll stop pushing his buttons.

Naruto and Sakura both stood in front of Ryouko, their mouths still dropped in shock. Sakura could just stare; Naruto managed to say a few words.

“...You promised to protect us. And now you're leaving...I understand, but...”

Ryouko just nodded his head slightly, and kept moving. Sakura clung to his arm for a moment, eyes down and covered by shadows. His arm was still warm with receding chakra. She didn't say anything to

dissuade him. What COULD she say?

It's what I thought of earlier...that we'd be separated...I just didn't understand the feeling.

"...I'll miss you, Ryouko. Please come back. There's always a place for you here."

It was almost silent, but she could just make out Ryouko say:

"...thank you..."

--

Inside Ryouko's genjutsu, the Ryouko in chains felt his bindings tighten up painfully. The glass in front of him shattered, starting with the crack. But a wall made of metal grew in it's place, leaving Ryouko chained up in the dark.

Never again...this hurts so much...so much...

The shattered glass rose up from the ground and aimed pointy ends at 'Ryouko'. He raised his head to look at them. Wearily, he let his head drop again. There was no stopping the pain.

They all pierced him like daggers. He should have died- but he didn't. Only a will to live and reason to cling to that will kept him going.

This one's self hasn't been challenged like this in a long time.

The chamber began to fill with fire. Hot gasses rose in the windowless room, scorching all within.

--

Naruto pushed past Jiraiya without a word. Sakura followed in his wake, only looking at Jiraiya with 'why' written all over her face. But she ignored that. She didn't know why and right now she didn't care. All that mattered was that her friend and protector had been sent into self-exile by a cruel act.

And that burn...it must hurt so much. And there was nothing I could do for him.

--

--

Sunagakure was quiet today. There was no commotion to speak of. Maybe it was just too hot. Whatever the reason, even Gaara, the Kazekage, felt bored with all this...nothing. His duties had become mundane- sign off on this mission; allot this much; budget this; and so on. Boring, administrative stuff he tolerated for the good of his people. Part of him missed being in combat. The sand flowing; the power; the rush of adrenaline. Having since recovered from the pounding he took at the hands of the Akatsuki, the itch for battle had returned.

But there are no battles to fight. And going on the offensive isn't something anyone here will tolerate. Even though attacking the Akatsuki would likely prove fruitful.

Boom.

A distant explosion in a far part of the village shook Gaara awake. If he could have, he would have smiled. Something to break the boredom.

25 - Arc III- Separation: Chapter 3

Ryouko traveled briefly, finding respite in a border town similar to Tanzaku. This town didn't have the lively festivals that Tanzaku did; most just passed through here as a safety checkpoint, then continued on their way.

Ryouko had since changed into his old $\frac{3}{4}$ sleeve length top. He had to distance himself from any appearance of a shinobi. He couldn't deal with it just yet. Instead, he did all he could to look like a traveler. The hat and coat, and now the top all added to that illusion.

Sitting down at a small booth-style tea stand, Ryouko ordered 'tea, rice cakes, and chilled sake'. He wiped his brow under his hat, not wanting to take it off yet. The burn he had inflicted on himself hadn't healed yet, and it was sensitive to changes in the weather.

Someone sat down near him. Immediately, something clicked within Ryouko. This presence was familiar to him. But how?

"Amazake, please. Oh, and soba."

Ryouko's eyes narrowed further- he knew that voice. He was sure...

Then it hit him. All at once, he pushed himself back, reaching for the dagger inside his top.

The girl seemed to realize it at the same time. She turned to strike as well. Both stopped short, not wanting to make a scene.

"Apologies. Didn't realize it was you...Azami."

Azami smiled a little, sliding closer. "It's fine, Ryouko. Of course. May I ask what you're doing?"

"You talk first if you want answers."

Azami raised an eyebrow, slightly bemused by Ryouko's tone. "Oh, I see. After last time, you don't want to trust me. Fair enough. But you should know that I won't attack you like that again.. In fact, that's the reason I'm traveling."

She blushed, a faint tinge of pink on her cheeks.

"After you beat me, I realized that I needed to improve. I'd grown cocky, and that was my downfall. So I...well, took some time off and decided to wander."

Ryouko kept his voice low, even managing to smile amiably as the server brought his food. Through a bite, he murmured "And I should believe you why? You nearly killed me last time. Now we're all goody-goody with each other?"

Azami rolled her eyes a little. "We almost got REAL 'goody-goody', before you chickened out."

Ryouko's plate and cups hit the dirt with a loud crash. He stood up, fists clenched at his side. "You don't realize just how truthful what you just said was..." He wiped himself off and began to stalk away.

Azami looked at her own food, but opted to follow Ryouko. Why one little comment had cracked his stoic mask was another riddle she couldn't leave unsolved.

I care for him on some level. Maybe seeing him like this...hurt, confused...damaged goods...maybe that called up some kind of nurturing instincts from inside me. As much as I want to fight him again, I want to take care of him, too.

--
--

Ryouko stood by the river's edge on a wooden bridge. The bridge had been worn by erosion and creaked with each wave that hit it. But that was comforting somehow. His hat jammed on his head, Ryouko closed his eyes for a moment. The burns were worse than he had let on to Sakura. Feeling across the right side of his back, on the back of his neck, and now across his right eye.

Why couldn't I tell her? I'd be in less pain now if I had. But I guess I just can't. She's not a part of my life anymore. Only these scars. If I'd let her heal me, I'd be left with an act of her kindness to remember that fight by. But it's the scars and burns I need to remember.

Ryouko briefly remembered his body being incinerated from the inside, screaming in agony and defeat. He closed his eyes, forcing the memory out of his head. He had begun to sweat from reliving the pain. He clenched his fist and gritted his teeth so hard his gums bled.

A hand on his shoulder calmed him. A white cloth dabbed at the blood coming down his cheek. A voice spoke to him:

"Come on, settle down. You weren't like this before. Something's happened."

Azami sat down, tugging Ryouko down next to her.

"...And I want to know what. I want to hear your story...as a friend, this time. Not a rival; not an enemy."

--
--

"You did WHAT?!"

Jiraiya backed from Tsunade- he had really managed to piss her off this time.

"Now, hold on. I had no idea he would actually listen!"

Tsunade's smashed her desk with one powerful strike. She stepped over it's wreckage, grabbing Jiraiya by his vest.

"You know what the prophecy said! And after all I made him sacrifice to protect those two...you go and tell him it's not enough?!"

“Tsunade, listen, I-”

“YOU listen! YOU could have trained him! Or you could have been a little more tactful! Now your idiocy has cost those two what could be their last line of defense! If they die, you know what will happen! And in the process, you’ve destroyed someone else! Do you think that Ryouko will EVER forgive you? Or ever adjust after the hell you put him through?!”

Jiraiya was rendered silent. He had no answers and no defense. He had pushed things too far by mistake. His semi-paternal love for Naruto had made him err in an important matter, and he deserved this scolding.

He deserved a worse fate from Ryouko. Vaguely, he wondered if the boy would try to kill him someday. But that thought was instantly dismissed. Ryouko wouldn’t do that; not to another protector of those two.

But he WILL try to prove himself against me again. But how far can he get? There’s no master out there for him...

--
--

The explosions faded from Sunagakure as fast as they had come. But there were still visible columns of smoke rising from many of the Sand’s buildings. Fires were a problem in a desert land, though not common.

Gaara thoughtfully used his sand to put the fires out; shifting massive amounts of it onto the burning buildings. Most of the shops and homes were built out of sand to begin with, so the fires didn’t spread easily. But the few wooden stores and homes went up like kindling.

Temari soon joined Gaara, evacuating people who had been caught near the fire, and assisting those with burns. Her Wind Style Jutsu wouldn’t be of much help. So she put her mind to work.

Who would do this? And why? Gaara? Some old grudge? That’s the only reason I can think of...Unless our alliance with the Leaf?

Kankuro landed next to Temari after a few moments. But his face was marred with a little bit of anger.

“Temari, the border guards saw no one enter and no one leave.”

That meant that this was an internal job. Someone within the Sand was angry at the Sand. But weeding out who would be next to impossible.

Gaara let the last bit of sand drop, putting out the last of the fires. He had heard what Kankuro said, and spent a minute mulling it over. Finally, he reached a decision:

“Add more guards around the village, and add more foot patrols. The next time they strike, we’ll catch . And they’ll be punished.”

“Gaara, we can’t spare anyone else! Everyone is away on missions! Since the Leaf’s attack, we’ve taken on some of their work...” Temari said, recoiling automatically. Gaara was still scary when angry, even though he didn’t attack anymore.

“...Then it's time we called in favors from the Leaf. Temari, make the arrangements. It would be...nice...to see Naruto again.”

Temari still couldn't believe that her brother could feel any kind of...anything. Especially for someone as infamous as Naruto. But it was good he had a friend. Everyone could use a friend.

--
--
--

It was nearly dark by the time Ryouko finished his story. He had jammed his hat down over his eyes, still not looking at Azami completely.

“...So I took his advice and left. I couldn't do anything else. It's cowardly to run, but he had all but shoved me out the door. And I can't just tell a Sannin to 'bite me'.”

Azami sighed, really feeling for Ryouko.

It must be killing him. Maybe literally. Those burns aren't normal. A new one even welled up from under his skin while we were talking. He must be really damaged now...

“Well...it probably won't be much help, but...I think I can at least make you feel a little better. If it's true that misery loves company, anyway. But...please don't tell this to anyone. I really don't like people knowing about my past...”

So she trusts me enough to tell me something about her. It could be a lie...but I don't think so. She's been very genuine tonight...Maybe this will be the real thing.

Azami took a breath, then started, looking up at the moon.

“It was five years ago now. I was in the Sand's version of ANBU. Back then, the Third Kazekage was still alive, and very much a cruel warmonger, no matter what anyone else said. He was clever at hiding his political agenda from untrained eyes, though.”

Azami paused again, organizing her thoughts. Now that she had started, she really felt good about being able to tell someone about this, after all this time. The only person who knew was her father.

“So, I was training hard. I kept being recommended for seduction missions because of my body. I never older than my age, but everyone always called me 'sexy'. And I always declined those missions. When confronted, I told people to 'Respect me as a warrior, not a sex object'.” Azami chuckled, rolling her eyes. “You probably won't be surprised to hear that they didn't want to hear that. So I jammed it down their throats by becoming so strong that no other agent could touch me. This continued until I was given a mission- this time, an assassination.”

Ryouko had been sitting completely still, drinking in every word the girl was saying. It seemed they had become adept at listening to one another and reading one another. And, try as he might to keep this thought out, it kept creeping in:

This boy I'm supposed to 'adopt'...the one with the Issekigan...If he's that young, my solo lifestyle won't be a good influence on him. If it's to be a 'family' atmosphere, there should be a female involved as well. And Azami has been incredibly nurturing...not to mention how I suspect she feels about me...and possibly I about her...maybe I should ask her...to come along. Or...or to marry me.

Azami continued talking then, not seeing Ryouko's shy glance up from under his hat. He was blushing so heavily that the burn over his eye tingled.

I can't believe I had a thought like that! I'm not ready for marriage, or children! He's an apprentice. I'm not his father, or even his brother. I've got to stop thinking foolishly, or I'll just be hurt in the end.

"So, my target was a young man of a neighboring town. A prince, actually. I was supposed to kill him, so that the old, sickly king wouldn't have an heir, and we could annex the land. I showed up at the mansion..."

26 - ArcIII: Seperation- Chapter 4

=Flashback

Azami crept along the outer stone wall, concealed by the shadows. A black jumpsuit adorned her figure, along with a short sword across her back. There were other weapons hidden on her as well.

Scaling the wall, she peered over the edge. The land, in a time of peace, had a minimum of guards. There were only two visibly patrolling, and they appeared to be armed with nothing more than bo's.

Silently, Azami flipped herself over the wall. Having already picked out the guard's positions and movements, she ran full-tilt, and was on them in seconds. One was already on the ground, hacking into pieces by her sword. The other hit his knees and begged for his life.

The noise attracted the prince's attention. He opened his sliding door and stepped out. He saw Azami and nodded cordially, much to her surprise. Striding over, he picked up his guard, dusted him off, and sent him away. That done, he faced Azami.

"You're here to kill me. I see you aren't a cruel person by nature. You're acting on orders..."

He walked closer, his hands up in surrender.

"That's the difference between us, huh? You follow orders, and I issue them. But such a pretty female shouldn't be just following orders blindly. She should be fine with giving them as well.

Suddenly, something flashed, cutting in front of Azami's eyes. The prince had thrown some kind of flash paper, blinding Azami. He was on her in an instant, his hand already reaching for the straps that held her jumpsuit in place. His hands were getting near places that shouldn't have been available to him.

"Do you LIKE taking orders? Then I ORDER you to stop struggling! You've a fine body for such a young girl. And since I always get what I want..."

Azami's face morphed into a horrified mask as he held her down. Her vision just began to return.

=End Flashback=

-

Ryouko was beyond stunned. He was angry for her sake.

"Then he raped you?! That bastard!" he said in a hushed voice.

Azami shook her head. "No. He didn't. Up until that point, I had never killed anyone. I was skilled enough to always leave them in pieces, but alive. But when he jumped me like that, I was so horrified that the only way to end it seemed to be killing him. So before he touched me anywhere private, I hacked his body into bits. First his head rolled, and that should have been enough. But I kept hacking and slashing until he was a bunch of cubes. The worst part, though, was the head. I learned that brain function continues for up to two minutes after a beheading, and I saw his eyes and mouth opening and

closing. So I...”

Azami let her tears flow a little, despite there being a smile on her face.

“I chopped him up while he watched. I mutilated his body before his own eyes. I couldn’t believe I had done that.

Afterward, others told me my eyes seemed ‘cold’. I began to feel out of place. But no one helped me- no one knew how. And the Third Kazekage made it worse by asking me to kill his son, Gaara. My refusal earned me exile from the village. And I’ve never been back since...”

Ryouko let his breath out in a whoosh. “So bounty hunting was the only way for you to survive...”

“Yes. It doesn’t mean I LIKE it...but I can only exist as I exist.”

Azami stood up, pulling Ryouko to his feet as well. “...As only you can exist as you exist. If this is your reality- as someone who strives for strength, and a place of his own- then that is what you work for. Regardless of what anyone else does or says, you’ve been influenced by this chain of events. Just like I was. So now, you can choose- get stronger and think about your goals. Or, alternatively, you can lose both and settle for something else.”

“...” Silence from Ryouko.

“Wanna know what I think?” Azami asked, without her usual teasing tone.

Ryouko nodded mutely, head still down.

“I think that you won’t ever be satisfied until you’ve at least tried to make your goals work. They’re hard goals- maybe impossible- but they give you a mission. And having a mission is when you are happiest, if I understand you like I THINK I do.”

Ryouko turned his head toward her, looking at her for the first time.

“...You shared something very profound with me just now. Now, it’s my turn...And I ask you not to share this information.”

“Promise.”

“...I’m going to become the instructor for a boy with an eye condition. It’s called ‘Issekigan’. What it does is almost a complete mystery. But someone I trust told me I’m needed. And since I’ve left the Leaf...I don’t know. I never believed in fate.”

“Not ‘fate’. It’s a ‘sign’,” Azami murmured. “It’s not exactly Egyptian- I’m a quarter, by the way- but things like this are signposts to point you in the direction you need to go. I wouldn’t write it off as coincidence...”

Ryouko pulled his hat down over his eyes. “I’ll take your word for it, since you’re among the most wise people I know. You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

Azami reached out and hugged him. “And where do you go from here? Besides training this kid? Will you aim for revenge?”

“...I don't know. But I need to get stronger. I'm hoping that maybe another wise person I know will have some answers. I'm going to visit her.”

Azami wrote out a contract, pressing her blood onto it, wrapping it up, then handed it to Ryouko. “It's a summoning scroll. If you need to get in contact with me, this will summon an animal that can track me. So...”

Azami braced his shoulders and kissed him- this time innocently on the cheek. “...Take care, okay? You're needed. And you're...loved.”

Ryouko blushed, as did Azami. They stared at each other for a moment, before Azami turned away abruptly.

“I didn't mean me. I meant those two. The girl said she'd kill me, even if you were the one who left. Since I don't want the angry apprentice of a Hokage and a legend on me, you'd better not abandon them completely.”

She was gone just like that, with Ryouko just standing there. He smiled after a minute, wondering if she meant what she said literally.

--

Jiraiya had left Tsunade's office a long while ago, but Tsunade was still seething at his stupidity. Despite his stoic frame, Ryouko was a sensitive person when it came to things like this. And Naruto and Sakura were, of course, upset that their friend and protector had been coerced into leaving the village. They felt betrayed, but not by Ryouko.

Tap tap tap.

A knock at the window came, it's source a bird. Shizune opened the window, allowing the bird to sit on her shoulder.

“It's a messenger bird from Sunagakure. ...My Lady! They were attacked!”

“What?! By who? Not the Akatsuki again?!”

“No...it seems to be an internal thing...but they're requesting help...specifically Naruto and Sakura.”

“Damn it...I can't say no, after all they've done for us. We can't spare them; especially those two...but...Shizune, brief them and send them to Sunagakure. Have Shikamaru and Asuma go with them to round out the squad.”

--

--

Gaara planned to meet Naruto at the entrance to the Village, when they arrived in two days. Until then, he kept a watchful eye out over his village.

“Lord Kazekage, sir!”

A chunin appeared at Gaara's side, holding a picture. Gaara took the picture, waiting for the man to elaborate.

"It's her. Azami! A warrant for her arrest has been standing since your Father's reign! Sir, she's been spotted for the first time in years!"

Could it be she's connected to the latest attacks on the village? Right now, that's my only lead.

"Bring her in- alive."

--

--

Naruto and Sakura reached Sunagakure's gates just in time to see a violent struggle. Guards were being thrown around like rag dolls.

After nodding a silent consent, the two ran over to get involved.

"Hey! What's going on here?!" Naruto shouted. Someone who was defeated actually paid attention and answered with:

"She's a wanted criminal! We're trying to arrest her! But she's too strong!"

"We'll see about that," Sakura said, pulling her gloves into place. Naruto was right behind her. But they both paused upon seeing who it was who was struggling.

"Azami?!"

Then they charged even faster.

Someone else landed next to Azami, knocking the guards off her back with a mix of taijutsu and fire style moves. It wasn't a style that was familiar to Naruto and Sakura, so they watched with a slight admiration as the stranger took out the last guard.

Admiration became curiosity as the stranger grabbed Azami and disappeared once he caught site of Naruto and Sakura.

Asuma and Shikamaru caught up a split second later, standing behind Naruto and Sakura.

"Damn! Missed her!" Naruto growled, staring at the spot where Azami had been just seconds earlier.

Asuma didn't say anything. But he could feel the chakra as well as anyone else.

Ryouko's been here...

"We'd better check in with the Kazekage," Shikamaru intoned, shooting Asuma a questioning glance. "This seemed to be an urgent matter."

Sakura shook herself out of her trance, finding her voice long enough to agree with Shikamaru. Her thoughts were elsewhere, though:

He couldn't have been so desperate...could he? Even worse- could she have captured him? He was a wreck when he left. No way was he in fighting shape...

Could she have killed him?

No! I refuse to believe he's dead. He wouldn't die so easily! Not after tearing his own guts out to release more chakra! If THAT didn't kill him...

--

--

Ryouko put Azami down next to him, landing in the middle of the desert.

"You shouldn't go places where you're wanted, you know," Ryouko said matter-of-factly.

"I know that!" Azami snarled. "I needed supplies. They've never been so hostile before. I usually have a contact or two ready to meet me. But this time, the guards went ballistic as soon as I walked in, disguise and all!"

"Really? Why would they do that before knowing it was you?"

"Who knows? I haven't done anything. You can attest to that- we've been together for most of the past day."

"True enough," he agreed. "Either way, I've got supplies enough to last you."

"No, I couldn't. What'll you live on?"

"I'm no fugitive. I can go anywhere to re-supply. Besides, you shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth, right?" Ryouko asked, cheerfully handing Azami a summoning scroll. "I owed you one anyway. For listening to me. Thanks."

Azami blushed, to her surprise. "N-No problem."

She didn't ask what he was doing here. This was nowhere near the temple he was aiming for.

Ryouko still didn't remove his hat. From underneath it, Azami could see the burn over his eye. It seemed so wrong to see a young-looking face like his so marred. Especially since she knew what caused his injury.

"...I needed more time to clear my head. Before I go train anyone, I need to train myself a little."

"...And you couldn't just let me go, right?" Azami finished for him. "After I was nice to you, you saw another side of me, and decided to-"

"That's not it."

Azami looked at Ryouko curiously. He just shook his head.

"I already saw that other side of you. At the festival, when you tried to pick my pocket. You were too sincere about the 'I'm a good girl' act for it to be 'just' an act. And for all your posturing, you never seriously hurt me."

“Then why-?”

“...I don't know. I could be in love with you, for all I know,” Ryouko murmured, rubbing at his face. “I have no idea what I'm supposed to do. The other girl I've had my eyes on is taken. You caught my eye so quickly...I don't know. Something drew me to you.”

“...I can help you,” she said finally, standing up. “I think I know how to make you stronger. But we can't stay here to train. Let's move. To this temple you're heading to. I'll train you on the way. That is...if you don't mind learning from me...and owing me...”

Ryouko stood up, adjusting his hat even tighter on his head. “I've no problem with either one. We keep evening the score. Your help is accepted and appreciated.”

Azami gave her trademark smile. “Just one thing-did you say anything to them? When you saved me?”

“...No. They don't need to see me at my worst. Not those two...”

TO BE CONTINUED IN ARC IV!

27 - Arc IV: Harsh Reality- Chapter 1

Sunagakure had gone two days with no further attacks. The security was very tight, though, so no one dared take it easy just yet. Except for Asuma and Shikamaru, of course. Setting up their Shogi board in a rare cool spot under a shade-producing building, they quickly became immersed. Sakura and Naruto watched.

Click. Shikamaru made his first move.

Sakura was watching with a bored look on her face, arms crossed as she leaned against a building. Naruto was by her legs, crouched down to look at the game board. He looked like one of the frogs he occasionally summoned, all hunched over like that.

Clack. Asuma made his first move.

Sakura rolled her eyes and walked into the nearest building to refill her canteen. Naruto kept watching, seemingly intent on the game. He was really concentrating, working in 'developing his mind', like Iruka-sensei used to say.

Brrrp.

Apparently, concentration made Naruto gassy, as he let out a loud fart that even rattled a couple pieces on the game board. There was tension in the air as Shikamaru and Asuma both gave Naruto a mild glare.

"Heh heh. Guess I'll, uh, go help Sakura."

He left, yelling 'Sakura' as he ran into the nearest building.

"He hasn't changed a bit," Asuma commented.

"Idiot," Shikamaru agreed, returning his gaze to the game board.

--

Ryouko lay in the desert on his back, the hot sun not feeling so hot now. Probably because his body was so badly burned not even the brutal sun felt so awful.

...I'm not getting it.

"You're not getting it."

A frowning Azami hauled Ryouko to his feet by an armpit- one of the last places on his body that wasn't barbecued.

"Explain it again. Please."

Azami kind of rolled her eyes, pretending this was a huge issue for her. Really, he was making progress- progress she herself had had a difficult time with.

“It’s like my wind sword. I just use my chakra to manipulate the air. Granted, it’s a little harder for you, since you’ll have to ignite the oxygen in the air without blowing yourself up. But you’ve got a head start thanks to your ability to use catalysts.”

Ryouko rolled his shoulder, really feeling the burn as skin peeled off.

“I get it, but it’s two different things. Using something lying around- like water- is different than creating a ‘spark’ of chakra. When it comes to that, I can make a ‘stream’ of chakra; an explosion of chakra. A spark, though...”

Azami held out her hand. She snapped her fingers, instantly igniting a flame on her fingertip.

“I can see this is going to be a problem for you. Given how you fought me, this ‘you’ won’t do. You need motivation. Since I’m not going to strip you OR me, we’re going to work from the ‘pain’ angle. Take off your shirt.”

Ryouko narrowed his eyes. “Hell no.”

“Then I’ll burn it off.”

Ryouko shrugged off his shirt. Azami pushed him face-first into the ground, then stepped on his shoulders. She raised her finger, the flame concentrated on it.

“I’ve got no problem helping you. But remember-” she smiled dangerously, even though he couldn’t see it. He could probably *feel* the smile, though. A quick look at his reddening ears and neck proved he did. “- working with a ‘bad girl’ comes with a price tag. You had your chance with ‘sex’. I’m betting you’ll regret that now...even if it WAS a good show of character for you...”

Her finger moved toward Ryouko’s back...

--

Sakura lounged on a bar stool, staring blankly at the adobe walls. The pink concoction in front of her went untouched.

Naruto, watching her, managed to look in silence.

Wow...she’s really hot when she’s all melancholy like that. Her head resting on her chin...she really DID get prettier.

Naruto hadn’t forgotten the time they’d spent together. Or how Sakura had said how she loved Naruto and Ryouko- in different ways. Ryouko wasn’t the only one agonizing over that one. Screwing up his courage, Naruto approached her.

“Hey, Sakura. You okay?”

Sakura seemed to be startled awake. She lifted her head off her hand, making a cute little ‘huh?’

sound. Seeing it was Naruto, she looked down at her drink.

“Yeah...sorry. Just spaced out a bit...”

“I noticed. So...anything I can do?”

“You? You actually noticed I was bothered by something? This isn’t something Master Jiraiya said, is it? Manipulating women by pretending you care about their feelings?”

“Huh? What? No way!”

How’d she totally nail it? She must know Pervy sage pretty well...

“...” Apparently not caring if he was sincere or not, Sakura sighed and spoke.

“It’s Ryouko. That fight did a lot of damage to him mentally...I can’t help but worry for him.”

Naruto felt an odd pang in his chest. What was it?

“Don’t worry about him. He’s strong- he’ll be fine. And he’ll be back.”

I don’t like that...I’m feeling jealous? Because of Ryouko? But he backed off. He’s no threat to Sakura and I getting together. He’s done nothing but encourage it. So why?

Sakura looked away again. “I know. But...well, if I don’t worry, who’s going to worry about him? He’s probably out their training with no regard for his health. What if that Azami girl catches him again? In the state he’s in, he won’t be able to put up any kind of a fight. And if he does that stomach thing...well, there’s no one to patch him up.”

Naruto put an arm around her. “Like I said, he can handle himself. No way he’d let that girl pull her crap again. I’m sure he’s fine. Like, training in some forest or something. He’s probably meditating right now.”

Sakura giggled a little at the thought of Naruto being so...well, like a boyfriend, and not like a Naruto. Sliding her hand on his, she nodded a silent thanks.

“It’s late. I guess I’m going to go to sleep. Goodnight, Naruto.”

Jealousy fading, and an odd pride rising in his chest, Naruto gave her a small wave.

“Goodnight, Sakura.”

I’m sure I’m right about Ryouko. He can handle himself. How much damage could he be doing to himself?

--

“Aggh!”

Azami stepped off Ryouko’s back, letting the flame on her finger go out.

“Getting it yet?”

Ryouko pushed himself up to his elbows, his breathing ragged. More than half his face was now covered in burns, though the one over his eyes was still brightest. His arms were red almost all over. His legs were scorched, too. Amazingly, aside from his back, his midsection and groin were free of burns.

“No! I’m NOT getting it! And I have no idea what this insane ‘punishment’ idea of your has to do with my training!”

Azami clicked her tongue in disappointment. “It has EVERYTHING to do with your training. I’m using a spark of chakra to punish you. You should be able to pick up on the ‘how’, considering I’ve punished you...what, four times now?”

Ryouko could feel the marks on his back. Indeed, there were four, close to his right shoulder. “You’ve been burning me like this once every twelve hours. Like I’m a tally sheet. I get WHAT you’re doing, but not why you’re using my own back to keep score of my failures!”

“If you’d just go to a hotel with me, we wouldn’t be doing this, now would we?” Azami cooed, snaking her body around Ryouko’s. She put a hand under his chin, smiling brightly.

“You still look pretty cute, even with all these burns. They make you look rugged- give your cute lil’ baby face an edge. And staring at you...sweat pouring off your shirtless body...mmm...a little unfair of you to tease me, don’t you think?”

Azami just laughed as Ryouko froze up.

Now we’re even for him catching me off-guard with that ‘let’s date’ bit before our fight. It’s fine when HE makes the moves, but as soon as I do anything to seduce him, he freezes up and can’t figure out if I’m serious or not. I really should stop messing with him.

I’m not going to, though.

28 - Arc IV: Harsh Reality- Chapter 2

After two days, the Suna guards were relaxed a little. There had been no further sightings of Azami or her mysterious helper. There had been no further attacks on the village. Not even any threats.

Gaara and Naruto overlooked the village from Gaara's office, standing on the balcony, enjoying the breeze. The two of them had found so much in common over just a single fight. Now, they both seemed like proud protectors of their homes, overlooking a beautiful village at it's best.

Except I'm not Hokage yet! Gahhh! Naruto whined internally, shifting a large scroll off his shoulders, feeling the skin chafe thanks to his sweating and the extreme heat.

"...Naruto, what do you see out there?"

Gaara had quietly asked the question, staring at his people going about their business. Naruto looked, but didn't see anything out of the ordinary. He said so after a minute.

"...It's too quiet. There, in the far right of the village...there's usually a very active dojo over there. They've clashed with Baki and Temari before, and they've been very vocal that a 'weapon' like me shouldn't be in charge."

"Hey, if it's bothering you, it's my job to check it out. I'll get the others together and we'll go scope this dojo out."

Gaara nodded, still not quite good at conversations. He had learned how to make the bare minimum requirement for a conversation, but starting and ending them was still difficult. Especially now that he cared what others thought of him.

If that dojo's silence is real, then there's nothing to worry about. But I can't help thinking this isn't over yet...

An explosion went off on the far left side of the city. Civilians ran for cover while shinobi ran to intercept the attack.

Gaara took a large step off the roof. A cloud of sand immediately rose to hold him up. He kept stepping, and clouds of sand kept creating a bridge for him. He aimed to see the source of the explosions for himself this time, while his biggest opposition was held in check by the Leaf Shinobi.

Kankuro will be returning through the main gate soon...He might meet them if they flee. So the bastards are trapped. I'll show you what happens when you bring harm to the Sand Village.

--

Ryouko concentrated and concentrated as they walked. Azami watched him silently, though she kept taking note of their surroundings. Up ahead, there was a forest. It would be interesting to see if Ryouko

would make a connection here, too.

Bonk.

He made a connection with nature by walking into a tree.

“Dumbass,” Azami murmured, rolling her eyes. But she found Ryouko had fallen into the perfect position. His upper half was in the desert; his lower half in the forest. Time for another lesson.

“Look where you are, without getting up.”

Ryouko did- A forest and a desert meeting like this was rare. But there was no way she'd call this to his attention for the obvious reason.

“This represents how my chakra and the air are opposing forces, yet they coexist. Right?”

Azami didn't say anything, but widened her eyes a little, still smirking. He was on the right track.

“The coexistence happened naturally...which means that I'll have to get those two elements to coexist naturally...wind and fire...elements that play off each other...If I was a wind type, this would be easy. But my second type is earth...so...ah!”

Ryouko had an idea. He faced away from Azami, raising his foot.

“Can you give me some wind? A jutsu that will push me forward?”

Azami grinned- he had figured out the in-between step of her idea. It wasn't a jutsu she had come up with. It was a fighting style by itself. Now to see if he would really get it.

“Wind Style: Wind Rider's Jutsu!”

“Flama Succendo!”

The fire jutsu met Azami's wind attack with spectacular results. But even more spectacular was that Ryouko leapt on the wind and flames and rode them, moving incredibly fast.

He looked back, a somewhat satisfied smirk on his face.

“Catalysts...if was right in front of me the whole time. Chakra comes from within, whereas chi comes from without. I've been focusing on the 'out', not the 'in'.”

Azami felt a little proud, now that he was finally 'getting' it. It was so obvious. His most elementary jutsu was the key to the whole thing.

“Good for you, Ryouko,” she whispered while he made calculations in his head. “I'm proud of you. Now to test it. HEY! THINK FAST!”

Azami blasted Ryouko with a shot of wind. He dug his heels into the ground, using his chakra to stick to the sand.

“Sorry, this doesn't have a name yet, but...”

Ryouko breathed out, and the air around him ignited in a brilliant flame. But he managed to hold it's power in, and redistribute it to his hands and feet. He kicked at Azami, about two feet out of range. The fire extended...

But fell short.

"Close. Very close," Azami told him, genuinely happy for him. "Now that you've got the technique's basics, we need to fashion it to your fighting style and fine-tune the whole thing."

"Right. ..."

"Something else?"

Ryouko moved in and kissed Azami on the cheek.

"Thanks. I needed this."

While Azami needed time to recover from the shock, Ryouko looked toward the Fire Daimyo's mansion. It occurred to him that Azami might have a hard time getting in. But he guessed she already had a plan for that. So he didn't say anything.

--

Naruto and the others raced toward the dojo at top speed, weapons at the ready.

"There it is!" Naruto shouted, pointing toward a rare wooden building among the sand of the village. How it hadn't burnt down, being old and aged wood was amazing.

"Water Style: Tidal Palm!"

Naruto got washed away by a fierce blast of water. Sakura snagged his hand and threw him above the source, where he used a Shadow Clone Jutsu.

"Rasengan!"

The water aimed toward him was deflected by the Rasengan. Naruto's clone bounced off his shoulders and into the air, aiming a kunai at the source of the water. That person saw the kunai coming and threw a water wall in the way, rolling- right into Shikamaru's Shadow Possession Jutsu.

"Success. Shadow Possession achieved!"

Asuma nodded, his trench knives in his hands. "Good work, Shikamaru. Now we'll get some answers. -eh?"

"LET GOA ME, FREAK!"

A little kid was struggling at the end of Shikamaru's Shadow Possession Jutsu.

"Oh no! Mizumaru! Not again!"

Four shinobi materialized around the Leaf Shinobi, weapons at the ready. But one woman who appeared to be a leader pushed her way into the circle.

“Please, let him go! He won’t attack anymore!”

The woman had gray hair braided down to her waist. But her chakra felt as though it belonged to someone at least half the age she appeared to be. It was still vibrant and dangerous.

Shikamaru shifted a glance to Asuma. He had the ‘what a pain’ look on his face, scratching his head.

“Let him go. Clearly he’s in her jurisdiction. But-” Asuma held up a hand, silencing protests from his group, “She owes us answers. Answers that a child likely won’t have...”

29 - Arc IV: Harsh Reality- Chapter 3

Sitting in the wooden dojo as the four from the Leaf plus the five Sand were three more people. Two men and one woman, all in their early twenties, were sitting comfortably on cushions. They raised their heads only when the shadows of the newly arrived shinobi fell on them.

“Eh? I didn’t hear your coming. I apologize,” said the man on the left.

“Yes, I’ve had this problem for years,” agreed the man on the right. The two were identical, and spoke almost mechanically. As if their answers were being given to them, rather than actually ‘thought’ about.

“I see you’ve noticed,” the one of the left spoke again, standing up and offering a bow. “This is the only way I can communicate, I’m afraid. Ever since I...”

“...Lost my hearing and eyesight. The ones speaking,” the one of the right said, picking up where the left person stopped, “are tuned in to my thoughts. Now, why have you come?”

Asuma blew out a breath, not sure about how to communicate.

“W-ell...we’re here because there have been attacks around the Sand Village. And apparently, you folks don’t have the best reputation. We’re here to investigate that...”

The woman in the middle nodded, sitting up on her cushion. She opened her eyes. They were sightless pools of gray, time having long since put a film over them.

“Will you hear our story?” asked the one of the left?

“Yes, please. It needs to be told. We don’t have the Kazekage’s ear, and he needs to know why...”

“...his Father banished us to this corner of the village.”

Sakura and Naruto exchanged glances.

“Uh...” was Naruto’s response.

“Do we have time for stories?” Sakura whispered to Shikamaru, who only shrugged. If Asuma was set to listen, then they would have to follow his lead.

The one in the center beckoned the young boy who had attacked Naruto over. He was an odd thing. He had hair and eyes of the same blue color. It looked both natural and abnormal at the same time. His face was set in a stubborn expression.

“...picking on me...for water style...”

Naruto perked up. “Huh? Water style? What’s so odd about that?”

The one of the left spoke again. "Everything. Among a desert people, how did one talented in..."

"Water Ninjutsu come about? That is the source of..."

"...our ridicule. It's why we're so distrusted. Through no fault of our own, our chakra nature has excluded us..."

"...from our brethren of the Sand. From here, Yuuko will speak."

The woman with the gray hair and menacing chakra nodded.

"Yes...please, make yourselves comfortable. It may be a long story for you. To us, it is a relief to tell it. Especially to someone who may be able to speak to the Kazekage on our behalf. He isn't as nearsighted as his traitorous father..."

That was news. Gaara's father, the Third Kazekage- a traitor?

--

--

Ryouko walked toward the Fire Daimyo's temple. The forest was a nice break from the desert they had exited. Azami thought so, too, as she walked with Ryouko. She took a deep breath, then exhaled, thinking a little abnormally for her.

This is nice...kind of like he's my boyfriend, and we're talking a walk in the forest. The solutiude; only each other for company; the forest being such a perfect place. I wish that could be the truth of my reality. I wish I didn't have to tell him 'no' and act like a dog.

I'm no good for him. I'm no good to anyone. I work alone because I have to. I'm a bad person.

I've gotten so greedy and corrupt. I wish I could talk to him about it. To ANYONE, I guess. But if anyone would understand...

Why not?

"Hey, can we sit for a minute?"

Ryouko found he was tempted. Rather, he had no choice. Azami bragged his collar and pulled him down. Then she plopped down, sitting back to back with him.

Ryouko could FEEL the trepidation coming from Azami. But he didn't prompt her to say anything. He just sat there and acted as a wall for her. When she finally did speak, Ryouko was relieved to hear what she had to say. Someone opening up to him was nice.

"...I...was hoping to ask you...could you listen to my story?"

Ryouko grunted in surprise. "Didn't see that coming. But you listened to mine; I'm more than happy to hear you out."

Azami leaned her head back, twisting her upper body until her head was on his shoulder.

"...There's more. I need you to...judge me."

“Judge you?”

“Yes...” Azami put a hand on her chest, feeling her heart. “I’m so wracked by guilt and frustration that I can’t tell if I’m...well, right. Just. Whatever you want to call it. I need someone else to hear about what I’ve done, and then tell me what they think of me. But-” she held up a finger, despite the fact he couldn’t see the gesture.

“But?”

“You’ve gotta promise you won’t hold back because you like me. If, at the end, you think I’m a bad person, then you’ve got to tell me so. Don’t save my feelings is what I’m getting at.”

Ryouko was more than a little intrigued at this point. Must be one juicy story.

“Sure; I can do that. But answer one question for me first.”

“mm?”

Ryouko tilted his head back to look up at the thick canopy above him. It was a tapestry of still life. The creatures sensed the two sitting there and stopped dead, waiting to see if they were hunter or prey to the creatures. Everything was still, save for a falling leaf here and there.

“...Am I a bad person for running off on Naruto and Sakura? I didn’t HAVE to leave...I did for my sake. And I’ve felt guilty about it ever since. I just don’t know if I made the right choice?”

Azami stood up, again seizing Ryouko by the collar. She gently pushed him toward a tree with a large trunk, sitting him down. Then she sat next to him, leaning up against his shoulder and holding his arm.

“You don’t have it in you to be a bad person. You want to get stronger for yourself...and you protect others, so you’re STILL taking care of other people. Those two need time together. You can’t wet nurse them. All of you will grow stronger by the time apart. And, after all...”

Why can’t this be my reality? Why can’t I just love him without guilt or fear of dragging him down to hell with me?

“...Absence makes the heart grown fonder.”

With that, she began her story, curled up half on top of Ryouko.

30 - Arc IV: Harsh Reality- Chapter 4

Yuuko began her story after a long, reflective pause in which she seemed to age further. But her chakra stayed vital.

“First, let me say that, since you’ve already felt it- my chakra IS abnormal. In fact, this isn’t MY chakra. This chakra is from a deceased shinobi. It was implanted in me after his death.”

That was enough to elicit a hushed silence. The medic in Sakura got the best of her, though, and she asked:

“How is that possible? The chakra is gone once a person dies...”

Yuuko nodded in agreement. “Normally, yes. But as you can resuscitate a dying person, you can resuscitate a dying chakra.”

Asuma pulled his cigarette out of his mouth for a moment, exhaling smoke. “How is that possible? To catch a dying chakra in time, you’d have to be there the instant the person died. Not to mention have the equipment and the know-how to transfer chakra.”

Yuuko nodded again. “Yes, that’s true. This was a planned instance. As in, the shinobi I mentioned- my husband- was murdered.”

She clenched her fist, squeezing until her aged knuckles turned white.

“He was murdered by the Third Kazekage right before my eyes. Immediately, his chakra was put into me. At the time, my husband was all for it...”

“Hold on a minute,” Shikamaru interrupted, holding up a hand. “Your husband was murdered, and he was all for it? Maybe it’s the difference in cultures, but there’s no way that would happen where I’m from. Why would someone let themselves be murdered?”

“My husband believed there was no choice,” Yuuko said sadly, looking up at the ceiling. “Back then, those of us who could use water style filled the Sand’s reservoir’s. Water was never a concern. We stayed a desert people by choice, to preserve our culture. At any time, we water users could have flooded the village and created the lush green landscape enjoyed by the Leaf Village, for example. Or we could have become an island, like the land of waves. But our culture was to be preserved.”

Yuuko paused, taking a sip of the tea set before her. She looked up over the rim of her cup, her blue eyes startling in their intensity.

“We all agreed on that issue. However, keeping the village safe was the biggest priority. This meant that our group was treated with the utmost respect, as ‘preservers of life.’”

“So what happened?” Naruto chimed in, fascinated by the tale. It sounded a little like his own tale.

“As you might imagine, it put us in precarious position with the village...”

“How so?” Sakura wondered.

“As much as we could GIVE life, if we withheld our abilities, we could TAKE it as well. So everyone walked on eggshells around us. We didn’t see ourselves as different. We were another contributing force. Just as you need water to build a sandcastle, you need water to build a sand *village*. But like the tide, we could take the water away. Or, worse yet to a village ill-equipped to deal with it, give too much of it. Under the first and second Kazekage, this was no problem. The Third, however, was problematic. It began with the birth of his third son, our current Kazekage. Making him into a jinchuuriki was the Third’s greatest feat...and his greatest folly.”

Yuuko adjusted her position, then continued. The Leaf ninja exchanged glances. Shikamaru moved into his ‘thinking’ position, settling in to listen to the rest of the tale.

“Our abilities are unique to us and our offspring. So when the Third Kazekage decided to destroy his own son; the son he had made into an ultimate weapon; we were chosen to help. After one battle, in which my oldest son died, it was determined we weren’t enough. So he began to experiment. Eventually, the experiment expanded to add ‘immortality’ to the list. And it came close to being the fountain of youth the Kazekage hoped for. For example- I’m 96 years old, and yet my chakra feels like that of someone much younger. When my husband was taken, we were both in our eighties. After the experiment, I became younger- about seventy. And when even more chakra was added to my system, I appeared about sixty. But that second chakra belonged to a young man who was wounded in battle. As he lay dying, his chakra was transferred into me. That’s why my chakra feels so young and vibrant.”

That was a lot to digest. The Leaf shinobi were quite while they considered what was said. After a while, Asuma broke the silence.

“So why you? Any idea why you in particular were picked for this experiment? I mean, if it could have been anyone, wouldn’t they have chosen someone younger?” Asuma held his cigarette between his fingers, his face set in a thoughtful expression.

“Good question,” Yuuko said. “Simply put, I was- and still am- the most powerful among us. And only the most powerful would stand a chance. I may be the only one to ever have attempted to assassinate Gaara- er, Lord Kazekage- and live to tell the tale.”

--
--

Azami had already told Ryouko about the incident that set her on this path of life. Now she told him about all the people she had killed, threatened, or betrayed. There were so many accounts of evil that she didn’t even bother to illustrate them all.

Ryouko, for his part, listened attentively. This was a rare glimpse into Azami’s past- possibly the only person to safeguard herself against relationships more than Ryouko. As he listened, Ryouko felt a few things. Shock was most prominent. But at the same time, he felt a warm sort of sympathy for her.

It couldn’t have been easy for her, surviving that way. She had no choice after that botched mission she told me about, but still...It doesn’t seem like she WANTED to kill people. And it doesn’t seem like she got any pleasure from her evil. She was just existing in the only way she could.

At the end of her tale, Azami sighed and nuzzled Ryouko. She hadn’t meant to say it aloud, but it slipped out:

"I wish this was my reality..."

She blushed immediately after saying it, but didn't try to pretend she hadn't said anything.

Ryouko put a hand on the back of her head, doing his best to smile at her. He wasn't good at it, but he gave it the best effort he could.

"Just answer this- did you ENJOY doing any of those things? Killing, stealing, etc?"

"...No," Azami answered, seeming bashful. "Never. I just...did those things because it made sense at the time."

She lowered her eyes.

"That's all..."

"Then I've got to say, you're not a bad person. If you didn't do all those bad things for fun or pleasure, then you were just being a shinobi. You were doing what you had to for survival. It's what we all have to do."

"You're too forgiving..."

Ryouko shook his head. "No. I'm not. You're worthy of forgiveness, although I'm not one who can give it. But I'm no good example. There are people I plan to punish- even kill- for things they've done to people important to me."

"What about for yourself? Don't you want revenge at people who did things to you personally?"

"No. In my life's philosophy, there is no room for 'me', the individual's issues. I've got no one to blame but myself for the most part. But others...like the Third Hokage, and Naruto and Sakura...people who hurt them I can't forgive. I'll carry the grudges to my dying day if they aren't resolved."

Those were powerful words, to be sure. Neither of them said anything for a few moments. As if by silent agreement, they both began to walk to the Fire Daimyo's temple. It was only once they were on the path there again that Ryouko said something else.

"Lady Uzume may be the person who can help you forgive yourself. I won't pry about your religious beliefs; that you'll have to do on your own. But I don't think it'll hurt you to talk to someone. Especially her; she's helped me a great deal. In a way, I have you both to thank for me getting back on my feet."

31 - Arc IVii: Deep Secrets-Chapter 1

There was a long pause in the wooden dojo as the story told by Yuuko sunk in. It didn't seem unbelievable. After all, there were all those attempts to kill Gaara made by people of his own village. But the story didn't make sense somehow. To Shikamaru's analytical mind, the story was only halfway finished.

There are two sides to every story. It's just like Orochimaru believing himself to be right, while we believe that we're the ones who are right. So what we need to do is hear the Kazekage's half of the story before we make any decisions.

Asuma couldn't read what Shikamaru was thinking exactly, but he knew Shikamaru well enough to know that he wasn't convinced. If there was doubt in Shikamaru's mind, it was worth addressing.

Standing up and stretching a cramped leg, Asuma nodded politely to the congregated group of outcasts. "I'll be communicating with the Kazekage shortly. Thank you for the history lesson."

--

Uzume watched from the outside porch as her newest 'project' played with a ball. It still struck even her as odd that he was a child. The things he said and did were beyond his years. But here he was, bouncing around a ball on the dirt path outside.

More troubling yet are the expressions he wears. He seems so burdened. I've refused to read him, the way I can most people, though it's tempting. For some reason, my strongest feeling is that I'm not the one who needs to figure this boy out.

The child had long bangs that fell over one eye. That eye was gray, and held no sight. The thick black bangs covered it for the most part. The child looked very thin, although he was nourished properly each day under Uzume's guidance. His face was incredibly pale, as was the rest of his skin. But it was his remaining eye; his right eye; that garnered the most attention.

The main part of the pupil was shaped like a sideways diamond. On each side were half-diamonds that overlapped part of the center diamond. The eye's pupil was black, but its markings were a very pure white color. When the eye caught an image, it seemed to focus in the center of the main diamond. Once an image was trapped in the center of the eye, it seemed that the boy could do quite a bit with it. He could freeze the image to study it, although that wasn't very useful in combat. The other abilities weren't as apparent, and Uzume wouldn't have known about them if she hadn't been told by the boy's last living relative.

Uzume suddenly felt a horrible chill. Familiar and very malicious chakra was coming towards her.

"Child! Over here!" she called. The boy, now clad in a black gi top and black hakama with a white obi came over upon hearing her call. His eyes focused on the threat in the distance.

“...One of them is a fire type.”

Uzume turned her head toward the boy quickly. “Wh-what?”

“A fire type. You know. His chakra type. He’s a fire. The other one...the other one is different. He’s got six different types of chakra. I’ve never seen that before...”

The boy said all this matter-of-factly. There was zero emotion in his voice. He never spoke with any emotion. Uzume wondered if he felt distant because she had yet to give him a new name.

“Six...types? Come on, the guards will need to-”

Too late. Uzume felt the presence of two chakras behind her. She also felt lots of souls leaving their bodies. She gulped inwardly, though she showed no fear or any emotion on the outside.

“Itachi Uchiha...and someone I don’t know. You aren’t his usual partner,” she said evenly, turning half toward them, not meeting Itachi’s eyes. “Perhaps a name from you?”

Itachi Uchiha rarely differed to anyone. So this man must be incredibly powerful. Uzume knew enough about combat to not engage this man unless she had no choice. As the man gave his name, she knew her options were running out rapidly:

“Pain.”

--

Striding forcefully, Naruto barged his way past guards toward the Kazekage’s office. Sakura and Shikamaru apologized in his wake, saying he didn’t take his medication today and the like. Anything to get them to NOT throw Naruto in jail.

Smashing open the door, Naruto pushed his way into Gaara’s office.

“GAARA! WHAT THE HELL IS THIS ABOUT?!”

Gaara looked up impassively, flanked by Temari and Kankuro.

“You’ll need to explain...” Gaara rasped. That was obvious. He had no clue what Naruto could be talking about.

“THAT WATER GROUP! YOU’VE SHUNNED THEM! WHY?!”

Gaara went silent. Kankuro spoke to him quietly, trying to get him to calm down. Temari put her hands on her hips, glaring at the entire Leaf group. Shikamaru shook his head, indicating that it was only Naruto who had the problem. Still, Temari was a protective older sister- she HAD to be, with Kankuro and Gaara as brothers.

“Ugh, you idiot! Listen, they tried to *kill* Gaara. How’s he supposed to forgive *that?!!*”

Before he could be stopped, Naruto shouted his reply. It made his teammates recoil in shock. Never once had they known how deeply this bothered Naruto.

“The same way the Leaf forgave you people! Stop dwelling on the past and make a new future!”

Gaara stood up noisily, his hands thumping on the desk. But it seemed to be just a cry to call order to the room, rather than anger. Everyone breathed a collective sigh of relief before Gaara continued.

“They’ve done nothing to endear themselves to us. Sabotage, aiding other villages and towns before us...even killing some of our men. They’re rogue as far as I and the rest of the Sand government are concerned. They’re a security risk.”

Silence. The reason the Leaf group had come by was to hear the Kazekage’s side of the story. Now that they had, they were sent into shock once more. Sakura summed up the group’s general feeling the best:

“I can’t tell which side is right. I understand why they’d be outcasts, and I understand why they do bad things. But neither side is really making any progress toward correcting the mistakes of the past...”

Gaara decided to end the conversation.

“This isn’t why you’re here. We have information on the ‘Mad Bomber’ that’s been attacking us.”

Kankuro chimed in, holding up a picture.

“We used to have this ANBU agent who was too violent. He’d attack his own men if they crossed him. We exiled him ten years ago. We believed the bombings were being played out by Azami, but there’s been no sign of her. After she got caught so easily the first time, and after her rescuer went to all that trouble to save her, we don’t believe she’s behind this. It must be this other man. We only know his code name: Shuto. Here’s what he looks like.”

A gaunt man with close-cropped blond hair and hollow cheekbones glared at the group from the picture. They all burned details into their memories down to the last stray hair.

“I ask you to help us find this man. And when you do, turn him over to us for questioning.”

Kazekage’s orders given, the Leaf shinobi moved out to help their allies.

--
--

Azami stopped dead in her tracks, plopping down onto the ground. Ryouko hit the ground next to her, asking if she was okay, and what he could do. But she didn’t respond except to shake her head and say:

“He’s here. The Akatsuki’s worst member. We can’t be here!”

Ryouko narrowed his eyes. “Hold on, how do you know this? I can feel a chakra, but it’s not one I can identify, and I’ve run into most of the Akatsuki.”

Azami tugged on his sleeve, boring her gaze into his. “Don’t go. It’ll be suicide. Whoever they’re after, they’re already dead. That man can’t be stopped.”

Ryouko looked toward the temple, painfully aware that each second counted. For once, he actually

feared for his life. But how could he face himself if he ran? Even if Azami, who was likely more powerful and clever than he, was scared, how could he hold up? But he had to make the effort. Especially considering who was there.

“Okay. I’ll do it the safe way, then.”

Then another monstrous chakra came within range. Close range. This was one Ryouko could pick out. He pulled his hat down further.

“Azami...can you handle this guy? He’s a handful, but you’ve got the advantage...”

Azami had since regained her bearings, standing back to back with Ryouko.

“You’re going to do this no matter what I say, right?”

“...I have to,” Ryouko replied earnestly.

“...Fine. I can handle that one. But I can’t get onto the temple grounds...this might be where we part ways again...”

THAT made Ryouko hesitate.

“...I might not see you again. I don’t think I like that.”

Azami rolled her eyes a little, pretending to not be as touched as she was by his feelings.

“I know where you live. I’ll find you again, don’t worry. Now, go! And hurry- I can feel the chakra of two people, and they’re no match for the people they’re facing.”

Ryouko nodded once, giving Azami a long look. Then he took off at top speed, roaring toward the temple.

32 - ArcIVii: Deep Secrets-Chapter 2

Azami didn't even turn around to face the intruder.

"Kisame."

"Azami."

They stood silent for a while. Kisame had his sword, the gigantic *Samehada* shouldered, watching Ryouko go. He made no move to follow.

"I take it you're going to keep me here?"

Azami didn't respond right away. She still didn't turn to face Kisame. When she DID reply, she had a bit of bite in her voice.

"Don't ask stupid questions. You're no idiot. You know I won't let you get past me. So either shut up or strike."

Kisame grinned, showing his shark-like teeth. "I don't feel the need to get involved. Your little boyfriend is rushing off to his death. No one can face Itachi, much less Lord Pain."

--

--

Sakura and Shikamaru combed the west side of the village; Naruto and Asuma took the east side. They asked questions of anyone who seemed suspicious, but found nothing relating to this bomber. But there was some suspicion in the actions of some people. When the two groups met up again in the center of the village, they had the same curiosity to note.

"Hey, did you guys notice the creepy, fixed smiles some of these people have?"

Shikamaru said it first, looking around. There weren't many here. His mind went to work to pick out any interesting facts from the situation.

"Yeah, come to think of it..." Sakura muttered, her hand on her chin. "They seemed to be concentrated around the few wooden buildings I saw."

Shikamaru nodded absently, that fact already apparent to him.

"Starting fires is their next goal, maybe?" Asuma intoned, looking around. "With those bombs, I'm surprised there haven't been fires to go with them. This place is so hot that kindling could light up at the hottest part of the day."

Shikamaru ran that into his analysis, too. What he got was a mix of scrambled ideas that made sense in an odd way.

"What if...the point isn't destruction?"

Everyone turned to Shikamaru.

“Uh, Shikamaru? He’s using BOMBS!” Naruto half-shouted, as if stating the obvious. Which, to be fair, he was.

“Yeah, but no one’s getting hurt,” Shikamaru pointed out. “And there’s no fires. Like Asuma-sensei said, fires would be easy to start around here. And the place is small, but densely populated. So if the aim was to kill people, it would be easy. No, I think someone is going out of their way to *avoid* casualties.”

Asuma reviewed the facts, agreeing with that assesment. “But why would they do that? Why bomb at all? What’s the point?”

“Scare tactic,” Sakura murmured. Shikamaru turned to her with a questioning look. She shook her head. “I’ve only read about it in Lady Tsunade’s collection of scrolls. It’s an old ANBU technique. Foundation, to be exact.”

“The Foundation?” Naruto managed to utter. He thought of that creepy old Danzou and the crap he had just pulled.

“Yeah, them,” Sakura continued. “You either scare people into hating the leaders of the village- Danzou’s move- or you try to drive everyone out of a certain area. Either to make it easier to exterminate a crowded group of people, or to find something in the area being vacated.”

“Makes sense. That would explain why no one’s getting hurt.” Shikamaru drew on the ground with a stick. “I was thinking about the bombing. At first, it seems that there’s no rhyme or reason to where the attacks are. But if you look at the village from above...”

Shikamaru finished his diagram.

“You see everyone is being herded toward the center of the village.”

“Huh? But there’s nothing around the outside of this village but rock!”

Now there were endless possibilities. Someone setting a trap inside the rock wall? Someone looking for something? Why would you push so hard to get to rock?”

“We need to talk with someone about this,” Asuma announced. “Someone who lives here. And I don’t think the Kazekage will be willing to listen after Naruto’s outburst. So that leaves... You, Shikamaru.”

Shikamaru rolled his eyes. “I had a feeling. How troublesome.”

Naruto grinned and slapped Shikamaru on the back. “Hey hey, at least now you can get some sand-lovin’ from Temari!”

“SHUT UP!”

--

--

Even as Pain introduced himself, Uzume didn't blink. Neither did the child with the Issekigan. He just looked at Pain and Itachi, wondering about their eyes. He couldn't help but feel a connection to them, even though they were the bad guys.

"The guards...all dead?" Uzume asked calmly, searching for their chakras. She only found one, and it was that of Shinmaru; the Daimyo's personal guardian. They were both alive and well. But the other eleven shinobi...

"I see. Tell me what it is you want."

Pain looked toward Issekigan. "His eyes aren't something I've seen before. Give him to me, and I won't need to stain my hands with your blood."

The Issekigan child looked to Uzume. But she wasn't looking at Pain, even though she was talking to him. She was looking at Itachi. Issekigan knew enough to look at Pain, then. The cardinal rule of a fight was, after all, to look at your enemy.

Pain didn't make a sound, but his eyes blurred for a moment. As he wondered why, he noticed that Uzume was preoccupied with Itachi. That would make the boy an easy target.

"HEY!"

Ryouko was coming toward them at top speed, his tonfa out as he ran.

This was a minor intrusion, at best.

"Universal Pull!"

--

Ryouko found himself flying toward Pain. Pain's hand flashed up, in it a strange black sword. Ryouko had no time to do anything about it. SCHUNK!

POOF!

"Shadow Clone," Pain said mildly.

Uzume made her move quickly. Raising two fingers, she looked at Itachi. His eye began to bleed. But that wasn't the worst part for him.

His Amaterasu aimed itself at Pain.

33 - ArcIVii: Deep Secrets-Chapter 3

Ryouko roared into the clearing at full speed, three shadow clones following him. They began to move in an impossible to follow pattern, aiming themselves at Itachi. Once they had seen the Amaterasu aim for Pain, they aimed for the other threat. Ryouko let his clones attack while he went to Uzume and the Issekigan boy. Itachi was clearly fatigued; the clones were actually pushing him.

"I've got a friend with me; she'll help!" Ryouko told Uzume.

"The Daimyo is dangerously exposed," Uzume replied. Eleven of his twelve guardians are dead."

That hit Ryouko- hard. He felt like someone had just punched him in the stomach as hard as they could. "The Twelve...how could someone decimate them?! They're supposed to be the elite of the elite!"

Uzume looked at Pain.

"That one did it."

Ryouko was a huge fan of the Twelve Guardian Shinobi. Before he gave up on his dreams to care for Naruto and Sakura, he had studied to be one of the Twelve. At the time, he had no shot at it. These days, he would, but he couldn't. All the same, someone killing them all really ticked him off. He knew nothing about Pain and his abilities. All he knew was that he had Itachi on the ropes, and Pain was on fire. He had to administer a killing blow now! Someone so dangerous and malicious couldn't be allowed to live.

All at once, the fire was out. Itachi had managed to recall it, but he was still reeling from the effects. Ryouko's clones kept pushing him.

Pain extended his hand toward Ryouko, who had paused for the slightest of seconds to notice that the Amaterasu was out- something supposedly impossible.

"Universal Pull!"

Ryouko had sent his clone ahead against Pain to gather info. Upon it's destruction, he inherited it's knowledge. That little conflict allowed him to prepare for this eventuality. As he sailed in, he slid his tonfa into place in his sleeve. When Pain tried to stab him, Ryouko turned his body and blocked the edge of the odd black weapon with his tonfa. The effects of the pull gone, Ryouko tried to sweep Pain's legs. Pain jumped back, his hand extending again. This time he did something different.

"Almighty Push!"

Ryouko felt himself go airborne. He rocketed across the sky, straining to keep his eye on Pain. He had to get back there somehow.

--

Azami saw Ryouko go flying. Ignoring Kisame, she shot a jet of wind upward to slow Ryouko. She

smirked to herself as she saw him use his fire jutsu to propel himself back toward the right direction.

“Sorry, Kisame. Would’ve loved to catch up with you, but I just sent a good friend of mine rocketing straight toward hell. I should go catch him. Sayonara!”

Azami let herself fall backward into her own shadow. It swallowed her up and she was gone.

--

Ryouko landed right back between Uzume, the boy with the Issekigan, and Pain.

“...” Pain looked at Ryouko. “Why do you insist on getting involved?”

“You’re Akatsuki. That’s all the reason I need. But now, you’re trying to kill two innocent people. And beyond that, you’ve just slain eleven people!” Ryouko’s teeth were grinding in anger, and blood began to show at his gums. “That’s all the motivation I need to stop you.”

Itachi had since regained control, as Ryouko’s shadow clones had disappeared, since they were outside of his control radius when he went flying. This situation was rapidly spiraling from bad to worse, and from worse to impossible.

A shadow formed on the ground behind Itachi. Azami appeared as though laying on her back, but as she ‘reformed’, so to speak, she wound up standing again in an odd display of agility.

“You’re considering running,” Pain pointed out. “Don’t. Even if you DO make it, I’ll cut down the Fire Daimyo.”

Even as he was talking, Pain used his Universal Pull on Uzume. Ryouko wasn’t going to get there in time. He ran toward Pain anyway, if nothing else intending to avenge Uzume.

“Wind Style: Air Defense!”

A wall of air stopped Uzume’s progress forward. Unbeknownst to Ryouko, it took Pain five seconds to recharge after a jutsu. Since he ran in with Azami’s attack, he was well within that time limit.

“Fire Style: Dragon’s Ember Jutsu!”

“Wind Style: Air Acceleration Jutsu!” Azami added.

The two elements blasted into Pain at point-blank range. In that time, Ryouko grabbed Uzume and the Issekigan boy and spun away, using a Body Flicker Jutsu to put distance between himself and Pain.

“The Fire Daimyo has called for assistance from the Leaf!” Uzume told Ryouko. But he didn’t seem to hear her.

“Azami, can you use those clones of yours to buy me a minute?”

He tugged at his stomach, feeling the now-familiar length of black cord.

The boy with the Issekigan managed to meet Pain’s eyes again. And once again, Pain felt a disruption.

He held up a hand, signaling to Itachi and the approaching Kisame.

“We’ll withdraw. I underestimated them. One ‘Pain’ isn’t enough.”

With those cryptic words, the Akatsuki trio vanished. The four left standing stood still for a few moments, looking at the spot where the Akatsuki had been standing just a second ago. After that moment passed, Uzume faced the others.

“Ryouko; Azami- good to see you again. This boy is called Shoki ((English: Demon Queller))- it’s time you and he met, Ryouko. You’ve got a lot to talk about.

--

--

Temari opened a door, looking both ways before waving to Shikamaru.

“Hurry up! This room is off-limits to all but Sand Jonin,” Temari informed him, closing the door behind them. She left it open a crack to peer through, acting as a lookout.

Shikamaru delved right in, searching the blueprints of the Sand Village. Scanning the outside layer of rock, he learned a few things, but they weren’t what he was looking for.

“Why would anyone try to get to the rocks? Blow them up? But they haven’t hurt anyone so far. Unless the attacks were distractions...or a lure...”

“Gaara will be disappointed. He’s hoping for something to do that’s not paperwork,” Temari said off-the-cuff.

“Gaara...he isn’t exactly friends with that ‘Water Style’ group, is he?”

Temari gave Shikamaru a look. “Would you be friends with someone who tried to kill you?”

“I’m talking to *you*, aren’t I? Besides, Gaara has had a pure political agenda so far. He’s gone out of his way to distance himself from his ‘human weapon’ moniker. So why would he ignore this one group? And how does it play in to the walls?”

Temari smacked her fist into her open palm. “Irrigation! We have pipes and reservoirs inside the stone walls! They must be planning to sabotage them!”

Shikamaru looked at the blueprints again. Something was still missing.

“They’re water-users. They could just flood the place...but if they did that, they’d kill everyone. So it can’t be them. Or not just them... Are these water people popular?”

“They have their followers,” Temari said in a tone of voice indicating an eye roll. “But no sane person would do anything they asked.”

“‘Sane’ is the key here.”

Shikamaru went on to explain about the smiling people each group had seen. The where turned out to be the important thing.

“In our village, since fires could be common with a simple upturn in temperature, we place any wooden

buildings a distance apart., so they wouldn't ignite one another. Those people with the weird smiles are lurking around those buildings, right? So maybe they're going to set fires-

"-As distractions!" Shikamaru finished. "Then another group gets to the stone walls; blows them to plug up any exits from the village. Then they flood the entire village!"

--

34 - ArcIVii-Deep Secrets: Chapter 4

Shikamaru ran his theory by Asuma. At the end, Asuma asked the obvious question:

“Why haven’t they hurt anyone yet?”

“So we wouldn’t take them seriously,” Shikamaru replied instantly. “They’ve had *years* to plan revenge- that’s a lot of time to appear inconspicuous and gain trust, all while plotting.”

“We’d better move, then,” Asuma announced, getting up and reaching for his trench knives. “We might have moved up their timetable by being suspicious.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Hey, where are Naruto and Sakura? Oh no, don’t tell me!”

Asuma exhaled in frustration. “They’re near the water group.”

“So what do we do?”

“We assume they can handle themselves, and we get the Sand on alert for people with mysterious smiles and the ability to start fires.”

--

Naruto and Sakura were sitting in a corner of the wooden dojo, quietly talking amongst themselves about all that was going on. Both agreed there was something beyond suspicious going on here- something they couldn’t ignore. If the water people were experimented on and shunned, then their motivations were understandable. But couldn’t they just as easily have demonstrated how beneficial they could be? It seemed as though they had nitpicked the Kazekage for a reason to feel hatred.

“This just doesn’t add up,” Sakura whispered, looking around. “First, they boy attacked us for no reason. Next, we see those creepy smiling people all over the village and around all the wooden buildings- except for this one.”

“They’ve gotta be involved,” Naruto agreed, looking around carefully to make sure no one heard him. “So how do we prove it?”

Sakura took a few moments to think, but decided on a way that was of the least risk and the likeliest probability of a favorable outcome.

“We ask the right question. We ‘unintentionally’ provoke them. They’ll say things that they don’t meant to say- or, really, things they CAN’T say- and then we’ll have our proof.”

“Let’s do it!”

Sakura yanked Naruto back down. “Hold on! There’s a lot of these people. We’re going to have to fight them, more than likely. Let’s plan this out, first...”

--

Asuma walked by another smiling person standing by a wooden building. This time, they were looking for anything that could be a bomb, or a trigger, or even something that could make a flame. But after two trips around, both Shikamaru and Asuma had found nothing.

“What are we missing?” Asuma murmured. “There’s something we aren’t thinking of. But what?”

“There’s nothing about these people to suggest they’re- hey, what’s that?”

Shikamaru was pointing towards something clenched in a grinning man’s hand. Looking closer, it looked like razor wire or fishing line.

“Did any of the others you checked have that?” Shikamaru questioned Asuma.

“No...he’s the only one I’ve seen...”

The man slowly turned his head. His face was painted with a maniacal smile, and he even seemed to chuckle with glee as he tugged on the string.

There was no explosion, but a fire began inside the building nearest him. Soon, others had sprung up in all the wooden buildings. The fire reared up high, the buildings but kindling.

Asuma’s earpiece chirped.

“Shall I ready the sand?”

Asuma tapped the mic back. “No. Let’s see if the water moves. It’s only natural that they’d be among the first defenses for a fire...”

--

A small microphone was stuck to the inside wall of the wooden Water dojo. Sakura noticed it first. Wondering when it had been planted, she walked by it. But outside, she billowing black smoke distracted her. Leaping to the roof of the dojo, she could see a good expanse of the Sand village. There were many fires. Too many to be a natural occurrence.

Leaping back down, Sakura raced in.

“Fire! There are fires out there! You’ve got to help!” she pleaded. The water dojo people ignored her at first. Then one said:

“This is what they get. Sand scum. If they only want us around when it’s convenient for them, then maybe that SHOULD burn.”

Sakura looked over her shoulder- the person saying that had been well within the range of the mic.

The only problem now was getting out of here. It seemed the water group meant to keep their business and their story secret. They began to surround Naruto and Sakura.

--

Asuma grimaced after hearing the water end of things. He gave the command to ready the sand to help put out the fire.

“Shikamaru, you stay here and supervise. I’m going to help bail out Naruto and Sakura. Anyone of those bombers who live- hold them until Suna’s ANBU arrive.”

Shikamaru nodded, taking that in stride. He and Temari began to direct the evacuations. For once, though, Temari’s normal demeanor wasn’t in place. It seemed...cracked. If it wasn’t Shikamaru seeing it, it would likely have gone unnoticed. But...

“Hey,” Shikamaru called to Temari. They had done all they could, save for catch anyone who ran for it. “You alright?”

Temari blushed, not used to this kind of thing. “I’m just...not used to being useless, that’s all. My Wind Style would only make the fire worse...”

Shikamaru gave a small grin. “And my shadows? If it’s dark out, I’m screwed.”

It was a simple exchange, but both parties felt better. Which was good- they felt better just in time to see someone familiar make a run for it. Shikamaru ran through all the possible matches in his mind.

Short blond hair...hollow cheekbones...thin, like he hasn’t eaten right in years... Shikamaru figured it out. Now to test the theory.

“Shuto!”

The man looked at Shikamaru. That was it- the ‘Mad Bomber’ was right there!

“You know too much, kid! Now- eh?!”

Shikamaru’s Shadow Possession was success.

“You’re not familiar with the Leaf, I guess. So let me clue you in: This is the Nara clan’s ‘Shadow Possession’ Jutsu. You can’t move unless I let you. If you want to take a look, here:”

Shikamaru looked down, forcing his trapped counterpart to do the same. Shuto saw his shadow connected with Shikamaru’s.

“Damn it!”

Ka-boom!

An explosion went off right near Shuto and Shikamaru. The flash disrupted the Shadow Possession, and Shuto ran for it.

Unfortunately, he ran straight into Temari.

“Guess I’m not so useless after all,” she said around a smirk as her giant fan cracked him in the head, knocking him out. “You okay?”

Shikamaru was getting up slowly, rubbing at his ears and eyes.

“Yeah, fine. I’ll recover in a few seconds. Nice catch.”

--

The water group was closing in on Naruto and Sakura. But they didn’t seem to be attacking.

“You think we’re wrong, don’t you?” Yuuko asked quietly. “To let the village burn.”

“Hell yeah, I think you’re wrong! How can you sit there and let people die?!” Naruto shouted, clenching his fist in anger. “It just isn’t right!”

The blind/deaf woman, the matriarch of the clan, shifted her position. The identical people on her right and left began to speak for her.

“We can’t expect you to understand...” said the left.

“But please- we aren’t cruel. We believe in...”

“Justice.”

Naruto balked. “Justice? THIS is justice?”

“Indeed,” said the Right. “When our clan faced extinction from a horrible disease that affected...”

“Only our chakra, they denied us the most basic of help. We were...”

“In dire straits. The only one who dared help us was...”

“Your leader, the Queen of Slugs and Elixers, Tsunade.”

Sakura knew Tsunade better than almost anyone, and now she had to speak up:

“And THIS is how you would repay her kindness? This village is an ally of the Leaf’s- of Lady Tsunade’s! And no matter what, letting people die is wrong! The cycle of hatred has to end somewhere. Now, your group can snub the Sand, and they can snub back, but you’ll just keep hating each other. It’s a pointless cycle that you, right now, have the power to break!”

-

Asuma was outside the door, ready to charge in. But he smiled to himself and popped a cigarette in his mouth.

No trouble here. Wonder which instructor taught them to talk like that? They’ve gotten lucky there.

--

The meeting between the Kazekage and the water group went well, from all indications. The four Leaf shinobi removed themselves from the equation about now, leaving internal affairs to those directly involved.

“Mission accomplished,” Asuma said with satisfaction.

CAW!

A bird flew toward Asuma. He looked at it nonchalantly for a moment, but changed his tune when he saw the Fire daimyo’s symbol on the bird’s carrier pouch, right along side Lady Tsunade’s. The others looked on curiously as he unrolled the letter. He exhaled some smoke, clearly deep in thought.

“Got no choice, huh?” he muttered. “Alright, listen up. We’re making a detour to the Fire Daimyo’s mansion. There’s been a massive Akatsuki attack there. We’ll be staying to help while the new Guardian Twelve are selected.”

Jaws hit the floor. The Guardian Twelve were the best of the best. To think that even they were taken down by the Akatsuki...

It made Naruto’s blood boil. The Akatsuki always left such horrible destruction...

Sakura gripped his arm, trying to silently comfort him. Their jonin leader was now a little shaken. That meant that, as the medic, Sakura could relieve him and appoint a new leader, if he became unstable. She hoped that unhappy duty wouldn’t fall to her.

35 - Arc V: Broken- Chapter 1

Shinmaru hadn't left the Daimyo's side. The other eleven Guardians, which he could command, were sent to intercept the intruder. When not one returned, Shinmaru informed the Fire Daimyo. Then he heard the fight outside. He only caught the tail end of the fight, but he was amazed that two shinobi, a priestess, and a child could cause such a problem which his eleven elite men couldn't give to the Akatsuki. Then he gasped- he recognized the two shinobi!

The first was the girl. Azami; age 19. Unbelievable cold bounty hunter and ruthless killer- when it served her. Her skill level was nearly off the charts, and her potential for further growth was still very viable. The bounty on her head from the Sand village was exorbitant. He had always guessed her to be in league with the Akatsuki. But she had just fought against them, despite being clearly outmatched.

The other one, the boy, was 'Ryouko'. His name was so jealously guarded that it was apparently only known to himself, and possible to the priestess. Shinmaru had met Ryouko once- back then, Ryouko was still under the Third Hokage and was learning to meditate. At the time, he had picked out Shinmaru and wanted to spar him. The Third Hokage had stopped the match, realizing that Ryouko would be crushed. Shinmaru wouldn't have killed him, but the boy wouldn't have come out unscathed, mentally or physically, from such a sound defeat.

On the spot, Shinmaru made the decision to recruit these two- at least temporarily- for the new Guardian Twelve. The Fire Daimyo was so exposed right now that it couldn't be helped. But it seemed the two were more than formidable.

The other one close enough to get here for short-term emergency duty was the retired guardian Asuma Sarutobi. Currently returning from a mission in the Sand, he and his team could be diverted here easily.

--

Ryouko and the others had all gone their separate ways after exchanging names. Each one had a room prepared for them, and they all retired early.

"I wonder if Azami could make this burn into a tattoo or something?" Ryouko murmured, pawing at the burn over his eye. Then he spun and punched.

Azami blocked it.

"I sure could, sport. As a thanks for hearing me out earlier. What do you want?"

Ryouko smiled widely, thinking about how just a little while ago they had been in a bedroom together, close to having sex. This time, there was none of that tension. In a way he missed it, but mostly Ryouko felt happy to just have someone with him. Loneliness would have set in something awful if Azami hadn't been around to keep him distracted.

"I've got a design here..."

Azami nodded, going to work.

“So, you’re going to train that boy?”

“I am.”

“How?”

“I’ll have to see what skills he possess already before I decide that,” Ryouko replied.

Azami kept working, grimacing at the damage.

His own chakra did this to him? I guess this priestess knew what she was doing when she tied it off with that curse binding deal. I’ve never seen a flare-up like this...And from a boy normally so stoic...

“He’s got a lot of raw talent, but no way to channel it,” Azami observed. “All he needs is to find his chakra type, and it’ll be easy to work out exercises for him.”

The burn was taking shape now. It was very angular thus far, and interesting looking. It would be on Ryouko’s right temple and above and below his eye. It looked very tribal, Azami thought.

“Especially if I can count on your help.”

Azami paused for a second, but continued almost without missing a beat.

“Why would I stay?”

“The full pardon you’re being offered in exchange for being a Guardian for a few weeks. And maybe...something else?”

Azami blushed a little at Ryouko’s suggestion. It was true that she had tagged along thus far to be with him...to some degree anyway.

“I suppose I’m not done with *your* training either,” she answered. “Okay, your tattoo is done. Now, take off your shirt. Let me get rid of the burns I put on your back...”

Ryouko took her hand, clenching it between his own two. “Thank you. For everything. I think...I may have died if you hadn’t been there to protect me, in your own way. One of these days, I WILL repay the colossal debt I owe you.”

“I don’t aim to claim it.”

“But I will repay it nonetheless,” Ryouko promised, bowing his head to her a little. “Thanks to you, I can hold my head up high and face Master Jiraiya again.”

Silence. Something about that didn’t sit well with Azami. Before she could stop it, a pang of jealousy came rambling out of her mouth.

“So you’d go back? After what he did to you, you STILL want to guard his student and his little girlfriend?”

Ryouko hadn’t realized this would be such a sour discussion and immediately regretted saying anything. But he had to finish the conversation now.

"I do. If I were to stop, I would be defying the prophecy made by my teacher. I don't want to make him a liar. And who knows what would happen if the Akatsuki succeed..."

Ryouko had his back to Azami, as she was still healing his burns, but he could feel her expression softening.

"Besides that...Those two are together now. I gave up too much to get them together. To see their new-found bond last...that's my duty as well."

Azami sighed, laying her forehead against his back. "You're too damn noble for your own good. That self-imposed restriction is just going to hurt you, you know."

"..." Ryouko bowed his head. "I know. But it feels right somehow."

Maybe it was the fact that she and Ryouko had spilled their guts to each other, but Azami found she didn't want to leave. Not yet.

"I'll make tea," she announced.

"Sure you don't want to...you know..." Ryouko gulped, somewhat relieved she hadn't mentioned going to bed together. He wasn't ready to commit to her that much yet.

"...Not now. I'm not about to have sex with you on temple grounds. You've got your religion- I've got mine. I don't want to piss off the gods any more than I already have."

"...How about cuddling? That's innocent enough, right? After all..." Ryouko stood up, putting an arm around Azami's waist, and even nudged her with his hip. "It's not safe for a lady to walk home alone this late, right?"

He whispered it right in her ear, and he could feel the goosebumps rise on her neck. He chuckled to himself.

"NOW we're even again, I think."

Azami smirked back, giving him a playful smack. "Keep pulling stunts like this and you'll NEVER get me in bed."

...Damn it. I've really fallen for him. But she isn't out of his heart yet- not completely. Maybe this is my penance for the lives I took. I'm supposed to tease and flirt, but never get a real relationship.

I've never once regretted killing that bastard who molested me. But now...even just a little...I wish I could take it back, so I could deserve this boy.

--

After tea, Azami bid Ryouko good night. He managed a smile and nod, but Azami could easily see that the arrival of Asuma and company in two more days greatly bothered him.

Sitting in her room, looking at her clothes for tomorrow, she wondered if she would be of any help to Ryouko in training this boy. Even if she wasn't, she had to continue Ryouko's training anyway. But for some reason, she really wanted to help.

A knock came at the door. Azami, dressed in her white nightgown that left most of her back open, tossed on a robe and opened the door. On the other side was another priestess.

“Asuna, right?” Azami asked. The girl nodded.

“May I...”

“Of course. Come in.”

Azami slid the door shut, inviting Asuna to sit. There was an awkward air between the girls. Both were Ryouko's friends, and both were potential love interests. By all rights, Azami should have had the upper hand- she was strong, sexy, and worldly. Asuna was bright, had a lot of potential, and possessed a different strength, along with looks that were better described as 'cute'. Both were aware of this, and that caused a long period of awkward looking away from each other. Asuna finally broke the silence.

“Listen, I...know you've been with Ryouko. I just want to know...well, is he okay? He came here all beat up, and then you two ran off those Akatsuki guys...and he doesn't seem like his old self.”

Azami bowed her head. “He's not his old self. He's been...broken, I guess. Let me explain.”

36 - Arc V: Broken- Chapter 2

The explanation complete, Asuna shook her head.

“Unbelievable. And now he’s here to train that boy of Lady Uzume’s?”

“Yes. And himself,” Azami answered, sipping at a cup of tea. “He’s very concerned with a prophecy made by the Third Hokage. He’s going above and beyond it.”

Asuna rolled her eyes. “Typical Ryouko. And he’s hurting himself in the process, isn’t he?”

Azami didn’t need to answer that. Asuna just bowed her head once more.

“I’ve...sensed a lot from him. And you. I’ve only been Lady Uzume’s apprentice for a little while, but she seems to be more concerned for the future as of late, too. That’s why I’m here, in fact.”

Setting her cup down, Asuna took out a small box she’d brought with her. It was bound with string and seals. She made a complicated series of handsigns before removing the box lid.

“This,” she said, holding up a scroll, “is a Summoning scroll. In it is a weapon that Lady Uzume intends to use against Itachi Uchiha.”

Biting her thumb and making handsigns, Asuna touched her palm to the scroll. In the center appeared a magnificent necklace. It was made of pearls and gold for strings, and gold pieces hung down in front. In the center was a mirror.

“This is the ‘Necklace of Izanami,’” Asuna began to say. But Azami sputtered for a moment, not believing this.

“That’s a mythological item, isn’t it? But it fits...the name ‘Uzume’, her ability to bring out Amaterasu from Itachi’s eyes...”

“Yes, that’s where the name comes from. Priestess blessed with Lady Uzume’s gifts inherit the name. I’m next in line to receive the name. But Lady Uzume...she seems concerned for the future. And with my limited ability, I see her death.”

That stung Azami quite a bit. Imagine what it would do to Ryouko.

“But I believe it can be prevented. There’s one other weapon that can be wielded with this necklace to increase her powers. It’s called the ‘Spear of Izanagi’. According to mythology, Izanagi and Izanami were married. Individually, they were powerful. When married, that could create islands. It’s said that Izanagi even entered ‘Yomi’- the underworld- a feat not possible for mortals.”

“But how will this prevent her death?” Azami asked. “Not to mention ‘where is the spear?’”

“I foresee Lady Uzume sacrificing her life to defend someone.” Asuna closed her eyes, as if trying to

recall the image. "It's unclear who, but she dies without a scratch on her. There are only a few techniques- all forbidden- that allow you to sow life. One of which Lady Uzume can use twice on her life. She's used it once already- on Ryouko."

Azami put a hand to her mouth. "Then his curse bindings..."

Asuna bowed her head, eyes closed. "Yes. She knows of the Third Hokage's prophecy, and she believes it- to some extent. She feels it incomplete, hence the reason she decided to gamble on Ryouko. He won't train the 'child of prophecy' or anything like that. But she is certain his actions will turn the tide in a great shinobi war, or possibly help prevent it altogether. That's why he is tied in with Naruto and Sakura, and why he has to guard them."

Azami's unease was growing by the second. She hadn't heard one thing that she liked so far.

"This spear..."

Asuna smiled, just a little. "I've found it. But I can't get it. It's in a shrine, in the Land of Waves. But I can't pass there freely, as my training with Lady Uzume isn't complete. If the worst DOES come to pass, I need to be prepared as her successor. But someone as powerful as you..."

After your time as a Guardian has been served, and your past crimes pardoned, if you can go to the Land of Waves and retrieve this spear...it may be the difference between life and death. Not only for Lady Uzume, but also for Ryouko himself."

--

--

Ryouko woke up, wearing only a pair of black shorts. His body had felt constricted by his shirt. After the intense physical training, it was no surprise that he had gotten a little more muscle. It was also no shock he was sore.

For today, he chose to wear a black uwagi and black training pants, rather than his usual uniform. For one, it made him feel more distinguished- it was a good feeling, as he would be teaching as well as learning. For another, it was comfortable, practice, and not too informal.

Without realizing it, he reached over his right eye. There, he could feel his 'tattoo'. It was actually made of scar tissue from the burns, moved around and detailed by Azami with Ryouko's own burn remnants. The result had been something that looked similar to the kanji for 'fire', starting over his right eye and ending just below his right temple.

I'm training with Azami tonight, after I work with Shoki. I've got two days to learn what she's teaching, and pass on as much to Shoki as possible. Master Jiraiya and I will have to spar again, the next time I see him. So I'd better be ready.

Tucking a straw hat under his arm, Ryouko made his way outside. Shoki, Uzume, Asuna, and Azami would be waiting in a few hours. Even though he wouldn't be alone, Ryouko couldn't help but feel intimidated by Shoki. He knew nothing about the boy's eye, aside from what little Uzume had been able to determine. That meant a lot of trial and error.

It was the 'error' part that worried him.

--

As Asuna wrapped up her proposal to Azami, there came a knock on Azami's door. At her 'come in' greeting, Ryouko entered, closing the door behind me.

"Asuna, good to see you again!" he said brightly. "I hope you're well?"

"Very," Asuna replied. Azami noticed she had hidden the scroll she had been showing to Azami. So Azami took it that Asuna didn't want Ryouko to know what was going on.

"Sorry to drop in so late...er, early," Ryouko began, bowing apologetically. "But this couldn't wait. And Asuna, I'm glad you're here. I've a favor to ask all of you..."

Ryouko was already waiting outside when Shoki came toward the open area in front of the temple. The courtyard was beautiful; mostly stone paths and well-kept grassy areas, dotted with a few gardens.

"Good morning, Shoki," Ryouko offered, smiling politely.

"You're burned," Shoki replied by way of greeting. "A fire chakra and an earth chakra...and you were aided by a wind chakra."

It was true. Ryouko HAD spent the morning training with Azami. As a result, his right arm was bandaged up and showed signs of burning. But Ryouko and Azami's chakra types weren't very obvious if you didn't see them fight.

"Nothing to worry about," Ryouko assured the boy. "Now, let's get started on your training. Do you know your own chakra type?"

Shoki shook his head. "No."

"I wondered about that...okay, let's try something. Shoki, I know a little bit about your eye. The Issekigan's ability to 'freeze' an image for study."

Leading the boy to one of the meditation areas- this one a pond- he had Shoki look into the water at his reflection.

"Take a look at yourself. Then, freeze the image."

Shoki did as he was told. When he looked back at himself and froze the image, he felt something, and he could see something. But he didn't know what.

"I can feel...a kind of tingly energy in my upper body. And my lower body weighs a lot."

Ryouko could guess well enough from that. "Seems you're a lightning type and an earth type."

It occurred to Ryouko that this might be a reason that Shoki could use the Issekigan. When something went wrong with your body- say, blindness- it usually meant your body was at odds with itself. Earth and Lightning chakras were just about polar opposites. And even for his age, Shoki's chakra was very rough and unrefined.

So that may be another requirement for the Issekigan. Opposing chakras.

“Very good,” Ryouko said aloud. “Now, this temple is the ideal training ground for you. I’ve got one of my friends to help up today. Her name is Azami. She’s the wind-type you sensed earlier.”

37 - Arc V: Broken- Chapter 3

Shikamaru glanced over at Asuma as they navigated through the trees. Asuma hadn't had a cigarette in nearly four hours- since he had gotten the message to come to the Fire Daimyo's temple. That was the most evident clue that Asuma didn't feel the calm he was portraying.

"Asuma-sensei, you were one of the Guardian Twelve, right?" Sakura asked, calling from the middle of the pack.

"Yeah, I was," Asuma answered.

"Then that means...you must know some of the people who got killed."

"No. I only know the one who was left alive," Asuma replied. "Shinmaru was the Fire Daimyo's chief protector, even during my time. He's the one who sent the message. The other eleven I only knew on my way out, save for two or three. I wasn't close with any of them, if that's what you're wondering."

Sakura stopped her questioning for the moment, determining Asuma was still sane and rational.

"It's good you're thinking like a medic, Sakura. But believe me, this is one mission where I'll be perfectly sane. Just prone to violence."

With that, Asuma kicked up the speed just a little bit, and everyone adjusted to match.

"I wonder how Ryouko's doing," Sakura said aloud, looking to Naruto. Naruto's glance, however, was almost hostile.

"I'm sure he's just fine," he said shortly, clearing not wanting any more to do with this subject of conversation.

What was that about? Sakura wondered. **The last thing we need is trouble between those two when we meet up with Ryouko again.**

--

"So, this jutsu is broken down into three steps. First: Loosening the earth. Water Style: Flowing River Jutsu!"

Ryouko used a Third Hokage jutsu he adapted to loosen the sand below his feet, creating just a trickle of water that he had borrowed from the nearby pond. He hadn't gotten to the Third's level of water mastery yet, and this was closer to a water style jutsu than an earth style. But it served its purposes. By all indications, Shoki would have a much easier time.

"Step two: digging in with your chakra. This is where you focus your chakra to your feet, take a deep stance, then shift your feet in. Like this:"

Ryouko sunk his weight down, focused his chakra, then turned his feet inward. The chakra and mud made for a solid base.

“Now, step three comes when the attack is initiated. Azami, go ahead.”

Azami whipped up a good windstorm, directing it at Ryouko. He turned his body slightly, so his left shoulder was forward, and his chin was tucked into his shoulder. His arms were in a guard position, so the forearm and shoulder took the brunt of the wind. The grains of sand carried on the wind cut a little bit, but it was nothing to worry about.

“You’re going to get cut sometimes. You just need to control where, and your reaction. For now, the outside of your arms is probably safest. Nothing life-threatening there that can be hit very easily. Now, you try.”

Shoki was wearing a long, over-sized white kung-fu top, with sleeves that covered his hands, black pants that fell to his ankles, where they were tied off, and black sandals that were standard-issue for shinobi. With his overlong hair and small frame, he didn’t even look his twelve years- more like eight, maybe. But his mastery was incredible. He was, by no means, a golden boy or anything of the sort, but it only took being instructed once for him to pick the basics up. After that, he would progress rapidly.

“Stance looks good...Okay, Azami go ahead. Half-power this time.”

“Right. Wind Style: Raging Typhoon!”

The wind hit Shoki hard, but his slight form bent but didn’t break. He stood his ground and weathered the attack.

“Great job! You nailed it!” Azami cheered, smiling at the boy.

“Your stance was perfect. You’re a quick study, Shoki. Now, how about some lunch while you watch Azami help me out?”

Shoki nodded shyly, sitting down just outside the sand garden. He wasn’t very hungry, but he was curious to see what his new teachers were capable of.

“Mind if I join you, Shoki?”

Uzume sat down next to the boy, watching Azami and Ryouko warm up. They had both stripped off their heavy tops, and were both down to their undershirts. Ryouko’s was a white t-shirt; Azami’s a blank tank top. They nodded to each other, then began a high-speed sparring match.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” Uzume commented, smiling at Shoki’s shocked face. “It must be their lifestyle. Or perhaps their determination. It’s amazing to me that such opposites could be such good friends.”

“Opposites? How? Because he’s a boy and she’s a girl?”

Uzume had to giggle at the youthful innocence behind that statement.

“Well, yes, that’s part of it. But it’s more their pasts. You see, the boy, Ryouko, is a shinobi of the Leaf village. He’s loyal, very brave, and compassionate. He tries to hide all his emotions, but, well, he has trouble in that area when it comes to girls.”

“Why?”

“Why indeed,” Uzume giggled. “Now, the girl. She was a fierce criminal once, because her past made her that way. She was cold, and very intimidating. But then she met Ryouko. They share a special bond.”

“What kind of bond?”

“A bond between people who have sworn to do something. Ryouko has sworn to protect two people...well, really, anyone who needs his help, but two people in particular. And the girl...she’s learned from that boy, even though she’s doing the teaching now. She’s come to understand that, no matter what your past, if you really are a good person at heart, it WILL show through.”

Shoki watched silently as Azami got the better of Ryouko. She had him down in the stand, her foot poised for a killing blow to his neck. But she stopped short and offered him a hand up. Ryouko nodded his thanks, then took up his guard again.

Uzume had learned from a young age to never let her emotions betray her. Most of the time, that was no problem. She really did feel a sort of peace. But now that she felt certain her death was approaching, she found it difficult to accept. Yes, death was as natural as birth, and shouldn’t be a bother to someone who leads a solitary life, but she had since found that she wanted to see the progression of Shoki; the growth of Ryouko; the change in Azami; and many other things. Her fate intertwining with that of these people had been a blessing to her. Now, when preparing to face her darkest hour, it seemed a curse.

--

Azami shrugged her shoulders, loosening them up as she prepared for Ryouko’s more intense training. “O-kay. Well, let’s get to your training, then. If they’ll be here in another day, that means you’ve got until 5:00 tomorrow night to get this down.”

“I’ve got my guard shift then,” Ryouko replied, counting the hours. “I’ll be in with Shinmaru. Asuma and his group will be resting; you’ll be with Uzume and Shoki. I can practice with Shinmaru. I’ve been wanting to spar him again, anyway.”

“And it gives you more time before you have to see the ‘royal couple’ again,” Azami pointed out sarcastically. “I THOUGHT you were pretty eager to get that particular duty slot.”

Ryouko attempted a half-hearted smile, but it was just embarrassing for him to even pretend to shrug this off. “I’m just...not ready.”

“If it’s what Jiraiya said-”

“What he said was right, even if he said it the wrong way!” Ryouko snapped. Azami had her mouth

open, but had stopped there.

“...Sorry. I’m just frustrated.”

Azami gave Ryouko a pat on the back. “It’s fine. I understand. Hang in there.”

Ryouko gave a numb nod, ready to pick up where he left off.

“Good. Now, you know how to make fire. And you know how to release chakra in a burst. But so far, you can only exhale that fire, right?”

Ryouko nodded again. “That’s right.”

“Okay. So what we’ll do is make it so you don’t have to just exhale. You’ll be able to manipulate fire as easily as chakra. And eventually, you can apply the same technique to earth, and always have weapons easily accessible.”

--

With one more day left, Shoki received most of the attention. He had learned to walk on water. He had learned to climb trees using chakra. And he was having fun with weapons training. He seemed to favor a chain that Ryouko had lying around. He twirled it and pitched it with amazing accuracy. And it lent itself well to his small size. Weapons like that didn’t need much external force. Centrifugal force was an added bonus.

“You’re coming along great, Shoki,” Ryouko commented, grinning. “Now, how about we work on those eyes again? I’ve only learned a few things,. Can you tell me about the circumstances of your birth?”

Shoki thought for a moment. It wasn’t a regular thing you were asked, so it took a minute to recall what his parents had said to him.

“I was born at dawn...and my parents put two coins in front of me. One of them said ‘left’; the other had ‘right’ written on it. I guess I grabbed the left coin. So I lost my left eye, and I got the special eye in my right eye. After that, I got to choose my eye color. What I chose determined what kind of effects my eye would have.”

“There are other effects? Do you know them?”

Shoki shrugged. “My uncle could do amazing things with his eye. He could trap an image, like I can, but the person would also be frozen in that position as long as he didn’t blink.”

Shoki stopped, looking as though he’d had enough questioning. “I can’t remember the rest. All I know is my eye can do special things. For some reason, that orange haired guy wants me to die.”

“Yes. Your eye can disrupt his eye. I don’t know much about him, or his goals. I just know that if he’s trying to eliminate any threat to him, he’s either paranoid or a bad person. And since he came here and attacked a temple, I’m going with ‘bad person’.”

“Then I’ll help,” Shoki told Ryouko, still toneless. “I want to stop him. I’m not the only person he wants to kill, am I?”

“...No. You’re not even his real target. You’re a potential weapon we can use against him. But I don’t

want to do that.”

“Why?”

“People aren’t weapons. We USE weapons. No person should use another like that.”

“...Not even if a lot of lives could be saved?”

“...” Ryouko looked up at the sky, not quite sure how to answer that. “I’d never forgive myself for using you that way. I’d hate myself more if something happened to you. But there may not be a choice. All I can do is prepare you for the possible battle.”

Shoki hugged Ryouko. “You’re a good person. You and Azami, and Uzume and Asuna. I’m only twelve, but if I CAN help, I WANT to.”

It was such a pure sentiment that Ryouko couldn’t help but be impressed. The hug, though, made him think. What about being this child’s father, at least until he turned fifteen? Why did he have to be JUST an instructor? But then again, that wasn’t fair. He needed a mother; more so than a father. That, Ryouko could not do. And he had already been cautioned he could not adopt Shoki. So all he could do was prepare the boy for the worst, and protect him from the rest.

Feeling the gentle hug, that made Ryouko feel as if he was cheating the boy. The boy was starved for a real family. For once, Ryouko did not have the supplies nor the expertise on hand to provide that. All he could do was hug back and promise not to get too attached to the boy, or let Shoki get too attached to him.

38 - Arc V: Broken- Chapter 4

((Sorry this one is a little shorter than usual, but it leads right into the next chapter, which is a major arc. Please enjoy!))

Azami was waiting to greet Naruto, Sakura, Shikamaru, and Asuma at the gates to the temple. They all bristled when they saw her, but she raised her hands in surrender.

"I can never apologize enough for what I put you through. But, please, don't attack. I've since become good friends with Ryouko, and I'm in the middle of helping him."

There was a group silence. Asuma and Shikamaru didn't know anything about why Naruto and Sakura would suddenly get so uptight, but they knew enough to back their comrades.

"He sends his regards," Azami continued, "But he's currently doing his duty shift, guarding the Fire Daimyo."

Asuma held his cigarette out of his mouth so he could talk more freely. "I'd heard he and a couple others had gotten 'recruited' since the disaster. That's what Shikamaru and I are here for. We were invited by Shinmaru, the senior most of the twelve."

"He's asked not to be disturbed right now," Azami informed Asuma. "He left you a letter-" Azami held it up as proof "-apologizing for not being able to greet you right away."

Asuma took the letter, glancing through it. It was definitely from Shinmaru. The handwriting, the writing style; both were matches.

"Alright. Then do you have any idea where we'll be staying?"

--

Inside with Shinmaru, Ryouko was given his waist cloth with the Fire Daimyo's seal on it. He tucked tied it around his waist, feeling kind of proud, even though he had just happened to be here at the right time. Despite Shinmaru's assurances that Ryouko had more than earned the commission, Ryouko was certain that he was just convenient.

"We've got no dress code; where what you like."

"Thank you."

Shinmaru got quiet, deciding whether or not he was about to ask the question in his mind. He decided that he might as well, in case there was a problem that needed to be dealt with.

"The people coming...you know all of them?"

"Yes, I do."

“And do you have a problem with any of them?”

“It’s not a problem per se...” Ryouko let his voice trail off, but Shinmaru’s body language made it clear he was waiting for an answer. “It’s more one of their associates that’s a problem for me. And I left them under less than ideal circumstances, so I’m not sure what they’re thinking. It’s a little intimidating. Combat would be more straightforward.”

“True, true,” Shinmaru commented. He stretched his neck a little bit before he continued. “As long as it won’t interfere with your work, it’s no concern of mine.”

“I assure you- it will not. I am dedicated to being a Guardian for as long as I’m needed.”

Shinmaru stretched a little more, nodding his head. “Good. Then take off and go see these people.”

“Dwah?!” Ryouko couldn’t stop the unintelligible sound as it escaped his lips. “But I’m on duty for another four hours!”

“Heh. No avoiding these people now, Ryouko. Besides, I don’t need to sleep, and I can guard the Daimyo myself. I’m making it your assignment to see that these people are comfortable. I need to speak with Asuma and his pupil anyway.”

Damn. So much for my excuse not to see them again.

“Very well,” Ryouko conceded, his tone making it clear he was apprehensive. “I’ll change and then go see them.”

“And have the medic-nin heal the burn I gave you. Sorry about that,” Shinmaru added, snickering slightly. “I’m so used to that style of jutsu that I forget I can’t spar with other people without protection.”

“I notice there’s glee in your voice, Shimmaru-sempai,” Ryouko murmured in reply, an amused grin on his face. With that, he went to change.

--

The four Leaf Shinobi were still getting to know Azami when Ryouko returned.

“Ryouko!” Naruto and Sakura exclaimed as one, both scrambling over to see him. They stopped short of him, though, as he bowed unexpectedly low.

“It’s...good to see you both again,” Ryouko said, still doubled over.

“Hey, hey, what’s with the formal crap?!” Naruto exclaimed, pulling Ryouko up. “And, c’mon into the light, we can’t see you in the shadows!”

Ryouko allowed himself to be dragged into the light. The four stopped and stared at him.

Since he had been gone, Ryouko had cut his hair shorter; more aggressively, if it was possible to do so with hair. He had the tattoo on his face now, and he was dressed in a simple black gi top and typical

shinobi pants, with the Guardian waistcloth sticking out. Around his neck was a pendant with a tooth on it (It looked like a shark tooth, but the light was too dim to tell).

And his chakra...the feel of it was...deep. It was like a pool of black water. Dark and heavy, devoid of anything cheerful.

Sakura stepped forward carefully, looking to Azami for approval. Azami giggled, but nodded, mouthing 'we're not together' to her. Sakura nodded and finished her journey over.

"You've changed," she said carefully, trying hard not to make it sound like a bad thing. "And that tattoo...is that made from a burn?" She couldn't resist touching it lightly.

"It is. You saw the burn it was made from...you know, the last time you saw me. But, uh, if it's not too much trouble, my superior asked me to have you look at a burn he gave me by mistake."

"Oh, of course!"

Ryouko raised his gi top in the back. On his lower back was an odd colored burn. Sakura put a hand on it lightly, feeling the muscles on Ryouko's back contract.

"Mm, that's a nasty one. But treatable. Let me just..."

Using her Chakra Palm Jutsu, Sakura managed to get rid of the burn and pain altogether very quickly.

Naruto grinned, thinking **That's my girl!**

Shick!

A needle sunk into the back of Naruto's neck.

"Sorry!" A voice called.

"BE MORE CAREFUL, WILL YA?!" Naruto shouted back, yanking the needle out of his neck and tossing it down, grumbling.

Then his world changed. He saw red for a moment.

"You'll be fine," Sakura was assuring Ryouko. "We've missed you, you know? It's not the same without you."

Ryouko blushed a little, apparently a little happy about that. "I'm sorry I haven't returned. But I mean to stand by what I said to Master Jiraiya. But I'm close to being able to come back. I mean to keep my vow to you two as well."

Naruto felt a horrible anger. He was shaking. The anger actually *hurt!* He started to walk toward Ryouko and Sakura.

"Oh well. It's just good to see you alive and well. At least write us a letter to let us know you're breathing!" Sakura playfully admonished, before bonking Ryouko playfully on the head.

"I will. I-!"

Naruto reached Ryouko and grabbed him by the neck with one hand.

“What the-” Ryouko managed, before Naruto clamped down even more.

“You two-faced bastard! You help me get with her, then you try to steal her for yourself! You’re scum!
SCUM!”

39 - Arc VI: Kyuubi Unleashed- Chapter 1

Naruto threw Ryouko across the clearing and into a building. He hit the wall hard- hard enough to crack the very solid wood of the wall. He was most concerned with his neck. When he concluded there was no damage, he got to his feet.

“Naruto, what’s happened? I haven’t done anything. I stopped thinking about her romantically. I’ve done nothing to pursue her. I’ve made certain you had a clear path. If I’ve done something, I’m sorry, but you’ve misinterpreted...”

Ryouko had time enough to roll away before Naruto’s fist buried itself into the wall where Ryouko’s head had been an instant before. Scrambling to his feet, Ryouko launched a kick to Naruto’s chest, knocking him backward.

“Azami! See that Asuna, Uzume, and Shoki are protected! Shinmaru can handle the Fire Daimyo!”

“What’s happening?!” Sakura shouted.

“Stay back!” Ryouko warned, running away from Naruto. “He’s completely lost it! Be ready to administer medical procedures to both of us! I’m doing to delay him as long as possible! Contact Master Jiraiya, if you can!”

“He’s two days away!” Sakura shouted back, tears in her eyes. Naruto managed to hit a glancing blow on Ryouko’s defending forearm. Ryouko actually grunted with pain and backed off.

“I’ll get him,” Azami said, distaste all over her face. “For what he did to you...never mind. I can bring him here. It may take me a day to find him, but when I do, he’ll be here instantly.”

Ryouko ducked another wild strike from Naruto, noting that his punches were becoming wider and less likely to hit, but exponentially more powerful.

“We can’t leave the Daimyo and the others unprotected! If it takes two days, it takes two days!”

“What are you going to do?!” Sakura yelled back.

“Fight,” Ryouko shot back, throwing a kick to keep Naruto away.

Sakura sat down on the ground; hard. It was just like Naruto and Sasuke fighting. She wanted to run in there to stop it, but she knew she was powerless to do so. Naruto was fighting as if the demon fox could assert itself at any time, and Ryouko didn’t need to worry about her getting caught in the crossfire.

I can’t do anything again! Sakura thought, the frustration terrible. **Why can’t I wait. What’s that?!**

Sakura’s hand had found a senbon needle lying on the ground. There was a substance on it. It had a distinctive red color and a very liquidy texture.

Not blood...the consistency is too watery. Maybe it’s...

Sakura ran through her mental database, realizing what it was.

“Ryouko! He’s been drugged! Naruto’s been drugged! With the Kousei plant! It increases aggressive tendencies! The slightest emotional wave could trigger it’s effects!”

Naruto narrowly missed taking Ryouko’s head off with a vicious kick as Ryouko leaned back to avoid it. He braced his hands under Naruto’s legs and pushed up, flipping him onto his back.

“Can it be treated?!” he shouted back.

“Yes! I need to find the Fukashin plant! It grows in moist environments; usually in caves or rocky areas!”

“There are several spots like that around here! The boy; Shoki! He’s had more time to explore than anyone! If you can describe the plant to him, he can help you find it!”

Naruto hit Ryouko again, knocking him into the ground, then pouncing on top. Ryouko dropped one shoulder, then rolled the opposite way, throwing Naruto off. As he was rising, Ryouko struck a pressure point just above Naruto’s knee, slowing him down, if only for a moment.

“Azami, can you put one of your barriers up? I want to keep Naruto contained!”

“Right!” Azami called back, making the handsigns. “Earth Style: Four-Pillar Guardians Net!”

Azami’s four masked stone-clones (They wear the mask of Anubis; a nod to Azami’s Egyptian side) took up four spots around Naruto and Ryouko, leaving a large area. They sat as one, scrolls in front of them, large swords in their hands across their chests. The clones all appeared to be male, so it wasn’t technically a clone jutsu. But that was besides the point. The four of them held the snake handsign, and an invisible barrier erected itself around Naruto and Ryouko.

Azami couldn’t help thinking she’d just damned her best friend.

--

Naruto’s rage had grown to incredibly high levels, and Ryouko began to worry about his heart. This much agitation could cause heart failure, even in someone as fit as Naruto. Unless the nine tailed fox ate some of the agitation. But if THAT was the case, then a worse scenario now faced Ryouko.

This could awaken the nine-tailed fox. I’m hardly equipped to deal with that. I can seal it-temporarily- when a single tail appears. But if it’s beyond that, I’m no help. I have to try to calm him down. First, release his physical energy. That shouldn’t be a problem. Rage eats up energy.

The trickiest part was trying not to hurt Naruto. That meant most of Ryouko’s justsus were out. Genjutsu was the best option, and Ryouko’s forte regardless.

“Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing!” he recited, looking Naruto in the eye. The one jutsu that he could perform without handsigns hit successfully. Naruto appeared to be in mental pain now. If Ryouko had done this correctly, then there would be a hundred Ryouko’s. By Naruto’s insane charging around the

clearing, the genjutsu had worked. Naruto was burning off energy quickly.

“SHADOW CLONE JUTSU!”

“shoot! Should’ve expected that!” Ryouko growled as the clones spread out and began to attack. Even with all the others that Naruto was seeing, one of the clones would hit Ryouko eventually. He decided to start destroying them now, before they completely overwhelmed him. The clones in the illusion would mimic him.

“Kunai Shadow Clones!” Ryouko announced, throwing a spread of kunai knives. The knives multiplied until there were thousands of them. They flew into the cluster of Naruto’s and destroyed a good deal of the clones. Ryouko readied a second wave, but a dozen clones jumped him, knocking his knives away.

“YOUR STUPID GENJUTSU WON’T WORK!”

I must have hit the real one! The pain released the genjutsu! Now I don’t know which one to look at to cast the jutsu! Looks like I’ve got to really fight.

The Naruto’s were pinning him down, all taking shots at him. It was all Ryouko could do to cover up and deflect the blows. Occasionally, he lashed out with a fist or a foot and destroyed one of the Naruto’s, then he curled back up into his defensive ball. He could practically *feel* his organs bruising. He couldn’t risk using a weapon, in case he hit the real Naruto. So...

“Earth Style: Moving Land River!”

A river of mud appeared beneath the Naruto’s, driving them away from Ryouko. That gave him time enough to get to his feet and run toward them. Grabbing the first Naruto’s arm, he flung him into the group, hitting another Naruto. Both disappeared. Shadow clones.

Another Naruto punched at him. Ryouko moved his head to the side just enough, then threw a punch that connected in center mass of the attacking Naruto. Another clone.

Four clones slid into Ryouko from beneath.

“Na-Ru-To!”

Another four came from above, their heels aimed at Ryouko.

“UZUMAKI BARRAGE!”

They only splintered a log as Ryouko managed to use a Replacement Jutsu just in time. He landed above the attacking Naruto’s. He seized two by their back collars and smashed them into the other two. All four disappeared. The other four that had kicked Ryouko into the air from below threw a series of shuriken. Ryouko threw his arms in front of his face and chest, and crossed one leg in front of his groin.

Distraction. He’s aiming for me with something bigger. I’ve got to move. Looks like I’ll be taking a page out of *your* book, Naruto. Shadow Clone Jutsu!

Ryouko’s clone ducked below him as they fell, providing a stepping stone. Seconds later, Naruto flew in from between the four kunai-throwing clones and hit the clone with an Oodama Rasengan. The clone

was obliterated, and Ryouko had been barely a foot away. The breeze from the attack sent him spinning into the barrier's wall. Thankfully, it wasn't the kind of barrier that made you burst into flames. Instead, it was like a rubber wall. Ryouko would have been impressed with its efficiency, had he not been fighting for his life. He focused his chakra and stuck to the side of the barrier, trying to buy some time.

If this is what he's capable of in THIS state...then Master Jiraiya was correct. Naruto really *is* beyond me, and I was likely holding him back. But I've survived the fight thus far. Maybe I haven't outlived my usefulness to those two yet.

40 - Arc VI: Kyuubi Unleashed- Chapter 2

Shoki made his way across the grounds, heading toward one of the three areas that sounded like it met Sakura's requirements.

As they ran, Sakura tried to get the boy to talk. Apparently, unlike Ryouko, he was gender indifferent. That is to say, girl or boy, Shoki was somewhat anti-social, but not patently unfriendly.

"So your eye...what's it called?"

"...Issekigan. The 'Discerning Eye'."

"And what does it do?"

"I'm not sure. That's what Ryouko-senpai is trying to help me figure out, along with Uzume."

No title? Wow, this kid must know Uzume pretty well to get away with *that!*

"Have you lived here long, Shoki?"

"For a couple years now. Uzume took me in, and told me that she had a big brother for me. But he died..."

"I'm so sorry," Sakura told the boy. "Did you get to know him?"

Shoki shook his head. "No. He was dead within two days of my coming. He was Uzume's brother. Ryouko-senpai reminds me a lot of him."

"How so?"

"They're both nice people with a keen sense of duty. And they're both fire chakras."

Sakura was tempted to ask how Shoki knew that, and why it was important, but she held off. She didn't want to pry.

"Has Ryouko been good to you? I mean, has he taught you a lot?"

Shoki was quiet. "..."

"?"

"...He told me I don't have to be what I'm supposed to," Shoki said finally. "Those bad guys; the Akatsuki, I think. They wanted to kill me because of my eye. Ryouko-senpai and Uzume, and Azami-senpai stopped them."

“What do your eyes have to do with it?” Sakura didn’t quite understand that. If Shoki didn’t really know what they did, then how did the Akatsuki?

“My eye messes with this other kind of eye. It’s like a...ripple. Yeah. Like when you throw a stone into a pond, the ripples it makes. The guy trying to kill me had that kind of eye. The other one had red eyes with a lot of pupils in them. Lady Uzume brought fire out of his eyes somehow.”

Itachi Uchiha! Sasuke’s brother! Sakura exclaimed to herself. And the other one...ripple-pattern eyes? Who could that be?

“What did Ryouko say you didn’t have to be?”

“A weapon.”

“Huh? A weapon?”

“I guess my eyes help me to learn quickly. He and Azami-senpai have been training me to fight Pain. He’s the ripple-eyed guy, by the way. But Ryouko-senpai says that I don’t have to be a weapon. That people aren’t weapons- people USE weapons. But I told him that, if it’ll save lives, I don’t mind being a weapon.”

Sakura fell into silence, amazed by this boy’s maturity. **I guess he had to grow up fast.**

“Here’s the first spot where that flower might be.”

Shoki pointed to a waterfall up ahead. Barely visible behind the waterfall was a cave. Exactly the dark, cool environment the Kousei plant grew in.

“Perfect! Let’s get looking! It’s a red flower, shaped kind of like a daffodil, with a green center that makes a star shape onto the leaves.”

--

Naruto was really pushing Ryouko. He had backed him all around the barrier. It was a miracle Ryouko was still alive. Ironically enough, the more he tried to protect Naruto from himself, the bigger a danger Naruto became.

His chakra is agitated...almost enough to produce the nine-tails chakra...The only way I’ll be able to match him is to take off my curse bindings...but if I do that, I’ll only be okay for maybe two hours...three if I don’t use much chakra. There’s no guarantee that Azami will have found Jiraiya, or that they’ll be here in time. I’ve got to think of another solution.

“RASENGAN!”

It came completely out of nowhere. All Ryouko could do was throw his arms in front of his chest and jump. He hit the top of the rotating chakra sphere and was flung upward, spinning out of control. Naruto appeared above him and punched him right in the stomach, sending him rocketing back toward earth.

Damn it! Ryouko cursed, blood spilling out of his mouth. He nailed me right through my shielding chakra...I’ve got to heal myself- if I survive this fall!

Thinking quickly, Ryouko used the 'Earth Style: Moving Land River' Jutsu again, this time beneath him. He hit the now softened earth and was carried away by the water, narrowly avoiding another vicious punch from Naruto. His fist made a crater in the ground. He left it there, glaring at Ryouko as he panted from exhaustion.

--

Naruto walked toward the forbidding black gate; water on the floor beneath his feet. As he approached the gate, he heard a voice that would shake most people to their core. But Naruto wasn't scared- he knew this voice. He knew it well. It shared his body.

Do you want power? Power to defeat the man who would take your woman away?

Naruto reached toward the gate. There was no hesitation on Naruto's part, which was in direct contrast to the few times before he had accessed nine-tails power.

That's it...give yourself to me...

--

Naruto had begun to contort in apparent agony, his hands on his head. Around him, a malicious orange chakra gathered, forming two tails at his back.

Ryouko recoiled with horror. He was out of options now. If they were to both survive, he would have to play his own ace.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu! Triple Rashomon!"

Two Shadow clones flew toward Naruto at their highest speed, swinging fists, feet, and kunai, while three giant walls featuring a ghoulish face came up from the ground. Behind them, Ryouko felt inside himself for the length of black cord. He prepared himself for the pain.

--

Naruto had begun to contort in apparent agony, his hands on his head. Around him, a malicious orange chakra gathered, forming two tails at his back.

Ryouko recoiled with horror. He was out of options now. If they were to both survive, he would have to play his own ace.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu! Triple Rashomon!"

Two Shadow clones flew toward Naruto at their highest speed, swinging fists, feet, and kunai, while three giant walls featuring a ghoulish face came up from the ground. Behind them, Ryouko felt inside himself for the length of black cord. He prepared himself for the pain.

--

Sakura and Shoki had thoroughly searched the caves behind the waterfall, but had no luck. The next

spot, a dark grove near a pond, yielded no results either. That left one more spot. And this particular spot you was going to be hard to reach.

“It’s up there,” Shoki said, pointing upward. “On top of the bluff. Up there is a natural hot spring, where the priests go to bathe and meditate. Right near it is another cave, said to be where the first Lady Uzume understood her powers.”

Sakura nodded, silently praying that this would be the place where the plant would be growing. She couldn’t go all the way back to Konoha. There was no time. Ryouko couldn’t fight forever. Neither could Naruto. But with the size of Naruto’s chakra, she knew who was more likely to come out on top in a long fight.

“Up we get, then,” Sakura half-grumbled, focusing chakra to her feet. She paused at the concentration handsign, seeing Shoki just starting.
“What’s wrong?”

Shoki cocked his head, an image frozen in his eye. “I...don’t know how to do that. I know how to focus chakra to my feet, and how to maintain it...but I’ve never done it while moving...can you go up? Maybe I can do it if I see it once.”

Sakura doubted that. This might be second nature to her now, but she was the only one she knew of who got it on their first try.

“Well, you focus your chakra in an even amount. Just the right amount. You’ll know it when you feel it. Then you just walk, and keep the chakra going. Like this.”

Sakura walked up the mountain. She turned her head to see where Shoki was. To her surprise, he was making his way up the mountain! Slowly, but steadily, he was climbing up.

Amazing! Does it have something to do with his eye? Or is he a genius? Or...?

Shaking her head, Sakura decided to tell Ryouko about this later. Right now, she had to get up this hill to be sure there WAS a later for him.

-

At the top, Sakura paused. Her eyes went white, and her mouth twitched. Staring back at her from the hot springs were ten naked, shriveled old priests.

Yuck! Why couldn’t they at least be young monks?! This is so gross! That damn plant better be up here! I think I’m traumatized!

Looking past the naked old men, Sakura saw the plant she needed. Without a second thought, she sprinted over to get it.

She heard a cat-call, and two seconds later, she had lambasted a priest with a vicious right hand.

Oops. Am I gonna go to hell for that?

41 - Arc VI: Kyuubi Unleashed- Chapter 3

Naruto had disposed of the Shadow Clones quickly, but a third tail had begun to emerge. He was looking less and less like Naruto, and more and more like the demon fox. An explosion from the other side of the wall cued him in to the potential threat. The third tail grew a little longer as he ran over on all fours to investigate.

Ryouko ran up the wall as fast as he could. Where he had been on the ground was currently being occupied by Naruto. Or what used to be him. Chakra began to bubble at Naruto's mouth.

Is he going to spit it at me? Ryouko wondered, looking down. Then he saw Naruto swallow the whole thing. The third tail not yet fully formed, Naruto blew up like a balloon, stomach on the ground, head aimed toward Ryouko. **He is! But that much chakra, condensed to the size of something you can swallow...I'd better move!**

Just as Ryouko hit the top of the wall, Naruto spat out the ball of dense black chakra. It rocketed upward, narrowly missing Ryouko's head. Burns formed on Ryouko's skin from the mere heat of the projectile as it exploded, revealing red-orange chakra in the center.

Not good at all! I've really got nothing left. If he hits me once in this state, I'm done for. But maybe I can...

Kicking down, Ryouko landed on the other side of the three walls. He could sense where Naruto was. Now he just needed to get close enough...

"Bringer of Darkness Jutsu!"

Naruto's world went completely black. He couldn't see anything at all. His oppressive chakra lit the area around him like a beacon.

All at once, he felt something being stuffed in his mouth and tied around his head. Nine-tails, now half in control, wondered what it was.

Then he felt his chakra begin to vanish.

-

Ryouko had tied the curse bindings around Naruto's head, inside his mouth and fastened in the back. He could see the orange chakra recede, until the tails were gone, and only Naruto was left. The strain of holding the cord in place against the bucking Naruto had caused Ryouko's power to drain quickly, until the bloody red 'X's began to form on him. He had maybe thirty seconds before they began to bleed, and he was helpless. Naruto was still in the genjutsu, as Ryouko hadn't caused any pain to him, but wild swipes would eventually land against an immobile Ryouko. And with his chakra running out, he had to make a choice.

Release the genjutsu to save my remaining chakra? Or keep him under the genjutsu as long as possible?

I'll need my chakra. Maybe coming out of nine-tails state has weakened him, too.

Ryouko released the genjutsu. Immediately, Naruto spun towards him. He had pivoted on his heel, incredibly fast, as if he had sensed where Ryouko was instantly. The power of the move had doubled with the centrifugal force.

“RASENGAN!”

Ryouko had already begun to bleed from all the X's. Now, as Naruto hit him full-on with a full-power Rasengan, he could only feel himself floating.

Dead? No. Not floating. Propelled.

Ryouko's back hit the barrier, punched through it, and into one of Azami's clones. The clone disappeared, and with it the barrier. But Naruto sagged, exhausted, and fell down face-first.

--

Sakura and Shoki were the first to reach the unconscious pair of shinobi. Both their bodies were badly damaged. Naruto had suffered nasty burns to more than 80% of his body. The demon fox's chakra was healing him, slowly but surely. Reaching nearly four tails took a lot out of him, though past experience told Sakura he'd be waking up in another few minutes.

Ryouko had no such chakra, and as such was in worse shape. The Rasengan had twisted both his skin and organs around, blowing right through his rib cage. His face was half-bloody, and not from his release from his curse bindings. This was injury.

Naruto had landed face down out of exhaustion. Ryouko was lying on his back. There was something odd about that.

The Rasengan...if it put him through the barrier, which is supposed to be an impossibility...he would have kept sailing until he hit something. If he hit one of Azami's clones, then he would have wound up face-down, rebounding back-first off it. Considering his position, that's what should have happened.

But he's lying face-up. He's been unconscious since the last attack landed. Unless he had a major nerve spasm, he wouldn't have turned over like this. So that leaves one thing...

Replaying the scene in her mind from what she could guess at, Sakura could see Ryouko taking the Rasengan full-blast. His inadvertent flight plan would be just as she thought. To the equation, she added that Ryouko didn't want to hurt Naruto, Ryouko's nature, and Naruto's positioning.

“What if he...but that's-!” Sakura stammered, a hand over her mouth. “That...” she couldn't string two sentences together.

The only way Ryouko could have landed this way was to lower his shoulder and turn to his right...presenting Naruto the target area of his right ribs. Ryouko's arm is hurt, too...from the edge of the Rasengan. From that position, he could have blocked it's full brunt with his arm. But he

didn't.

He LET Naruto win.

Ryouko stirred, though not for long. He could feel every little injury. If an ant stepped on him right now, he would cry in agony. Through the one eye not caked with blood, he could see Sakura kneeling next to him. She was focused on healing him, but her tears were apparent. He wanted to reach a hand up, but couldn't do it. So instead he just told her:

"Sorry. Looks like you have to put me back together again."

Sakura didn't even look at him. She couldn't. "Be thankful you're alive! If I hadn't come when I did... What on earth were you two idiots thinking?!"

"He lost it."

"He was drugged," Sakura informed Ryouko.

"Ah. But that's not why he fought. The whole time we fought, he cursed me for trying to steal you from him."

As Ryouko struggled to breath properly, Sakura drank that in.

Why would Naruto think that? If the drug he was hit with brought out thoughts and amplified them...that would mean he had it in his head that maybe there was a slight chance Ryouko was trying to steal me from him. But normally, Naruto would dismiss that thought. The drug forced him to act on his most malicious thought. At the time, that was the thought.

"Sorry," Ryouko managed to say around a great deal of agony. "I...wanted to do the right thing."

"..." Sakura finally faced him. After looking at him a moment, she finally asked the question that was on her mind: "Did you let him hit you with that final attack?"

Ryouko sighed deeply, but didn't really get to finish thanks to the pain it caused. So he just said it quickly. "Yes and no. I tried to block it just a little better, but he took my blind side on his own. I might have been able to dodge it, but...he needed to win. My promise to back off was riding on the match...at least, to him. So I had to let him win. And he earned that win. He's gotten stronger."

"You reckless bastard! Don't you think it tears me up when you idiots clash like this?!" Sakura snarled, slamming her fist into the ground (sans chakra, mercifully, so the whole place didn't collapse). "If it's ME you're fighting over, at least consider my feelings!"

"...I kind of had no choice. If we let him go, what would have happened?" Ryouko asked, not needing an answer. Naruto would have rampaged as nine-tails if his energy hadn't been burned off. "So, you've got two half-dead instead of two totally dead. I'm sorry there wasn't a better way. But...well, do me a favor. Go treat Naruto."

"What are you saying?"

"I used my curse bindings to reign in his nine-tails chakra. I'm probably dying from that, never mind the

injuries he gave me.”

The next words he spoke would echo in Sakura’s ear.

“Just numb my body and go take care of Naruto. I’ve fulfilled my duty if he cares for you that much.”

--

Sakura didn’t want to leave his side, but her boyfriend was dying within her vision. If what Ryouko said was true, there was precious little she could do for him anyway. She couldn’t re-attach those curse bindings. That would take no less than Lady Uzume.

As if on cue, Uzume had come running. Azami and Jiraiya appeared from underneath the shadow of a nearby tree, and split up. Azami went to Ryouko, and Jiraiya to Naruto.

Uzume looked down at Ryouko, and began to weave signs.

“If the curse bindings are not restored, he will perish. I guess my visions were correct.”

She bent close to Ryouko, still making handsigns.

“Forgive me, Kimihiro,” she whispered, using his real name, “I know you wouldn’t accept this treatment. But your duties are still required. I trust my apprentice with my work now.”

A set of hands stopped Uzume. The hands were that of Asuna, Uzume’s apprentice and one of the few people Ryouko trusted.

“Then don’t, Lady Uzume. If I understand correctly, using this jutsu the first time only fatigues you, correct?” Asuna intoned, knowing full well she was right. “Well, then there’s no need for you to sacrifice yourself this time. I’m capable of completing the jutsu and saving him. He would never forgive himself if you died healing him. Don’t make him bear that kind of burden as well.”

Uzume had been trumped, so she stepped back and knelt down, simply praying. Something she hadn’t done as often as she felt she should. Being a priestess should mean less fighting and more prayer. But both her and the Uzume before her had seen such action and deemed it necessary. But still, peace would have been preferable.

42 - Arc Vlii: Deep Inside- Chapter 1

Asuna finished tying the cord around Ryouko's tenketsu, then removed her shimmering, transparent hands from his body. Azami stood nearby, a look of anxiety on her face that belied her usual cool demeanor. This was nerve-wracking!

"He'll need to be in your care for a while," Asuna told Azami, wiping her hands, despite them being devoid of blood or anything at all besides her own sweat.. "The idiot. If he's yours, please take better care of him."

Azami shook her head. "He's not 'mine'. Just someone I'm helping train. Although I need to be leaving, so he'll have to train by himself."

There was a shared look between Asuna and Azami. Asuna understood that Azami planned to leave on her quest to find the Spear of Izanagi. She wouldn't need long to get to the Land of Waves. Acquiring the spear might prove more difficult. But Azami wasn't known as someone you said 'no' to.

"At least wait until he's conscious again," Asuna requested plainly. "If something were to happen now, either to you or him..."

"I'll wait, of course. Is it safe to move him?"

"Yes. Let's put him in his room. The darkness should help his subconscious. He'll recover within the day. From my jutsu, anyway. The other damage...that's up to the medic-nin."

--

Naruto was being treated by Sakura, while Shoki looked on curiously. He seemed to be interested in Naruto's chakra for some reason.

"..." Naruto regained consciousness. The first thing out of his mouth was:
"Oh...I didn't?"

Sakura nodded sadly. "You did. But he'll live. But he swore, before he passed out that...that..."
Sakura managed to choke back tears into a brave smile.
"...That he really has given up on me. He won't pursue me anymore."

Naruto didn't say anything for a few moments. He couldn't believe the damage of the landscape around him. He flashed back to when he lost it with Orochimaru, and saw the same destruction.
"...I knew he wouldn't. So why couldn't I control myself?" Naruto finally asked.

"Someone hit you with a poisoned needle. The drug on it brings out aggressive tendencies. And mixed with your potent chakra and latent worry that Ryouko might still be after me..."

Naruto's head dropped into his chest, despair on his face. "...I should have been killed. I'm just a danger

to everyone.”

Sakura shook her head, giving him a warm embrace. “That’s not true. You’ve touched a lot of people, Naruto. And maybe...maybe you weren’t as out of control as you thought. Your last Rasengan hit Ryouko, and he didn’t block it...but you didn’t kill him with it. And you should have been able to. You must have restrained yourself somehow...”

The thought put Naruto slightly more at ease. He closed his eyes and let his head fall into Sakura’s lap.

--

Shinmaru grinned at Asuma, raising a sake glass.

“So, this is your main student, eh? Spitting image of Shikaku, I tell you!”

Idiot. Shikamaru couldn’t contain that particular thought very well.

“So, we’ve got five total guardians. Ryouko, Azami, you, Shikamaru here, and me. What about those other two? Can they stick around for a little while? As you might imagine, things are desperate...”

The details worked out, Shikamaru put on the waistcloth, feeling a little bit of pride. He wouldn’t tell Asuma, of course, but it was pretty cool to be able to follow in his footsteps like this.

“I think they can,” Asuma replied, sipping from his cup. “It’ll be good training for them. They’re both apprentices of legendary shinobi, after all.” Asuma had put a cigarette in between his teeth, flicking his lighter with practiced ease. The flame kissed the cigarette, lighting it and allowing the smoke to fill the room. “But those two are Akatsuki magnets. With Ryouko here, too, you’re begging for those black-cloaked villains to swarm you.”

Shinmaru rubbed his chin, apparently drifting into a deep thought. Asuma sighed and shook him out of his stupor.

“I know what you’re thinking, Shinmaru. And no, we won’t use those kids as bait for an ambush. That’s out of line.”

“The opportunity-” Shinmaru started, but he was cut off by Asuma.

“The opportunity will still be there when they’re fully grown.”

Shikamaru hadn’t seen Asuma so tense in a while. For now, he decided to chalk it up to the fact that he seemed to know Shinmaru, and didn’t completely trust him when it came to safety.

“I can’t believe the Akatsuki would attack here, of all places.”

“Lady Uzume and the boy are threats to them. Best for them to kill them both now.” Shinmaru shifted to a sitting position, apparently thinking again. “The boy; Shoki. He’s got it rough. But ever since this Ryouko guy came, the kid has been more at peace. I’ve got no idea why- it’s pretty obvious Ryouko himself couldn’t define peace right now.”

--

Shoki stared at the comatose Ryouko. Sakura had predicted that Ryouko would wake up in a couple

hours. Shoki had volunteered to sit with him, feeling it was his duty as a student to watch over his hurt master. Azami didn't seem to mind. She seemed preoccupied, really. She had spent the last hour sitting in the corner, looking through a map of the Land of Waves. Shoki hadn't heard of the place before. It seemed like a small, unimportant nation.

"Is he awake yet, Shoki?" asked Uzume, stepping into the room. Shoki shook his head.

"Hmm? This is...! Ah, no wonder! Shoki, do you want to see Ryouko's paradise?"

"Huh? How?"

"I can tell- Ryouko put himself in a protective genjutsu while his body heals. When he removes the curse bindings, it's painful until they re-attach and align themselves to his tenketsu. So he puts the pain out of his mind by sedating himself. And, in effect, allowing himself to train, if only in his mind."

Shoki would be lying if he said he wasn't curious. Master Ryouko was such a closed book. What would make a man like him happy? What was his paradise?

"I'm going to enter his mind. For this to work, you'll need to make the same handsigns as me, Shoki. Get ready..."

--

Genjutsu

Uzume and Shoki appeared in the library area of Ryouko's genjutsu. The number of books and scrolls had increased since the last time Uzume had been here. She noticed a new bit of furniture as well. One of the few comforts Ryouko afforded himself was a long couch, stretched across one wall. Above it was a giant wall scroll, written in nearly unreadable kana.

"Shoki, this is the world he created for himself. There's an important lesson to be learned here. I think you'll understand when you see it. For now, let's find Ryouko. If he wants us to see the whole thing, he'll give us a tour."

Ryouko wasn't going to be hard to find. He was outside in the big, grassy field he had created. This time, a cherry tree was planted in the ground. It was massive, looking as if it had been growing in that spot for four hundred years. Weapons of all shapes and sizes were lying underneath it.

Ryouko was currently in the middle of sword practice. He moved with a practiced ease, and a gracefulness that suggested long, intense periods of practice. After a few more moves, he gave the sword a shake and put it in its scabbard. Turning to his visitors, he gave a small smile and offered an apology.

"I was almost done, and I wanted to finish up. Lady Uzume; Shoki." His smile grew a little wider. "If I'm seeing you, I guess Naruto didn't kill me after all."

"No. That would have been a poor way for him to repay your courage. You let him win, after all."

Ryouko half-shrugged, setting down his sword and untying his belt. "Not really. He had me with that last strike. I didn't give him an opening; he found one. Maybe I could have done a better job of blocking it,

though.”

Not wasting anymore time, he walked over to the two. He didn't have a drop of sweat on his body, even after that hard workout. That was an effect of the genjutsu.

“Shoki, try that jutsu we worked on. The fire style. Let's show Lady Uzume your progress.”

Shoki was a shy boy by nature. But he came alive at this command, excited to show off his new abilities. Uzume looked to Ryouko, seeing him half-smiling. He looked at Uzume and winked slightly.

“It's interesting. I think you'll be surprised. The time I've spent in here wasn't spent just healing...”

Shoki performed his personal fire jutsu flawlessly. His attack was interesting, and incredibly effective. He did the same sort of move as Sasuke, except he could make three balls of fire, and send them in different directions, stack them on top of each other, or focus them one behind the other, to break barriers. Uzume WAS impressed.

“Okay, good, Shoki. Now, let's try this while we're in here. Don't worry, you can't be hurt in this genjutsu world. Now, I'm going to use my fire style attack on you. I want you to look at it, and 'capture' the image with your eye. Then imagine an invisible wall in front of you, blocking the attack.”

Ryouko used his attack, sending a blast of fire toward Shoki. The boy looked scared, but took his master's advice, and held his ground. He captured the image in his eye. He imagined the invisible wall. And just as the attack was about to reach him, everything froze.

Ryouko walked around his ball of fire, to stand next to Shoki.

“I was right. When you use your eyes, you aren't just capturing images. You're analyzing them, and you've even got the ability to block them. Look at your 'invisible wall'.”

Ryouko was kneeling down, pointing at a floating black character sitting just underneath his fire attack. “The kanji for fire. I had a feeling. Shoki, what's really happened here is that you negated my attack with the base element of fire.”

That made no sense to Shoki, and he said so. Ryouko drew on the ground for a moment.

“See, all the elements have a weakness. Fire is beaten by water and enhanced by wind. But if two fire attacks meet, if there is equal force behind the two attacks, the attack is negated. Since your force is stationary, but equal to my moving force, this gives the illusion that you've 'frozen' my attack. But really, you've blocked it. In effect,” Ryouko smirked, “You're fighting fire with fire.”

Uzume touched Ryouko's arm lightly. “I was hoping he could see...”

Ryouko gave a slow nod. “I was debating that myself. It would be a healthy thing for him, wouldn't it? Although I'm not sure I want him to see his teacher at his worst. But...”

Ryouko looked toward a hill in his grassy field. Just beyond it lie the sealed doors.

“He won't hurt you. Just remember that,” Ryouko told Shoki, realizing that he probably just scared the poor kid even more.

43 - Arc Vlii: Deep Inside- Chapter 2

Ryouko walked through the doors without opening them. Shoki paused, putting a hand out to touch the doors. But his hand went right through. He yanked it back out, counting his fingers, then took to staring wide-eyed at Uzume.

"It's okay," she told him, giving his hand a squeeze. "Nothing in here will hurt you. But it might scare you a little. Just be brave, because I promise you- Ryouko is more scared than you are."

Shoki looked at the ground, ashamed of his fear. But a question was on his lips, and he couldn't resist asking it.

"But why would he put something so...so...so scary into his sanctuary?"

Uzume looked at the doors, a serious expression on her beautiful face. A wind from nowhere kicked up and tossed the long part of her hair. She took a moment to phrase things a way that might make sense to the baffled youth next to her. He was young, yet so mature beyond his years, she shouldn't need to dumb it down too much. Just make it relatable...

"This is a perfect world, isn't it, Shoki?"

"It is."

An instant reply.

"If you could stay here forever, would you? Never being hurt, or sick, or even thinking about anything like that. A world where anything you want, you can have. Instantly."

"It sounds perfect."

"That's why this is here," Uzume said gently. She ran a hand down the door, just barely touching it.

"It's easy to lose yourself in a daydream or a genjutsu. They can be much more pleasant real life. This room reminds Ryouko that there is another world- the real world- that he can't leave behind. Because if everything was perfect, there would be no reason to live. People can only aspire to perfection. To attain it is impossible, and with good reason."

"What's that?" Shoki's twelve-year-old mind couldn't grasp what was so bad about perfection. Isn't that what you strive for in everything you do? Everything worth doing?

"We'd all think we were gods. No one would have to work. Our race would never evolve. We'd never become anything more; we'd just delude ourselves into thinking so. And we would never procreate, or take care of our physical bodies. We would all die. As much as reality may hurt, avoiding it will hurt more. Because when you die, no one will remember you. You'll have lived and died for no reason, contributing nothing. And wasting a good life...well, that feels like a sin to me. Life is for living, and striving for the perfection you can never reach. And in that, you become stronger. Some stronger than others. And the strongest-" Uzume paused, sweeping an arm around to indicate the world around her "-can learn to control temptations like this, and become even stronger. Now, let's go in."

They both stepped through the door. Inside, they found Ryouko pressed up against the glass barrier, staring at himself. Shoki gasped, and nearly vomited. Apparently, this genjutsu paradise wouldn't allow that, as he felt better physically right away. But all the same, the shock didn't disappear right away.

The chained-up Ryouko looked bad. In addition to the continually appearing and healing cuts and the locks and chains holding him in place, one of the chains strained at his neck, lifting him onto his tip-toes. Choking him. The place was almost completely dark as well. The only light came in from a small window in the stone wall behind Ryouko. The walls, in the light you could see, had blood smeared on them. Some was dry and brown; some vibrant red. There were claw marks with them. Rather, fingernail marks. A desperate plea...

Ryouko pressed his hand to the glass. The chain around the other Ryouko's neck began to loosen, until he was on the ground. The cuts even stopped for a moment as the other Ryouko dragged himself forward, pressing his hand against his counterparts.

"Are you closer? Can you free me yet?"

"I'm getting closer. I think I can ease your suffering," Ryouko told him. "The pain I've felt in real life...the 'letting go' you talked about...I did that. And it might have helped. Even though my physical body is battered, my mind healed a little. Hold still."

Ryouko cocked his fist back and punched the barrier. To his surprise, it shattered. For the first time, he could walk up to himself and feel the chains. Two keys were floating around, and they worked themselves into two locks. One of the chains read 'Anxiety'; the other 'doubt'.

Shoki and Uzume could see both Ryouko's faces ease. They looked at each other, happy to see their beleaguered friend get a measure of relief. But Uzume knew his relief would be short-lived. Sure enough, Ryouko turned on his heel and walked out. His only parting words to himself were: "The next time I meet you, I hope I can end your suffering entirely. Or at least ease it so that you don't hurt anymore."

-

Back outside, Ryouko set his face into a stern expression. "Lady Uzume, please explain something."

"How was I able to force Itachi's jutsu to activate?"

"That's it exactly. I shouldn't be surprised you know."

"You know mythology, yes? Yamato. Kusanagi. All things from legend that have a basis in reality. The same goes for the story of Amaterasu. When she could bear Susano'o no more, she hid in a cave. The other gods tempted her to come out, but failed. Then, one began to dance and sing. The other gods began to enjoy themselves. Their merriment carried so that even Amaterasu's anger quelled. Curious, she came out of her cave."

Ryouko had heard the story, of course. Mythology was one of the few things he read that didn't have a

basis in the fighting arts. But a legend was a legend...wasn't it?

"So...it's the same thing?"

"Think of it this way," Uzume told him. "All the ninjutsu that exist. Fire, earth, water, wind, lightning. Physical, mental, spiritual, ocular, forbidden. Shadow, sound, animals, transformations. All these amazing things that people can do. It's all gifts, of course. Some are gifted in other ways. Some can't do ninjutsu, but some can cook. Some can't use jutsu, but can learn to fight. And some of us...some of us can use ninjutsu without knowing how. It's just something we can 'do'. And legends have a basis in reality."

Ryouko had to think about that. Orochimaru's jutsu was the best example in his mind. Forbidden, nature-defying...and yet it was possible...

"The first one to use the Uzume name was a...shaman would be the best description. She could summon the shinigami, and even quell his killing instinct so that the living could speak with the dead. The second Uzume could even call souls back for a brief time. Once someone has died, it's unnatural to bring them back, and to some religions, it is blasphemous to attempt it. But to 'borrow' a soul and then return it quickly, without sacrificing it's purity, isn't a sin."

Uzume smiled at Shoki, who was wide-eyed at hearing these feats. She had never told him about this for her own reasons. But now as good a time as ever. Feeling her death was impending, Uzume wanted as much of her knowledge as possible to be imparted to the right people.

"The third Uzume was a hero. She was very much a warrior. You would have liked her very much, Ryouko. She was brave; upstanding; strong yet feminine. It is she who invented chakra wards and seals. And she devised them with combat in mind. Her technique, duplicated by only one of all the priestesses, saved this temple from destruction. That was during the last Great Shinobi war. She ventured onto the battlefield herself, and used her chakra seals to incapacitate the enemy. Wielding a bow and arrow, and then a dagger, she betrayed her own vow to never take life by killing no less than fifty enemies to defend those weaker than her. She would have retained the Uzume title, but she felt she had broken a code, and passed the title on to her successor. The fourth Uzume. Me."

There was a pause. That was a lot to take in. Ryouko wasn't sure, at first, why she was telling him all this. But somehow, he could make out that she had a reason to want to speak to him. And he sensed that she needed to talk to him alone.

"Shoki...I need a favor. My body can still get dehydrated. Will you make sure Sakura administered some kind of IV or something? After that, if you'll continue your training..."

Shoki sensed that this was a request he COULD refuse, if he wanted. But he chose not to. He trusted Ryouko and Uzume.

44 - Arc Vlii: Deep Inside- Chapter 3

Ryouko made handsigns, then tapped his hands to the ground. All around he and Uzume, a large area began to take form. Furniture that was just right for them both showed up as well.

“Ever since I saw my friend Tenzo use his wood style, I was jealous. So I...fudged my powers a bit in that area. Just for fun.”

Uzume smiled, but seemed unusually rushed. As if there was something she needed to get off her chest.

“You never questioned where Shoki came from,” she pointed out. That was a valid point. Ryouko was usually the type to question anything and everything.

“? I never gave it much thought, really,” Ryouko responded thoughtfully. “I just assumed he was an unfortunate orphan, dumped on the temple keepers.”

“Yes and no,” Uzume told him, speaking in low tones, despite the fact that there was no one around to overhear them. “He’s not an orphan. He still has family. But you’d never know it.”

“I’ve had a feeling,” Ryouko admitted. “You never let yourself get too close to him. Like you’re waiting for someone else to come and take him away. You’re doing it so neither of you will be hurt when that time comes.”

Uzume smiled, but let him keep going. **He has excellent instincts. I wonder how close he’ll come to the truth?**

“One thing that doesn’t make sense, though, is this detachment. If I’m the person who’s going to come for Shoki, then you don’t need to be distant with him, since we won’t be far. There’s another reason you won’t get close to him. My guess is that you think your death is near, and you can’t prevent it, so you’re cutting as many ties as you can, while making sure your work is completed.”

Uzume leaned back in her chair, brushing her hair out of her way. “You’re incredibly close. My impending death is the reason I’ve been so rushed, yes. But regarding Shoki...you aren’t quite correct. Let me make a point, first. Asuna is your friend, yes?”

“Of course.”

“Would it shock you to know that she is the only person who could be my apprentice?”

“A little bit, but I won’t pretend to understand your divination.”

Uzume shook her head. “It’s not divination. I didn’t know myself until saw her one time. But that one time was all it took. That one time, she was using chakra seals. And she was doing it well; as if it were

second nature to her. And her *tsundere* attitude is even reminiscent. She is the veritable reincarnation of the third Uzume.”

That made Ryouko sit more upright. He hadn't expected to be shocked, but that one caught him completely off guard.

“Now that I've surprised you, let me ask you...do you believe that abandoning someone is a crime, if you've no other choice?”

“If there's no choice...no.”

Uzume breathed in deeply. She exhaled slowly, as if forcing her resolve to thicken so she could say whatever it was she had planned. And she finally did.

“I'm Shoki's family. His half-sister, to be exact. Our fathers are different, but we had the same mother. The second Uzume, really. It's his father, Ryunosuke, who possessed the Issekigan.”

“Ryunosuke? That's a powerful name. Where was he from?”

“Heat Devil Village. Ironic that he would have a child by a miko,” Uzume chuckled. “After my mother's first husband died, she planned to remarry, to keep our bloodline going. That became less and less a viable option. No strong suitors came to meet a miko. Except this man. He was so taken with my mother that he renounced his current beliefs as a follow of Jashin and planned to wed my mother immediately. They were married, and almost immediately she became pregnant. That's when she retired and allowed the third Uzume to take over. But just as quickly, Ryunosuke was killed by his former Jashin comrades, leaving my mother pregnant and alone.”

“Dear God...” Ryouko muttered, leaning forward in his chair. “That's horribly morbid. I can't begin to say how sorry I am...”

Uzume looked a little sad, apparently allowing herself to feel more than usual. But she kept the same tiny smile on her face. “It's alright. I've come to terms with it. It helped motivate me to train. And most importantly, it led me to find Shoki, the brother I never knew I had, and the only immediate family I had left.”

Standing, Uzume looked at a candle, flickering in the corner. It seemed to wane as she came over, and she interpreted it as a sign of her impending death.

“I don't have much time left. Not as much as I'd like. I don't know anything about Shoki's Issekigan. But you may be able to find out something in his father's birthplace. He was useful against Pain, and I think we both know that Pain's terror won't end like this.”

“So I've got to go to Heat Devil Village with Shoki...alright. But Lady Uzume- I won't let you die.”

Somehow, Ryouko managed to put true force behind his words, as if they could stave off death. He and Uzume knew better, but it was a comfort to them both.

“If I might ask one more favor, Lady Uzume...”

--

Azami was crouching by Ryouko, Asuna at her side. Ryouko stirred, and finally woke up. He felt the first wave of pain, and he curled into himself until he was in a fetal position. He rocked over onto his left side, and the pain lessened enough so he could speak.

“You’re...leaving?”

Azami nodded quietly. “Yes. Officially, I’ve got orders from Asuna, Uzume’s adjutant, to go to the Land of Waves on a peaceful surveillance mission, and to see if they are willing to offer support to the Fire Daimyo. Unofficially, I’m going to find the Spear of Izanagi.”

“Understood. Best of luck..agh! Damn, this hurts!”

Azami looked down at him, pity on her face. Ryouko couldn’t stand that. So he forced himself to his feet, though he was still hunched over.

“Don’t pity me. If I wasn’t doing something damned stupid, I wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“Yeah,” Asuna agreed quickly, scowling “You’re too noble for your own good. You should’ve punted the little bastard to the moon.”

“So the squeaky-clean miko’s nature finally shows!” Azami said around a grin. The three had a good laugh about that.

“Just make sure you come back to crack us up again.”

Looking at Asuna, then at Ryouko, Azami nodded. She couldn’t bring herself to smirk like usual. Instead, she held her face in a serious pose. This was at least part oath to her. “You guys are family to me. I’ll be back. And I’ll be back with the means to save Lady Uzume’s life.”

After another day, Ryouko found his strength almost completely back. Rubbing his ribs, he could feel a slight bump. That was the only evidence that Sakura had left after treating him. Medical ninjutsu wasn’t magic; it was a science. It was still miraculous to Ryouko.

He slid open the door to the receiving hall. He found Sakura, Naruto, Shikamaru, Shinmaru, and Asuma waiting for him. There was an empty spot set at the low table, apparently awaiting it’s owner. Ryouko took it silently, offering only a bow by way of greeting. He folded himself into a careful tatehiza, earning himself an admonishment from Shinmaru.

“Relax. You’re being too formal.”

Ryouko didn’t dare argue, though he found fault with the claim. He certainly felt as if he was under scrutiny. No doubt, now that the blood had faded, Naruto and Sakura were looking to see his physical condition. And his tattoo... It was about now that Ryouko realized he must look unhealthy. He had hardly eaten since his devastating defeat at the hands of Master Jiraiya. But the feeling of hunger was foreign to him.

Deciding to break the awkward silence, Sakura chanced with a “How are you feeling?”

“Just fine. The pain will recede further in another day or so.”

Sakura had to try really hard not to feel disappointed by his response. Granted, she hadn't expected he would be feeling one hundred percent, but he seemed to have regressed.

Back when he first came to the village. He was so distant. His eyes were sad. A lot of people avoided him because of that. But I remember...When I first really saw Ryouko.

45 - Arc Vlii: Deep Inside- Chapter 4

=Flashback=

Ryouko, fourteen years of age, sat by himself outside the academy. In front of him lay no less than ten scrolls. He was entranced by the information within them. So much so that he ignored virtually everyone- including bullies.

One group wasn't so easily deterred.

"Hey, shorty!"

Silence.

"Freak!"

Nothing.

"Kiss-@\$\$\$. You're only the Third Hokage's pet; you're no warrior!"

Slowly, Ryouko turned around and stood up. He took a half-step closer to the boy mocking him, so close that, had they been wearing headbands, they could have touched if either boy inclined his neck.

"I detect jealousy. Why don't you go learn something yourself? THEN come back and try to talk trash. That is, if you ever get good enough to back it up."

The bullies didn't like their prey firing back. Apparently, Ryouko couldn't care less about that, as he scooped up his scrolls and walked into a nearby teahouse.

-

It's always the same. Why can't they leave me alone? I don't care if I make friends. I'll settle for being ignored.

That was the way Ryouko felt. He knew it was wrong for someone his age to feel like that, but all the same, it felt good. Him against the world. Okay, his parents were there, too, but they couldn't fight all his battles for him. This one he wanted to win. That's why he studied so hard. So he would never fall behind anyone. So he would never lose. So he could always protect the important things.

"Eek!"

"Leave her alone!"

Ryouko heard the commotion and looked up. All the 'responsible adults' weren't even reacting. Just some kids playing, in their minds. But Ryouko knew better. That wasn't a 'play' scream. That was a distress call. He didn't know or care who it belonged to at this point. He stood up and strode out of the

teahouse, and forcefully lifted up the flap.

There he was two young girls being bullied by the three idiots who had been harassing Ryouko before. One girl was blond, and clearly a little vicious. The other was a pink-haired girl, cowering before the bullies, wanting no part of the conflict. It was her they were zeroing in on, of course.

“You rotten jerks can just shove off! Leave Sakura alone!”

“Scram, Yamanaka! If we can see you behind Haruno’s forehead, then you’re too close!”

Ryouko had heard about enough. “Ah, the idiotic guffaws of the intellectually challenged!” he called. That was enough to snap all five heads towards him. Realizing that all his genjutsu and ninjutsu would be wasted here, Ryouko prepared himself for a fist-fight.

The tallest boy, the ringleader, stopped teasing Sakura and took to poking Ryouko in the chest. Push.

“You think you’re the hero to these little girls?”

Push

“You think you’re gonna stop me? You can’t even take care of yourself.

Push. Grab.

Ryouko grabbed onto the boy’s finger, held his wrist, and pushed the finger up. He could hear the boy’s finger creak, and he heard his gasp of agony. That was the point at which he stopped.

One of the tallest’s flunkies tried to hit Ryouko in the face. Ryouko threw the tallest boy’s arm up in the block, then used his own hand to smack a nasty pressure point under the boy’s armpit. The third bully found himself stuffed in the guy with a kick.

“Run home and tell your mommies that you got beat up by the skinny little runt of the village.” Ryouko raised his eyes at them. The cold, distant eyes that seemed to say ‘I don’t care’. It didn’t matter what the question being asked was.

The three bullies took off, holding their hurt appendages. That left one last chore for Ryouko. He turned to the two girls, and looked at them. They looked back at him.

“Wow...thanks,” Ino managed. “That was something.”

“I dislike bullies. Especially the ones that pray on innocent girls like that. It’s low.” Kneeling down, Ryouko offered Sakura his hand. “Do you need help getting up?”

Sakura realized her eyes were still tear-stained, and she wiped them with an over-long sleeve on her sweatshirt. Then she took Ryouko’s hand, and let him pull her up.

“They got lucky,” Ino stated. She held her hand out, holding rose stems between her fingers. “If they kept up, they were going to get these where the sun don’t shine!”

It was probably then that Ryouko developed a healthy fear of girls.

And I thought they needed my help?! Kunoichi...no, girls. Girls are scary, and definitely not as docile as they seem.

=end flashback=

Unconsciously, Sakura smiled at the memory. Ryouko had always been a brave person, if a little reserved. No attempts made by the chunin and jonin to get Ryouko to make friends seemed to work, except he made friends with jonin and chunin. Ryouko was more comfortable conversing with adults, apparently. So his growth had been rapid when it came to skills and social graces with respect to older and younger people, but he remained distanced from those close to his age. And every once in a while, Sakura thought she glimpsed regret about that very subject.

Next to Sakura, Naruto was trying and failing to make eye contact with Ryouko. Whether he knew Ryouko threw the match or not, he had done massive damage to an innocent friend. Even under some kind poisonous influence, Naruto felt he should have known better. Showed better control. Done something that didn't involve his friend being so battered.

"Naruto."

Hearing his name, the orange-clad shinobi perked up. Ryouko was the one who had garnered his attention. It took four simple words to put Naruto at ease.

"Don't worry about it."

The tension left the room. Well, except for Ryouko. His eyes had hardened again. Everyone here; all of them his friends; they knew it would take a while for him to become close to jovial again. His skills had taken a large step forward; his personality progression had taken two steps back.

Naruto remembered the first time he had met Ryouko. It was one of the few memories he had of the boy before his training with the Third Hokage. Before he had become a powerful, semi-trusted person.

=Flashback=

Naruto ran full-speed, snickering all the way. He tore around the academy hallways, somehow managing to elude Iruka-sensei and at least three other chunin.

"You suckers will never catch me! Believe it! Hahaha!"

That was when he had spotted one boy at the top of the auditorium-style classroom. The boy was deep in his studies. He was maybe three years older than Naruto, but didn't have a headband yet.

"NAAARRRRUUUUTTTOOOOO!"

"Yikes! I'd better move it!"

Kicking up a cloud of dust, Naruto ducked into the classroom with the single occupant. Looking up, hoping the kid would help him he made a request.

"Don't tell them where I went!"

The boy looked at Naruto, then deliberately shut his eyes. "You'd better hurry."

Naruto dove out the window on the side. Sitting under the sill, trying not to chuckle too loudly, he heard the teachers ask Ryouko where Naruto was. For a minute, Naruto really thought Ryouko would tell. He looked like one of those rule-happy types. But then he heard Ryouko's voice say in a tired drawl: "I can honestly say I didn't see where he went."

=End Flashback=

The memory always made Naruto smile a little forlornly.

Ryouko's a rock. He's not the same skill-wise as Kakashi-sensei, but at least to me, and I know Sakura feels it too; it's like we just know we'll be okay when he's on our side. Like nothing will happen to us. Maybe it's because he makes sure it all happens to him.

...

I hope he can bounce back from this.

--

Azami stood on at the end of the dock, drinking in the air thick with a salty moisture. When she was a little girl, her father had brought her out on the water to teach her how to fish. She wasn't squeamish in the least, even then. She felt sorry for the fish, but it was the natural order of things. And char tasted really good, too.

With a practiced ease, Azami stepped into the small boat that was going to be her way to the Land of Waves. She cast off with no difficulty, and began to guide herself toward an easy current that would carry her to her destination at a reasonable speed.

This would be nice if Ryouko was here. In our swimsuits. Fishing, swimming...just being together. This magnificent view, and I've got no one to share it with.

Before self pity could take over, her mind added the annotations to her thought:

Of course, it's not any lack of effort on Ryouko's part. I keep pushing him away, then thinking about him privately. And I'm not on a relaxing cruise. In fact, I need to speed this up.

Using the pole that was serving as an oar, Azami dug it in and pushed hard, using all of her sinewy female muscle to propel the small craft at a good speed.

--

End of Arc Vlii: Deep Inside

Coming next: Arc VII: Still Human

46 - ArcVII: Still Human- Chapter 1

The Land of Waves had clearly prospered since the 'Great Naruto Bridge' had been completed. They still resisted having a shinobi force, no doubt thanks to images of Zabuza and Haku still in their heads. Instead, they settled for a civilian force toting makeshift weapons and a few swords that had been bought from mainland visitors.

Azami stopped for just a moment to look at the bridge. Her father had been an archeologist of sorts, and as a result she'd seen tombs and other ancient structures that had been built to last. Looking at the details, she decided that this bridge would remain standing for quite a while, barring any freak accidents or battles.

"Hey, little lady! How 'bout keeping us company, eh?"

Azami rolled her eyes. The men calling her were over thirty and grubby looking. Stubble due to not shaving, an offensive odor due to not showering, and breath that could stun the nine-tailed fox from drinking were the first attributes that Azami picked up on.

Great. The town drunks. Stupid perverts.

"Hey, don't ignore us, baby! We're lonely!"

A hand grabbed Azami's bottom. She flushed a little bit, but that didn't last long as she punted the drunken loser across town. She could vaguely hear the man scream:

"Ahhh! Not again! It's just like that pink-haired girl!"
(Somewhere, Sakura sneezed)

Doing her best to turn off her intimidating look, Azami went into 'innocent traveler' mode. She spent a little time just wandering, looking at the various culinary delicacies and trinkets that were for sale. The food interested her a little bit- something else her father had taught her; she had never known something from another land could taste so good until he'd made her eat spicy gyoza from the Land of Eddies.

"Excuse me!"

Another pervert? Damn it. This place is infested!

But it wasn't. It was a boy of about 14. He had a wooden crossbow slung across his back, and thick brown hair that seemed to fall all over the place.

"You must be a traveler, right? My name is Inari; I can guide you if you want."

Azami debated for a moment, and decided 'nothing ventured, nothing gained'. If things went south, she was pretty sure she could mop up this entire village's civilian army.

"Do you know a lot about the history of this place, Inari? My name is Azami, by the way."

Inari grinned. "I sure do! My Grandpa is the man who built the 'Great Naruto Bridge'! He's told me all about the history of this place. What are you looking for, exactly?"

Now, Azami was forcing herself to hold back here. Her old self would have gone into 'sexy' mode, and wrapped this kid around her finger. But she wasn't that person anymore. Well, except with Ryouko, maybe, because he was so fun to tease. She decided to give him a straight answer. But before she could, she saw someone run up in a flash and reach for the boy's pocket. Extracting his hand, the robber found a wallet.

"Hey!" Inari shouted. The crossbow was off his back in a second. He shot an arrow off, managing to shoot the arrow in between the robber's legs, tripping him but not hurting him beyond that. As the robber tried to recover from the faceplant, Inari snatched his wallet back. He looked at it for a moment, shaking his head sadly.

"The bridge is both a blessing and a curse. Just look at this place."

Thought Inari was talking to himself, Azami did look around. And what she saw made her cringe. While she never pretended she wasn't a murderer, no matter if it was the scum of the earth she was killing, she could see certain people making a living by that thinking. As a criminal of sorts herself, she found it intolerable.

"Inari," she said quietly. Black-clad, shifty-eyed people everywhere, making no mistakes about broadcasting their identity. "Do you think anyone will object if I remove some of the human waste around here? I'm on a mission to save someone's life...but I know this person well enough to know that she and her people would ask me to clean up the cesspool that's coagulated here, first."

--

"So it's decided, then. Congratulations to all of you."

Shinmaru looked to each of the temporary guardians. A Jinchuuriki, a medical shinobi, a retired Guardian, a lazy shadow-user, and a melancholy boy with a tattoo on his face.

"They'll need some training, Shinmaru. How about Naruto, Sakura, and Shikamaru go up against you? I know you've already fought Ryouko, and you and I don't need to go another round..."

Shinmaru and Asuma exchanged a quiet grin. Shinmaru's ability was surprising your first time going against it. Naruto would have a hard time of it, no doubt. His impulsiveness would work against him heftily if he didn't figure out how to counter this ability.

In the back corner, Ryouko lay quietly, watching silently. His hair was matted down in the front thanks to the water he had splashed on his face in an attempt to wake up, causing his bangs to be mostly covered. He was peering through them as a result, apparently not going to bother pushing the bangs out of the way. He hadn't said anything since his reassurance to Naruto. He didn't seem to be 'here', per say. He was out of it, for some reason. The others knew better than to ask. They had gotten together and agreed to support Ryouko quietly. Approaching him only caused him to push himself farther away.

To Shinmaru's trained eye, however, there was more to Ryouko's apparent 'trance', if you will. He could see right through that, no matter how strong of a defense the boy put up around himself.

He's much too young for that discipline. But perhaps he IS world-weary and jaded enough to handle it. Which will it be, Ryouko? Will you quit? Will you go mad? Or will you succeed? Interesting.

--

Ryouko saw nothing but the flame in front of him. Concentrating on it, he reached his hand out to touch it. Flames licked his fingertips, but he felt nothing. It spread to his palm, but still not a sound of pain passed his lips. Even as he started to put his face in the flame, nothing.

Then, slowly, the pain began. It started as a tingle in his hand, but quickly spread to the rest of his body. He continued to stare at the flame, growing more and more antsy, however. Finally, a moan escaped his lips. Though it was quickly silenced, his chief objective had been destroyed. His secondary objective, however, could still be obtained.

The flame molded to his body first. Then it began to sink in. This was painful, but not nearly as excruciating as it could have and should have been.

Uzume and Azami's instructions had been separate, but they could produce desired results. Ultimately, it was a matter of disciplines. Uzume's was a mental discipline- one she had resisted bestowing upon Ryouko. It was only out of pity for him that she finally consented to allow him to learn her most difficult discipline:

The removal of the 'world' from the 'self'.

Azami's 'discipline' had begun in Ryouko long ago. Since she had first started training him...no, since his own chakra had first singed his skin. THAT was when it began. The physical discipline: The addition of the 'element' to the 'self'.

Yin and Yang. Light and Dark. Female and Male. Opposites that would not exist without the other. Together, they gave power and understanding. If he was to fulfill his mission, and to make his life validated, Ryouko would need both.

BAM!

That was felt in Ryouko's reality and the real reality. Tempted to ignore it, Ryouko knew otherwise. He forced himself from his trance and away from the tantalizing notion of finally realizing what it was Azami and Lady Uzume had told him about.

47 - ArcVII: Still Human- Chapter 2

Everyone ran outside, finding a rainstorm hitting them. For a moment, they all believed that it was just the thunder that had made the enormous bang they had heard. That is, they believed it until Asuma herded them all inside the Fire Daimyo's chamber. All except Ryouko. They could see him, outside, standing peacefully in the rain. It beat down hard on him, plastering his hair to his head. But he stood, staring straight ahead, no real urgency in his body language.

"What the hell?"

Sakura voiced what the other were thinking. They looked to Asuma, who just shook his head and lit up a smoke.

"He's an oddball sometimes, but he's got the right idea. I was never great at barrier ninjutsu myself. Shikamaru, get the priestesses and Shoki in here. It'll be easier to protect everyone if they're all in one place. Shinmaru, I've got the front. Just like old times."

Shinmaru grinned, standing at the rear door of the Daimyo's receiving chamber. Beyond that door lay the single most influential person of the Land of Fire.

"Just like old times!"

--

Ryouko knew full well it must look insane to the others. That didn't concern him at the moment. Even the water evaporation when it hit his still-warm burns barely distracted him, disconcerting as it was. Still, he had promised himself he would do as much as he can, despite the pain.

You never really got used to someone tying a square knot inside your body. It felt unnatural, and you definitely felt the strain. It wasn't so much an awful pain as it was a bothersome, disturbing pain. Even if Ryouko WANTED to, right now, he couldn't save the day.

If I'm going to be separated from Naruto and Ojousama, then I have to let them learn. Kakashi-sensei is right. They are not ducklings. I am not a mother duck. I am a friend who will not let them die. But they have to fight their own battles. My barrier won't detain anyone of Akatsuki level for much longer. And with Azami away...

Trying to shrug it off, Ryouko nodded his head, almost imperceptibly. Four clones landed, kneeling around him, facing inward. Ryouko systematically raised his arm up and sliced himself open on the back of the wrist with a kunai. The blood dropped onto the ground. The four clones took the drops, made a mark with it on their palms, and clasped their hands together in half-tiger hand signs, as though activating a hidden paper bomb. As they did, a thin fire barrier sprang up. Ryouko stepped out of the center of the circle. The four clones didn't acknowledge him at all.

Once he re-joined the others, Ryouko let himself wobble a bit.

"Sorry. I'm still weak from the procedure. I can maintain this barrier for a while, and then use a blanket genjutsu. But that's about it..."

Pleased, Ryouko noted the looks of alarm on Sakura and Naruto's faces. It worried him a little when they both seemed to be less than ready to fight. As if they had given up.

I knew it. I've coddled them by mistake. They're not willing to-

Rising to the occasion, as he always did, Naruto declared loudly:

"Guess it's up to us then, Sakura. We've gotta show Grandpa Ryouko here that we're in top condition!"

Sakura tugged her gloves tight, raising one in a fist in front of her. "You got it! Don't worry, Ryouko-ojichan. We've got this!"

Ryouko couldn't help but be amused. Not that he enjoyed being called 'Grandpa', no matter what honor was attached to the title. He'd have to dissuade that behavior in short order.

--

It had taken her less than an hour. All Azami had to do was declare a million-dollar ryo on her head. Inari ran around to warn the innocents not to get greedy. But no one told the villains. Eventually, one after another, they all wound up in a heap at Azami's feet, bound with chakra-reinforced ropes.

The entire Land of Waves applauded. Azami allowed herself an outward smile, but inside she was wondering how many good deeds like this she would have to do before she could forgive herself for her crimes in the past. Surely this one was a big plus for her?

Finding what she came for would be a bigger one.

Inari marveled at the pile of villains, wondering (not for the first time) if he should go to the Leaf village to learn ninjutsu. But he couldn't just up and leave this place. Not since he was the head of the civilian defense force.

He remembered what he was doing here, and shook himself away from his dream-like state. He knew three things that were relevant:

- 1- he was in LOVE with the girl before him
- 2- he had found what she was after
- 3- the girl was a complete knockout!

"I've found what you're looking for," he finally managed to spit out. "But it might be difficult to get, short of stealing it..."

Azami cocked an eyebrow, very close to saying 'no problem'. But she had to force that away. She wasn't that person anymore. Instead, she answered more correctly:

"Where is it, and is there anything I can do to get it? I'd like to do it legally, but a very good friend of mine's life hangs in the balance. If I have to break some rules to save her, I will. Even if I have to come back here to face the music."

Inari gulped, suddenly more scared than in love. But he stood fast, as he had against all the threats that had plagued this land.

"If that's the case, then I think we can get it. My Grandpa is the one who built the bridge that made our thriving lives possible. He holds some sway with just about everyone. Even the head of the museum

where the spear is.”

Azami ran a hand through her hair, smiling into a nice, oncoming breeze. She was relaxing for the first time in what seemed like years. The waves crashing against the bridge made a pleasant sound, coupled with the tone of passerby’s going about their business. Not for the first time, Azami thought about rooting here. Setting up a home. But she was never able to act on that notion anywhere else. But maybe this time...

“Inari...what if I stayed here for a while, and protected the Land of Waves? If I did that, would you do me a favor?”

--

It was settled. Azami would stay here, in the Land of Waves. Inari would bring the Spear of Izanagi to Asuna. It would take him a month to return. The journey to the Fire Daimyo’s temple would be short, as Azami could send him there with her unique shadow jutsu. But he would have to make his way back on his own.

The spear, underneath it’s carrying cloth, was magnificent. It had a long, golden handle, encrusted with jewels, and had cloth inlaid with silver at the end for a grip. The metal was polished to a mirror’s brilliance, and was sharp to the slightest touch. Inari was overwhelmed by the weapon, but agreed to Azami’s proposition. He owed Naruto a lot. If helping a friend of his would help him, too, then it was worth while.

“One last thing...” Azami told Inari. “There’s one boy there called ‘Ryouko’. Would you please tell him what I’ve decided to do? And that I wish he was here?”

Inari’s face dropped. “Is he your...boyfriend? Husband?”

Azami had to swallow the huge laugh that almost caught in her throat. “Oh, no! Nothing like that! He wishes! But...he and I are close in another way. I know it would mean a lot to him to know I’m safe here.”

“I understand. Please take care of my home for me!”

--

The strain on Ryouko’s body was becoming unbearable. But he had to hold on a little longer. At least until they identified their enemy. If it was Pain...

Then the barrier would only fall when Ryouko was dead. One clash with that monster had told Ryouko that he could not win. Not ever. Not alone. But he could buy the others time to get away. For now, the barrier stayed.

Naruto and Sakura were ready to go on near the edge of it, staring intently ahead. Sakura looked out across the grounds, a look of determination on her face. She didn’t realize she was giving Naruto strength by being strong herself.

“Hey. You ready?”

Sakura gave a firm nod at Naruto's question. Not good enough. He frowned, then made his move. In a world and time when a display of affection was rare, Naruto kissed Sakura. She was completely surprised, but returned the affection quickly enough, despite blushing because so many people were right there. Naruto was holding her tight, and she returning it despite her surprise.

The barrier flickered for a split second.

Ryouko was sweating with the effort. But those who knew him also knew that the emotional strain was becoming worse.

A hand was on Ryouko's shoulder. Asuma knelt down next to him.

"Let it go. The barrier. And your emotions. She's beyond you now. You know that. You made it that way. So stop torturing yourself."

The barrier dissolved, and Ryouko's head fell to his chest. Then he jerked away from Asuma's grip. He stood up, his head still down. But small burns began to rise on his skin again. He had flashed back to his defeat at the hands of Jiraiya. Then at Naruto's hands. If Naruto was allowed an emotional release...why not he, too?

Ignoring his clones, Ryouko ran forward. The barrier sprung up behind him. Through the fire, everyone could see him. Naruto and Sakura stopped their moment of passion. Asuma ran to the barrier.

"Shikamaru, get him back!"

Shikamaru shook his head, indicating that it was impossible. "His barrier..."

"Destroy those clones!"

The four clones stood up, kunai in their hands, opposing the shinobi. Though clones, they still held some of Ryouko's power. The one clone touched his hand to his head, nodding.

"My original...he says stay out of it. You all have people to take care of now."

48 - Arc VII: Still Human- Chapter 2

“To hell with that!” was Naruto’s immediate response. “Why is he doing this?!”

The clone shook his head. “He won’t share that with anyone. Only two people besides the original know. And they won’t tell. I’m sorry. These are the wishes of the original.”

“I’ve never heard a clone talk that way...”

The newly-arrived Jiraiya was escorting Uzume and Shoki. He looked at the clone, scrutinizing it. “Don’t tell me...He’s managed it...”

“Not completely,” the clone informed Jiraiya. “He’s going to fight with his attempts at separation and joining incomplete.”

That was cryptic to everyone but Jiraiya and Uzume. By way of explanation, he told them: “Call it an advanced form of meditation. It involves removing worldly desires from one’s life entirely. You replace it with additional strength, or another mental state. Ryouko had only partially managed it.”

Uzume knelt down, touching one of Ryouko’s clones. It didn’t reject her touch, though it seemed to know something.

“I see...he’s managed to parcel out his emotions. Each one of these clones holds an emotion. It’s a half-way measure of the ‘separation’ Jiraiya mentioned. A meditation exercise I developed for him. I had no idea he would go this far...”

The clones all seemed to be showing one emotion or another. The ‘lead’ clone was showing sorrow. Another ‘happiness’. The other two clones were harder to discern.

“Is this...dangerous?” Sakura chanced, breaking the ice. She was, first and foremost, concerned with his well-being.

“Yes. Tantamount to suicide,” Uzume told her, head bowed, voice serious. “Emotions are one of the body’s controlling mechanisms. It lets you know when you’ve come too close to the edge. When you’ve reached your limit. For a while now, Ryouko has been painfully aware of his limit. It seems that this is his response.”

Uzume drew herself up, eyes half-closed, as though in a trance.

“He’s chosen to deny those limits exist. One’s limits are set by a variety of things. Individual strength of body; individual strength of mind; individual physical limitations; individual mental limitations. In short, everything contributes to you reaching your limit. It takes enormous discipline and suffering to surpass them on the scale Ryouko means to.”

Her hand at the barrier now, Uzume withdrew it, sparing Ryouko a little bit by not telling them what triggered this display.

“He’s denying the emotions now. The real concern will come when he’s injured. But the positive is that, once injured, this barrier will fall. And then I can help him.”

--

Ryouko had run for about ten seconds before he stopped himself. Leaning against a tree, he steadied himself. It took only a moment to gather his thoughts. And he realized something:

I'm making it harder on them. I'm their friend; their burden is my burden. I promised to let Sakura go. And I promised to protect their relationship, whatever it may be. I'm only an observer now. The time to pass the torch to them has come. I have to restrain myself!

...

But it's hard. I want them to grow, but I don't want to be left behind! Not again!

Ryouko had realized it before, but it was his fear of being left behind that was REALLY the roadblock. His friends, like it or not, were going to surpass him. It was destined. It was fore-ordained. It was hitsuzen. Whatever term you used, Ryouko wasn't going to be the strongest ever. He had to let that dream, too, die. It needed to die here and now. And so it would.

But it meant opening a void in his heart so big it may not ever close.

Duty or not, that was a hard thing to think about. Destiny or not, it was hard to accept. Difficult or not, it was fact.

Ryouko looked around; he had felt the chakra around here. It wasn't Pain's chakra. But it was incredibly malicious. And there were three others. It seemed that Ryouko would be involved now, some way.

It was time to let them shine. Sakura and Naruto's time to shine was now.

With quivering hands, Ryouko released his barrier. The coward in him considered plunging a kunai into a non-vital area of his leg to make it look as if he had been injured and been forced to drop the barrier, but he was determined to handle this with the utmost dignity. At least while other's watched. Ryouko suspected he would crumble later. And that would be okay.

It would have to be.

The others ran by. Ryouko kept his head down and went the opposite way. His place now was beside the Fire Daimyo, Uzume, and Shoki.

It was Naruto, Sakura, and Jiraiya that ran by Ryouko, giving him worried looks. Jiraiya even stopped, but what must have been the last of Ryouko's pride allowed him snarl:

"Don't pity me, you bastard. I don't need your mocking sympathy. I'll die before I'll accept it."

That was hard on Jiraiya. He had only been doing what needed to be done. Whether or not Ryouko would ever realize that, or could be allowed to realize that, wasn't something he knew right now. All the white-haired legend could do was keep moving, his eyes on the next generation.

--

"I was thinking too small. I'm going to target EVERYONE that was involved. ANYONE who benefited from Itachi's sacrifice. The entire Land of Fire is guilty. And I will be the executioner!"

Those words came from Sasuke Uchiha. His face was so calm that he almost seemed insane himself. His three companions knew that was not the case. Sasuke was as clear-headed as ever. His face was set in determination. And these three would support him. Not simply because it was safer than crossing him. No, they believed in Sasuke. Directly or indirectly, he had given them all a second chance at life. A life taken by Orochimaru. Through deception, kidnapping, experimentation, or even through work. They had all suffered, whether or not they had been aware of that suffering.

Strangely, as a whole, they lacked anger, or even the mocking sort of pity the Akatsuki displayed. Their feelings didn't gel, though their cohesion as a group was impeccable.

One wished to stop killing.

One wanted only to kill.

One wanted love.

One wanted vengeance.

Love is a dangerous enough emotion on its own. As is a desire to murder, and a thirst for vengeance. The most innocent emotion, the desire to *stop* killing, was partly marred by the other three.

An insane quest made possible by even more insane strength.

Now, standing at the edge of the temple's grounds, it was going to be a reality. The Fire Daimyo would perish. All his protectors would have to go as well. No one would be left alive. Not even the pure priestess. No one could be allowed to live and reap the benefits of one's heroic fall from grace.

Sasuke was at the lead, no trace of concern on his face. On his right was Suigetsu, Zabuzza's ponderous sword on his back. To Sasuke's left was the sensory type, Karin, in all her bespectacled fury. Bringing up the rear was Jugo, a neutral frown on his face.

"Well?" Sasuke demanded, glancing at Karin for the briefest of moments.

"Shut up! I'm trying to concentrate!" she snarled. Inwardly, she swooned at the authority in Sasuke's voice.

"Hurry the hell up, will ya? Personally, I think we should have left you outside, Karin. We don't need to know what we're up against."

Hefting his sword in one hand and stretching it out in front of him, Suigetsu grinned, his pointed teeth jutting out from his mouth.

"I think we just need to kill them. That's the plan no matter what you tell us is waiting. Right, Sasuke?"

Sasuke didn't even favor Suigetsu with a look. This bickering got old quickly. Instead, he said flatly:

"Enough, Suigetsu. Underestimating our enemy is a stupid mistake. Even though we have the means, working blind when you don't have to is idiocy. This calls for strategy."

Karin looked up, suddenly seeming panicked. "I've got them! But...this can't be right! There are two of them with odd chakra. One is a Jinchuuriki. The other...I can't describe it..."

Even Suigetsu didn't dare crack a joke.

"Naruto, then, and someone else? Fine. Let's move."

Sasuke led the way.

--

Naruto's face suddenly cracked with emotion. Seconds later, Sakura felt it, too. Sasuke. Their Sasuke. His chakra.

"Sa-su-ke?" Sakura choked out, tears filling her beautiful emerald eyes. She looked at Naruto, as if confirming it with him. When she saw he had tears in his eyes, too, she allowed a smile to cross her face. When she smiled, she glowed with a brilliant radiance. At least, that's what Naruto (and Ryouko) thought.

"Who's with him?"

Jiraiya brought the two back to reality with his question. That was what he intended. But all the while, he frowned.

They're all kids. But they're not average by any definition. That means I need to even the odds. Naruto will insist on facing Sasuke. I'll fight the one with the strongest intent to kill besides Sasuke. One of the chakras is female. I'll leave that one to Sakura. Their forth is more gentle, but very deadly. I'll need someone like that. And unfortunately, the leading candidate wouldn't give me the time of day right now. But I have to try to get him out here.

Jiraiya tossed a tracker toad out of his pack, sending it to find Ryouko.

--

When Ryouko shuffled back, the others breathed a collective sigh of relief. But at this point, it seems not even Uzume could reach him. Asuma and Shikamaru tried to talk to him, but Ryouko only gave them a slight look to acknowledge that he heard them. Puzzled, they looked to Uzume. But she wasn't going to tell them what was wrong with Ryouko. That was his private struggle.

He sat down near Uzume and Shoki, talking in a low mumble, pointing at different things on the ground. Apparently, it was strategizing of some sort. Asuma glanced at Shikamaru, wondering why his resident genius wasn't being included in what he did best. It made no sense.

Apparently, Ryouko picked up on that sentiment, because he looked over at Shikamaru, clearly considering asking him. Shoki tugged on Ryouko's sleeve, pointing back at the crudely drawn diagram on the ground. Asuma tilted his head, trying to make sense of it, but couldn't make heads or tails of it. He spied Shinmaru looked curiously, then nodding with understanding.

"What's going on?"

Shinmaru raised an eyebrow at the question.

"I'm not allowed to say. Lady Uzume's wishes, at least until all this is over. It'll be obvious by then. Our role, along with your student, will be strictly the last line of defense."

Asuma exhaled, trying to swallow his dissatisfaction at not being included. Shinmaru grinned, reading his old friend like a book.

“Don’t be that way. It’s not because you wouldn’t do well out there. It’s for the boy’s protection. Shoki’s got a secret, and we can’t let it get out. As it is, we’re not sure all this will work. Hence the reason we need to be the failsafe.”

49 - Arc VII: Still Human- Chapter 3

They were full engaged now. All it had taken was a little conversation between Sasuke and Naruto. Jiraiya had tried to keep it going long enough for Ryouko to return. Only two of Sasuke's group seemed ready to fight. That was to say, Sasuke and Suigetsu. The other two were quiet.

Yandere. Jiraiya's mind supplied him about the sweet and sour looks Karin was giving Sasuke. **She and Sakura will pair off. And there's no force on earth that could keep Naruto and Sasuke apart at this point. I'll focus on that one- he called himself Suigetsu. That leaves that innocuous one in the back for Ryouko. I can't even sense that one's intentions. They're all over the place.**

"I'm going to punish all who benefited from my brother's disgrace."

Naruto twitched. "Who do you mean? Who could have possibly benefited from your brother's insane rampage?!"

Sasuke closed his dark eyes. "You wouldn't understand," he said simply. When he opened his eyes, the Mangekyo Sharingan was visible in both of them. "You could never understand, Naruto."

"We were friends-" Naruto began, but Sasuke cut him off by leaping closer. He put his arm on Naruto's shoulder.

"Yes...we were that, weren't we? But I've told you before-" Sasuke's sword was out of its sheath alarmingly fast, and at Naruto's neck. "-I will sever that tie between us."

Naruto showed incredibly reflexes by being gone before Sasuke's sword hit him. He was shaking, but managed to steel his voice long enough for one, sharp retort:

"I made a promise, Sasuke. If I have to sever our friendship first to honor that promise, I will! Because...I made that promise to the most important person in the world to me!"

Sakura's mouth dropped- she couldn't believe she had just heard such a blatant love confession from Naruto. She smiled slightly, suddenly feeling like she could tackle the world.

-

"...I made that promise to the most important person in the world to me!"

Ryouko had returned just in time to hear that. Shoki would be coming later on, escorted by Asuma and Shikamaru. But he was numb to that right now. Instead, his stomach churned with emotion as his last chance with Sakura fizzled out.

This will be easier in the long run. God, I hope it gets easier. Right now, I need to take my place in this battle.

The last time I will involve myself in their lives like this. After this, I am nothing to them. I will become invisible. The most pure essence of a shinobi life. No more foolish pursuits toward love. No more friendships. No more alliances.

Leaping high, Ryouko landed behind the enemy.

-

“That’s the one with the weird chakra!” Karin exclaimed, pointing at Ryouko.

Ouch. Weird? How so? Never mind, she’s ugly! Yeah, THAT’S telling her. Idiot.

“...”

Jugo’s body- no other way to explain it- morphed quickly. His deformed arm, large and brown, big as Ryouko’s body shot towards Ryouko. There was no way to react in time.

It took three trees to finally halt Ryouko’s progress. When Jugo withdrew his arm, his killing impulse quenched and his face marked with a horrified expression, they all saw the damage.

Ryouko’s body had been smashed. It seemed odd that such a devastating injury could yield so little blood.

After a split second, Ryouko fell forward, his hands clenched over his stomach.

Jugo held out his now-normal hand. At least a dozen kunai fell off it.

“He fought really hard in those few seconds,” he intoned quietly.

The others stared for a moment. Then, Ryouko’s limp form stirred. Then he sat up. He stood all the way up and cracked his neck to the side.

“There wasn’t any killing intent in your strike, Mr...”

“Jugo...” came the reply in a bewildered voice. “But...that’s never happened before. I always kill people!”

“Maybe you’re learning to control yourself, Jugo. Or maybe Ryouko isn’t as weak as he looks.”

As soon as Jiraiya said that, he realized he’d worded it wrong. But Ryouko didn’t even look mildly offended (though Jiraiya could FEEL his chakra pulsing angrily). Instead, he reached toward his stomach.

“I dislike relying on this technique. It hurts like hell, and it feels like I’m cheating. But there’s too much at stake here to let you do whatever you want...!”

Ryouko frowned, poking at his stomach. “Don’t tell me...of all the times! Not now! Damn! Never mind, never mind! Let’s just get this over with.”

His voice was a mix of flatness and emotion. Call it ‘intense annoyance’. Sakura could tell Ryouko was bothered by something big right now. But she couldn’t believe that his trump card would fail! Not when it was so important!

“Don’t worry,” came the comforting tone of Ryouko’s voice. He didn’t smile or look at her, but Sakura could tell his words were for her. “I was the ‘Heaven’s Temper’ before I gained that ability. I’ll be fine. I always am.”

If he was unsure privately, he didn’t show it. Sakura had come to expect that of Ryouko. He was a very

private person, even to his closest friends. All the same, she couldn't believe that Ryouko's ability would simply stop working. It was too much of a coincidence.

Ryouko doesn't come to combat unprepared. If something really happened just now, he knew about it in advance. Or it's a strategic move. One's as likely as the other. But it seems his opponent is subdued, so maybe it doesn't matter.

"You don't seem interested in hurting anyone," Ryouko commented, looking toward Jugo. "How about we talk, as your name suggests?" (Note: Part of the kanji for Jugo's name can be read as 'language', hence Ryouko's choice of words)

Before Jugo could reply, Ryouko used a genjutsu and clamped it on tight. Both he and Jugo both seemed to be dazed. Their eyes were glazed over.

Sasuke frowned, not liking what Ryouko could be doing to Jugo. Sasuke's key to using Jugo was that only he could control him. He didn't need Ryouko messing that up. If Jugo were to be cured of his mental illness, who knew how he would act? He might not have any need for Sasuke anymore. Deciding to take care of it, Sasuke threw a lightning-laced kunai at Ryouko.

K-ting!

Ryouko's arm slashed up, knocking the kunai away. A faint blue glow resonated from his arm. A chakra scalpel.

"'Heaven's Temper' is not a name awarded lightly," Ryouko said mildly. He hadn't broken the genjutsu. Instead, he had split his concentration. He could hold Jugo in a genjutsu while keeping enough chakra circulating to defend himself. It just reinforced Sakura's belief that Ryouko didn't come to the battlefield unprepared.

Sasuke closed his eyes, making him seem even more relaxed, despite what his agitated chakra would lead you to believe. He raised one hand.

"Team Taka, we're withdrawing."

"How come?! It was just getting fun!"

"Shut up, Suigetsu! Sasuke's in charge! If he says we're leaving, then we're leaving!"

"Both of you, shut up."

Both sides stopped dead as Sasuke's tone was acidic.

"We need all of us functioning at full-strength to beat them. Jiraiya is a legend. Naruto and Sakura are no pushovers. And Ryouko...he's a wildcard. If one of us is captured, the others have to waste time rescuing them."

--

In the bushes, Shoki slipped quietly away. While he was relieved that he didn't have to fight this time, he now had the prospect of a huge battle hanging over his head. It was unsettling to him, but it had an interesting effect. For the first time, he wanted to train because he wanted to get stronger. Not because someone told him to; not because he thought Ryouko was cool, or Lady Uzume incredible. Instead, his own strength was largely unexplored at this point. He wanted to learn more about himself.

--

The fight broke up, with no one giving chase. Ryouko gave a nod to Jugo, who actually returned it. In his mind, they had just had a good conversation, even though they had never actually spoken. For his part, Ryouko learned that Jugo wasn't a dangerous nutcase. He was actually a good person who was dependent on Sasuke. For a moment, Ryouko thought about taking advantage of that and removing his need for dependence. He could do that, to some degree, through genjutsu. But, for all the trouble it would have saved him, Ryouko chose not to.

Jugo is developing as an individual thanks to Sasuke. There's nothing to suggest that at least Jugo and Sasuke are evil. They're misguided. Killing them would be ideal, but it's not my place to decide that. We know their targets. We can put people on notice. That might drive Sasuke to make bad alliances, but by the time that happens, we'll be ready.

Turning on his heel, Ryouko walked away, leaving the other three behind. He moved at a brisk pace, needing to find Lady Uzume. He had important questions.

Meanwhile, Naruto and Sakura balked. The fight they had been waiting for, and it was over just like that? There was no winner or loser. Just a single genjutsu.

"Hey, guys, why the long faces?! Didn't you hear what Sasuke said?" Jiraiya announced, his arm around both of them, a jolly grin on his face. "He said he'd have to rescue them!"

"So what?!" Naruto snarled, jerking away from Jiraiya. "I didn't even get the chance to fight him! So what the hell is good about him being willing to rescue those idiots?!"

Sakura got it. She smiled around teary eyes, just a little. Not so long ago, she couldn't have smiled. But after Naruto saying that she was the most important person in the world to him, she couldn't help but feel happier than usual.

"It means he's still human, Naruto. If he's going to rescue his teammates, the old Sasuke is still in there!"

Jiraiya gave a big grin, his arm around his protégé and his protégé's pretty girlfriend. But in his mind, something niggled at him.

Sasuke wouldn't withdraw like that. He's too headstrong. He came for another reason, then. But what? With that group of his, it'll be impossible to tell. That sensory-type is going to be dangerous.

50 - Arc VII: Still Human- Chapter 4

Inari fell upward (an interesting sensation that really had no description) out of the shadow. He was greeted by quite the vision. The second he materialized, he found a pair of trench knives at his neck, owned by a scary bearded individual. And the bearded person wasn't alone.

"Azami?...no, it's not her. Who are you?"

"Azami sent me!" Inari half-shouted. He saw one of them perk up. That one was a young man, a tattoo on his face, up over his right eye. His sudden interest made Inari wonder if this was the boy Azami had meant. The one called 'Ryouko'.

-

After Inari's story was explained, everyone went off in their own directions. Naruto and Sakura headed outside to have some time together. Shikamaru and Asuma sat down to play Shogi. Shinmaru took up his spot by the Fire Daimyo's side, unmoving. Ryouko stalked off silently to his lodgings, apparently in a daze.

That left Shoki, Jiraiya, Uzume, and Asuna with Inari. Uzume stared silently at it- the Spear of Izanagi.

"This isn't something I predicted," she said in a hushed tone. "This weapon is said to be holy when used by the correct person."

"The correct person is you, Lady Uzume," Asuna told her crisply, managing to keep the fear out of her voice. "None of us will allow you die this death you envision quietly, and certainly not alone. We'll avoid it, however possible."

Uzume put the spear on the table. She bowed to Inari. "Thank you for your trouble."

But she left the spear where it was. Asuna stood up to go after her, but Uzume stopped. Without turning around, she spoke as harshly as Asuna had ever heard her.

"You are not to interfere on my death. If it is hitsuzen; unavoidable, that is to say, then it will come to pass."

--

Inari was just wandering around, trying to figure out what to do now. He could head right home, but it seemed a waste. His job was being taken care of by a beautiful, deadly female. He wouldn't even be missed. And he'd never left the Land of Waves, so traveling was new to him. Maybe he should take the time to travel for a while; relax, learn about the world. He had spent years in the pseudo-military his home employed; could it hurt to take a break?

As he walked, Inari inadvertently stumbled into a surprising situation. Separated from him by a wall of thick wood were two voices talking in low tones. One voice was clearly angry; the other more sage-like. Finding a small crack, Inari put his eye to it, closing the other to get a better picture. To his surprise, he saw the big white-haired guy and Ryouko, whom he only knew by name, having not yet met him formally.

Apparently, Ryouko was the angry one in this case. He wondered if that was a constant thing...

--

"You've got a lot of nerve, wanting to talk to me like this, Master Jiraiya! It's taken a lot of effort to restrain myself from hitting you before. With the added stress now, be thankful I haven't attacked yet."

"I know you're mad..."

"Oh, do you?! Was your first clue the venom in my voice? Look, those two are your problem now. You said it yourself."

"What I meant was-"

"Your point was perfectly clear, regardless of whatever else you might think. You proved you were right. Now let the matter drop!"

"Dammit, will you listen to me?"

"Why should I? You might be a legend; you might be great; but you shattered my old life. Now that I see the girl I was in love with being with another man...I'm the odd man out. Just like I wanted to avoid."

Silence. Then:

"I'm leaving. Do NOT approach me again, Master Jiraiya."

"Kid..." the voice trailed off, sadness all over it.

"...You're forgiven. Just don't bother me anymore. Those kids are YOUR responsibility now. The Third's prophecy has been broken. I'm free of my duty to them. It's become too painful to bear. But I don't expect understanding or sympathy. Pity me for believing in that prophecy. As every fool learns eventually...Hardship is the truth of the real world. Suffering is given to us; it is our harshest mentor. Happiness is living through all that. And what doesn't kill you only makes you stronger."

-

The sound of footsteps caused Inari to jump involuntarily. He wasn't sure what it was he had just witnessed, but it didn't make him happy. He felt that there was a bad history here, and that Ryouko was on the losing end of it. Inari, most of all, knew when someone was putting on a brave face despite feeling beyond redemption.

Ryouko was almost the most clear example he had ever seen of that.

--

Naruto and Sakura actually steered clear of Ryouko as he walked around the hallways on the outside of the temple. They had never felt a fear of him; but now it was clear he was feeling something that they couldn't understand. Could all this have stemmed from him simply loving Sakura but never having a chance with her? They agreed- no. Ryouko wasn't that shallow. There was more to this. They needed to give him space.

He marched right past their room, his bare feet thudding past with unusually heavy footsteps. It was a small thing to most; but to someone who practiced his art constantly...a shinobi taking elephant-sounding steps was wrong. The two huddled in a doorway as Ryouko stomped past, his eyes fixated on some intangible point in the distance

“Hey...I meant it.”

There was no need for Naruto to elaborate. They both knew he was talking about his radical confession on the battle field. Sakura didn't say anything, but squeezed his hand in reply. A small content sigh in which a light breath caressed Naruto's neck gave him the answer he wanted.

“I feel the same. Naruto, I really...”

“So...”

“Not in a temple. And not yet. Perv. You're just like your master.”

--

For the first time since he had known her, Ryouko found Uzume looking angry. She was glaring at one of the most beautiful weapons he had ever seen. But he didn't know what it was. Apparently, Uzume knew that, so she said aloud:

“The Spear of Izanagi. Used by the right person, a holy weapon.”

Her desire to discontinue the obvious questions Ryouko had hit him, and he didn't press further. Instead, he asked her:

“Why didn't my special technique work?”

Uzume nearly spat the answer. “Because you didn't *want* it to work.”

She drew in a breath and inclined her head in apology.

“I'm sorry. I don't mean to be so...never mind. You know what I mean.”

“I do. At least for the apology. Which is unnecessary, by the way. But I didn't want it to work...I'm not sure I follow...”

“It's just as it sounds. You didn't wish to use that attack. You didn't want to fight. You're tired of it. Tired of your comrades. Tired of yourself. Tired of failures. And even tired of successes. And you're worried.”

“Worried about what?”

“Being alone your whole life. But even more, you're worried about your strength. Namely, that you've reached the pinnacle of your strength, and it's not enough.”

“Have I? Peaked, I mean.”

“No. There is no such thing. You can be the strongest, and still have something to learn.”

That made Ryouko feel better. Now it was his turn to be comforting. He knelt before Lady Uzume and took her hand. Blushing, he raised it to his lips. He spoke in his most formal voice.

"If I may, Lady Uzume, allow me to do something for you. Anything within my power. The prophecy has been destroyed as of now. Anything I do is of my own volition. Were I to give you my life, it wouldn't be enough to repay all you've done for me. But at least allow me to settle a portion of my insurmountable debt to you."

Even Uzume wasn't used to this. She sank down to her knees and embraced Ryouko. Whispering to him she said:

"Were you to find happiness, that would prove that those of us who bow to destiny *can* become something more. And that would please me more than anything. To know that destiny is not all powerful, but is as flawed as we humans."

After an awkward moment, Ryouko scooted backward on his knees, a half-grin on his face. He thought it was the fatigue that made him tired enough to smile.

"I was hoping something tangible would suffice, Lady Uzume. But..."

"You've got a request?" Uzume finished for him, smiling her knowing smile again.

"Yes. My name...from now on, would you call me 'Yuji' instead? 'Ryouko,'" his eyes dropped. "...He perished on the battlefield today."

"I can grant you that," Uzume replied. "What will you do now, Yuji?"

"I'll master myself," he answered instantly. "I haven't freed my inner-self yet."

"Strength comes from unity. Perhaps trying to 'free' your counterpart isn't the answer...It might be the very opposite. It might even mean your death."

Yuji had never heard her say that before. He shifted uncomfortably. Mortality was always in the back of his mind. Shinobi were born to die. But knowing about it in advance wasn't the greatest feeling in the world.

"Does that mean you've seen..." he asked, his voice trailing off.

"No," Uzume said firmly. "But, well, your health...Yuji, I don't want to say something like this, but if you don't get control again..."

--

Concealing his inner-turmoil, Yuji approached Sakura and Naruto. He didn't bother trying to put on a brave face for them. He didn't have the energy or even the desire. They could- and would- draw strength from each other. He owed them only one more thing, and that was the truth of the situation, straight from his mouth.

Sitting down without waiting for an invitation, Yuji stared into the small fire in the center of them for a moment. The other group was huddled around a larger fire outside.

"I owe you both an apology for my abhorrent behavior."

Without waiting for either of them to accept or reject the apology, Yuji drew in a breath and continued. "As of now, the prophecy has dissolved. My end has, at any rate. I'm no longer a servant. That was ended when Master Jiraiya became involved in my self-imposed exile."

"Hey, that's great! You can come home with us again, and things will be like they used to be!" Naruto was ready to party, and Sakura shed her doubt and looked hopeful. She had such a cute look to her when she was melancholy. But 'hopeful' was pretty darned attractive, too.

"Even if it were my wish, it's not possible," Yuji said bluntly, pulling no punches.

"Why not?!"

"I've spent a long time being a servant with no will of his own. And knowing what I do now...it's only fair I tell you..."

...

I'm dying."

51 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh- Chapter 1

Shocked silence reverberated in the high-ceiling room. Sakura and Naruto could do nothing but stare as Yuji as he explained.

“For some time now, I’ve been wrestling with...myself. In my subconscious. I can manifest this will in a special genjutsu, to allow myself to see and interact with my illness. This version of ‘myself’ is one I’ve been trying to defeat entirely. To push away; to free. I’ve learned now that I’m skipping a step. To defeat him, I have to let him merge with me first, THEN purge his existence, rather than keep denying his right to exist. However, due to all the time I’ve spent fighting him and going about this the wrong way, I’m afraid my time is short. I may not be able to win.”

Standing up, Yuji looked toward the doors. He felt like he had to say something...but what? It struck him- his own words!

“Sakura...you can tell, can’t you? Where my chakra has boiled my skin? It’s a sure way to tell that I don’t have long. The burns grow in intensity and frequency just about weekly now. Azami showed me how to make the scar tissue into a tattoo. That’s how I keep track of my lifespan. The right side of my body and my back are covered. If you can spare burn medication...that would make these last weeks easier.”

With that, Yuji scuttled outside. He had to hurry, before the idea left his head.

--

“You were special, old friend. A female’s name; a warrior’s heart; a strong soul; a weak body...so many things describe you, Ryouko. Maybe that’s why I need to make this grave. A grave with no one in it. Only memories and emotions that I cannot bring with me. And perhaps one more...”

It was a peaceful spot under a shady pine tree on the edge of the temple’s grounds. Nothing but rocks, birds, trees, and a small stream even within shouting distance. The tree was the tallest of it’s distinguished, aged group. At it’s base sat a single rock, upright in place. A grave marker. Written on it was ‘Ryouko’ and nothing else.

Yuji swallowed his emotion, struck by the thought that, as he (and therefore, ‘Ryouko’s’ remains) might cease to exist within weeks, it was stupid to be overcome with feelings for burying a name.

“Burns are one of the most painful injuries we can endure. I should have known that these burns were my body telling me that I’m messing up.”

It seemed so obvious now. No one died from burns like this. There was the remote chance of spontaneous combustion, too, but that was unlikely due to the fact that Yuji’s very chakra nature was fire. It should have been an easy thing to spot.

Now to correct my mistakes. Sakura and Naruto can fly on their own now. They are beyond anything I could teach them. More importantly, they have each other for protection now. Beyond

that, they have the support of people far more powerful than I.

I'm sorry to make you a liar, Third Hokage. I can't fulfill that prophecy you made. Unless I've already fulfilled it by doing what I've done so far?

Now I need to see another prophecy through. The one regarding 'Heaven's Temper'. The next stage of my development.

--

Sakura and the others held an emergency meeting regarding Yuji. Their opinion was split.

Sakura and Naruto agreed that Yuji needed medical care- possibly for mental illness- and should be confined to care by force.

Asuma thought that Yuji had earned the right to spend his time as he pleased now that their was no prophecy.

Shikamaru felt sure that no one should be bound by a stupid prophecy anyway, and that Yuji should be given free reign.

In the end, it was Uzume who gave the best explanation, belief, and idea.

"I think that Yuji is a lost soul now that the prophecy is dissolved. His complaints about it to me were always on a personal level, not a professional level. Based on what I know, he needs a purpose. Even if that purpose is rebellion."

Uzume looked at Naruto and Sakura.

"It's an undeniable fact: His presence in your lives would have to shrink as you grew closer to each other. And given his past feelings for Sakura..."

"It would be so painful..." Sakura said quietly, her hands folded on her chest. "I can't imagine..."

"And yet he's said nothing of it. He knows it on some level. It's an absolute truth to him when he says 'There is no room for me in my life'. But his needs have begun to assert themselves. And that's healthy. What is unhealthy is the developmental crossroads at which they chose to reveal themselves."

Everyone looked to Sakura when the medical jargon began to flow. But she was as clueless as the others at this point. Male development continued into the twenties, but puberty should have been in the ending stages...

"Yuji is a late bloomer. More importantly, his emotional maturity is too high for his age. His capacity for self-sacrifice is in place, and just like that of your average adult jonin. However, he does not have the adult presence of mind to cater to his own needs. It's backwards for most people. But Yuji is not average." Uzume folds her hands in front of her chest and looked up, stretching her neck back and extending her chin and upward. She was most likely saying a silent prayer for his sake. Someone in his situation needed all the prayers he could get. Yuji needed a miracle at this point. Given Uzume's calm demeanor she didn't seem to think that a miracle was outside the realm of possibility. If anything, she seemed to favor his chances of coming out of this alive.

There seem to be a great deal of people that cared for Yuji. It made it that much more of a mystery -why did he insist on tackling things alone? To someone like Naruto, who couldn't have made friends if he

tried when he was younger, pushing away any support seemed ludicrous. It didn't benefit anyone. Did Yuji think that he could push himself out of the minds of those would bonded with him? Did he think it didn't hurt them if he was out of sight? And what of Yuji? Wouldn't you want to be surrounded by loved ones at this juncture in your life? Or was there some primal instinct driving him to go it alone? Or was it a childish impulse? Since things didn't work out the way Yuji expected, was this his way sulking?

"So what's your plan?" Asuma asked plainly. "You've got something in mind. And as his family isn't here to help his decision, I'll be acting in that role."

Shikamaru noticed that Asuma hadn't made a move toward his cigarettes in quite a while. Did that have something to do with Yuji's predicament, too?

I didn't think Asuma was that close to Yuji. Is it because of Yuji's relationship with the Third Hokage or something?

Uzume smiled, happy to see that kind of compassion for her embattled friend.

If only you would accept this kindness, Yuji.

"I think that he should be tasked to be an attendant to myself and the next Uzume. More importantly...Shoki could use an 'older brother' in his life. I cannot play that role. Yuji, however, is in the perfect position to do so."

--

Yuji stared at nothing. Sitting there silently, his shinobi gear left aside, he wondered how to save himself. For all the times he had thought things were hopeless, he had never REALLY given up hope. Not until this time. For some reason, even though he stared death in the face on a daily basis, this time... This time it was different.

It was a slow, torturous death, rather than the swift death he always imagined. His talk of 'mastering himself' was bluster to keep everyone else calm. This was one fight that no amount of training would help him win. And it was killing him, literally and figuratively.

"Damn it..." he swore quietly, to no one but himself. It was so damned unfair. Being nearly twenty-two years old, he had spent almost none of that time really *alive*.

Someone else was coming. Out of habit, Yuji looked up. Dispassionately, he noticed it was a girl. He just kept staring ahead, bleary-eyes from holding back a rare wave of tears.

"Move it!"

Not an ounce of compassion in the voice. It was a female voice, sure, but it had no warmth to it. At least, not obviously. As the voice bounced around the trees and hit Yuji's ears, he thought he could hear the slightest bit of caring. Or maybe he was desperate for concern. Who knew? Moreover, who cared?

"Oh, bite me," Yuji shot back, unmoving. "You don't own this spot."

"Neither do you."

For whatever reason, the girl attacked. She dove at Yuji, aiming a fist at his face. He rolled backward instinctively and flipped her over him. He leapt to his feet, hands in a guard. The girl only smiled at him and disappeared.

Yuji fell back down, his hands still in a guard.

“A...hallucination...ha ha. HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA !”

He pounded on the ground until his fists hurt; then he clawed at the ground until his fingers bled. His face in his newly-dug hole, Yuji put his hands to his temples.

“Ha-ha! I’m so close to death I’m hallucinating! Man, what a beautiful hallucination! Pretty spry for a guy so close to death! HAHAHAAAA!”

His finger nails destroyed and his face dirty, Yuji stood up, no longer chuckling. He looked downright angry now, glaring at nothing. For no reason, he began to run. Faster. Faster. Impossibly fast. Trees sped by. The Fire Daimyo’s temple disappeared. Yuji ran and ran until he hit a mountain he couldn’t just leap over.

When he opened his eyes, he was back in the clearing.

“Another hallucination? Feels like genjutsu...haha. Couldn’t be! HAAAAHA!”

But even as he let insanity take over, Yuji dug inside himself. He could see his chained-up self reaching out to him. But the chained-up self looked healthy. Yuji’s hand was blackening with necrosis. His body really was dying.

My tattoo...I’ve only got my left hand still untouched. Why is *he* so healthy?

Haha! A slow, insane death...not the ‘blaze of glory’ I pictured for my death. Like, on the battlefield. Or killed by someone far more powerful than me. The battle where I have no chance at all, but I’ve got to fight because I’m so damn noble!

Uzume’s words ran through his mind. He stopped fighting himself and let himself fall in to himself. His outstretched left hand grabbed the right hand of his inner self.

It hurt. A lot. It was absolutely agonizing. Beyond words.

And yet, Yuji couldn’t let go. It felt like it was right. Before he passed out, he wondered briefly if this was the height of insanity, or if his intuition had managed to survive the minefield his body had become?

I need to stay calm. If I really don’t want to worry the others, who then I need to start by calming myself. Every instinct I have tells me to push through the pain. I’m damned if I do and damned if I don’t...

So I might as well do!

52 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh- Chapter 2

It was late now. The sun had long set. Most everyone had stayed out late tonight, though. Some with worry; some who had something to celebrate; some to solve problems.

Naruto and Sakura fell into the first two categories. While deeply concerned about Yuji, there was noting they could do. Except maybe celebrate their newfound relationship. It was something Yuji had sacrificed a lot- possibly even his life- for. The least they could do was celebrate a little. In all fairness, they were teenagers experiencing requited puppy love for the first time. No one would blame them for letting their natural instincts and hormones take over for a little while. Especially for shinobi, peace was in short supply. Love even more so. Both trained so incredibly hard most of the time that it was excusable to go ahead and act their true age for a little while.

“The moon...it’s so beautiful.”

Sakura broke the silence with a pretty standard observation. It was really a verbal volley that she hoped Naruto knew enough to return. Normally you couldn’t shut him up, but when it came to romantic moments he was as clueless as any 16 year old boy.

Smalltalk. Naruto knew enough to agree.

“Yeah...”

The moon was pretty amazing. Tonight, it was full, and extra high in the sky. That night was amazingly clear, giving a great view of the stars. It was the kind of night where you wondered how anything could possibly be wrong anywhere in the world. Couldn’t everyone see these stars and just be content? Then again, seeing this view with a special someone really did add something to the moment.

Naruto leaned in closer, his hand on her cheek. Sakura closed her eyes and met him halfway, an arm draped across his shoulder.

When did he get so tall? And his shoulders so broad? (sigh) It’s what I dreamed, but not WHO I dreamed. But maybe that’s...a good thing. It would be fun to have all the answers all of the time.

It was a special moment for the two young lovers. Even if only for short time, they could forget about all their other obligations and focus only on themselves. As shinobi, they were constantly focusing on their work and not nearly enough on each other. It was a rare sight to see any shin obi in a stable relationship. Some didn’t dare for fear that they would die and leave someone behind -a very understandable sentiment. Some were engrossed by their work; some had just been the shadows too long to remember what life is like outside of them. Some were surprisingly shy. Others simply had the worst luck when it came to finding love up.

For some reason, Naruto and Sakura had found each other. They both felt a little bit thankful toward Ryo- er, Yuji, for his help. But both stopped thinking that quickly- they couldn’t dwell on Yuji right now. It was obvious pity wasn’t what he wanted. It was solitude, and time to understand. And, quite possibly, to die a quiet death. It distressed them that there was nothing they could do for him. For some reason, being in love seemed to be the ideal solution. It was as if Yuji was the definition of how fleeting life was. Life was meant to be lived, not mourned.

Sakura pulled Naruto into a quick, passionate kiss. It surprised her nearly as much as it did him. He was more used to getting punched by her than being kissed. This was a welcome change.

As they embraced, a black-clad warrior snuck by, making not even the tiniest sound. His chakra was perfectly concealed as well. A professional assassin.

Around his neck was an odd symbol. A triangle enveloping a circle.

--

The black lines crisscrossing Yuji's body had begun to thicken. The spaces between the lines filled in until his body looked as though it was covered in the ink that one would write with. Yuji's breathing was getting labored. The only reasoning he could come up with was that the burns and subsequently the tattoo had preyed on some of his inner systems as well. The strange process that he had begun by reaching out to his "other" self had stopped and started at least four times by now. The pain didn't stop after the first time -it was as agonizing the fifth time as it was the first time. But still, Yuji felt certain that this was both necessary and correct.

Maybe I'm trying to forget everything. Sakura... Naruto... Azami... Shoki... Asuna-chan ... Lady Uzume. My enemies are too numerous to list. Maybe the only reason I'm tolerating this pain is because it's real to me. I'm dying, and that doesn't feel real. But pain is second nature. So maybe it's comforting? But that doesn't explain why it feels like it's necessary. What have I got to lose by seeing this through to the end? My life is forfeit if I don't. So I may as well...

Yuji could feel the power coursing through him again. He had learned by the third time through this that if he discharged chakra the pain was more manageable. So he activated a Chakra Scalpel in both hands and dug into the ground.

The holes around him were all at least 10 feet deep. As the pain increased, so did his digging speed.

I will at least try. That which does not kill you, only makes you stronger. So I'll have a hell of a lot of strength after this! His face was contorted into a mask of pain and concentration as he tore into the earth. It was such a pointless act, but it was the only bit of solace Yuji could allow himself. So he dealt with the pain, and kept working toward the most favorable conclusion he could figure out.

But the process stopped again, and the tattoos continued to snake around his body. Yuji could feel his throat tighten slightly. But he wasn't scared anymore. He was dying, one way or the other. All he could do was try. It was almost a release in and of itself.

--

After three more tries, only Yuji's pinky was left unblackened by the growing tattoo. Breathing hurt- a lot. So did moving. He had time for maybe one more try before his life would end.

Reaching inside his subconscious again, Yuji could see his bound self. This time, there was no barrier between them. He could reach out and grab his other self. When he did, he 'sunk in' to his other self, effectively finding himself in chains. Once there, he pulled at the chains. This time, they seemed much more loose. He managed to free one arm and leg. Now he could feel the pull of his real self, trying instinctively to get him away from the part of his subconscious that was never supposed to be touched.

This time, Yuji could ignore his instincts long enough to free himself.

He felt that freedom for a full four seconds before the pain set in. But it was different. The pain started sharp, but had begun to recede. He was in control of it, though he felt the pull that would force him to relinquish control.

But it didn't matter. This time, he had done it. He had freed himself, even if only for a few moments.

It's important to understand that Yuji never really 'freed' himself. To him, creating this setting was a focus drill that allowed him to see tangible results to a problem with no tangible solution. It made the victory feel more real. But the same rang true for defeat.

Now that he was free, he felt as though he had a good measure of control. It wouldn't last forever; he knew that from experience; but it was a good start. Now he had to combat the rest of the problem without being allowed to hide it behind a mental wall. Now the problem was 'real'. And just maybe it had a 'real' solution.

Is this whole "Heaven's Temper" thing part of all this?

--

Bidding the others goodnight, Uzume retired to her room. She found Shoki waiting for her. The boy looked undisturbed, but there was clearly something different about him.

"You wanted to know if anything in my development changed..."

It was plain to see. His hair, once black, was now turning a silver color. It had begun at his temples, and was now almost completely over his head. It wasn't so much an aging process as it was...well, mysterious. It seemed as if the change in his hair color was coming from his eyes, connected by two silver wisps that came from the sides of his eyes.

"When did this happen?" She asked, putting her fingers at his temples, then running a hand through the hair on the crown of his head. The roots of his hair were even more of a defined silver color.

"It began after I looked at that boy with the Sharingan. When our eyes met."

Did that awaken some of his ability? Or...

Uzume didn't have time to wonder about that very long. She sensed a presence. She didn't recognize the feel of the chakra. She didn't even have time to warn Shoki when the chakra stopped outside the door. Whoever it was, male or female, he or she was an expert at concealing their presence, as even Uzume had to strain to feel anything about the intruder.

The door across the room slid open. The shinobi who had snuck past Naruto and Sakura was now staring down Uzume and Shoki.

"Give me the boy!" he demanded through his mask. It distorted his voice, likely by design. He was covered from head to toe in a black jumpsuit which left him completely hidden by night's shroud.

"I will not," Uzume replied simply, her hand feeling under her table's black cloth. Her fingers brushed

up against a polished metal. "You will leave immediately."

"GIVE HIM TO ME NOW!"

All at once, Uzume's candle flickered. In that split second, several things happened. Shoki captured an image of the attacking shinobi in his eye. Uzume withdrew her weapon- the Spear of Izanagi- and slashed. Her face remained perfectly calm, even as blood splattered down the front of her. It hit her face and ran down her cheeks, looking as if she was crying blood. Coupled with her impassive face, it was incredibly disconcerting.

Lastly, the shinobi fell to the floor.
Dead.

Shoki looked to Uzume, wordless horror on his face. Fear was frozen on his features as the 'bloody tears' ran down Uzume's face. Her features did not change; did not waver. It took Shoki a little while to realize she was crying, and her tears were mixing with the blood, then rolling down her cheeks. Somehow, it made him a little sad to think that she wasn't allowing herself to really show her emotions. Was she unable to, or choosing not to?

"Shoki...please gather Asuna-chan, Shinmaru, and...yes, Yuji. Yuji should be here as well, no matter his condition. He was present for a good deal of the tale. He should be here to see it's end."

53 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh- Chapter 3

Yuji found himself lying on the forest floor, his body seized with agony.

“Ahh...” he exhaled as the pain hit, his entire body clenching reflexively. He felt his brow automatically, as something felt odd. Or, rather, missing.

His tattoos, save for the one on his forehead, was gone. So were all his burns.

My burns are gone...I can still feel my mental symptoms...but I'm not dying anymore. How long has it been? It feels like I've been suffering for days. But it can't have been more than a few hours...

Yuji was very confused as he stood in the clearing. The signs of his turmoil were all around him, but they seemed surreal. The holes in the ground and the destroyed trees were like a symphony of chaos that he had created, yet had no control over nor any real attachment to. Like he existed separately from what he had just experienced. His body no longer ached. He felt...cleansed. It was an unnatural feeling. Yuji felt free, but that in and of itself was disturbing to him. He was so used to feeling burdened that this freedom felt almost constricting.

“ Yuji -dono! Lady Uzume wishes to see you immediately! It is extremely urgent!” came the voice of a messenger from the temple. A young monk had been given the job and had unintentionally intruded on a private moment.

Yuji looked up with trepidation in his eyes. Had something happened to Uzume? Turning quickly, I followed the messenger back to the Fire Daimyo's temple at top speed. Or what used to be his top speed. Somehow, Yuji felt like he was holding back. Did his breath with death actually make him stronger?

I thought I was just making myself feel better, saying that...

- - -

Uzume was seated formally on her cushion, posture perfect, eyes clear and focused, and face devoid of emotion. She looked up briefly when I came in, her stoicism intact, save for a small glance that would have been innocuous to anyone with a lesser bond to her.

It was the silence that cued Yuji to look around. In a darkened corner of the room lay an unfamiliar body, sliced from shoulder to hip. From the red on the floor he could tell that the body in the corner had died a gruesome death. That cut looked like a sword wound, or at least a similar weapon.

Horrified, Yuji looked for a weapon that was capable of causing this destruction. Yuji was afraid of what he would see. But it wasn't his nature to ignore facts, no matter how unpleasant. This one time, Yuji hoped that he was so horribly mistaken that he could laugh with relief.

Even when a weapon is cleaned perfectly, there are always signs of use. In this case, the sign was the

otherwise on unmarred blade. While perfectly sharp, the spear was ceremonial and not prepped for battle. Where the blade had met bone, it had chipped and bent. The gold, jewel-encrusted handle was still tinted with a deep crimson hue.

This couldn't be Lady Uzume's doing...could it? No! I've let the most pure mortal I know soil her hands, while I'm off lamenting a death that never happened? It's all my fault! I've got to make amends!

Stay calm, Yuji. She might not have done it. And even if she did, you KNOW she had a good reason! So settle down and hear the story before you freak out.

--

Uzume felt a lot as she confessed to her crime, though it wasn't a crime by anyone else's standards. Uzume was supposed to be a religious figure; as close to pure as a mortal could come. Even in self defense, killing a man wasn't something even she had ever foreseen. But she calmly recited the details, making eye contact with every one, but especially Yuji and Shoki. They were the two who seems to need her the most. Shoki treated her like a sister without ever knowing their blood relationship. As for Yuji... He was still struggling with the failure of one prophecy while being in the middle of another. He might have become "Ten no Kishootsu", but that wasn't all that was left. There was yet one more state and an untold amounts of knowledge and power left for him to realize. But her duty as a priestess came first.

"...So even though my actions were in defense of myself and another, killing is not a holy action. So I have asked the Fire Daimyo to pick a suitable punishment. His choice was that I should be exiled for a year to the "Land of Trees", near Mount Tenchu. I've accepted."

Before anyone could raise a protest, Uzume held up a hand for silence.

"The more important issue: Why is their a sudden interest in Shoki? And why 'Heat Devil Village'? That is something I ask you..." Uzume's eyes slid to Yuji; a gesture which no one else seemed to notice; "To investigate."

Yuji was standing at the back of the room, his three-quarter length black jacket on. He wasn't sure what to make of this just yet, despite Uzume's apparent confidence that he could find out. What he DID figure out was that he owed his life to Uzume's advice.

"Then consider me exiled as well."

Every head turned to look at Yuji. He didn't talk to anyone in particular as he strode toward Uzume.

"I'm alive because of Uzume. Her advice and expertise has saved me on more than one occasion. The only reason she had to kill that assassin was because I wasn't around to handle it. I swore that I would repay my debt to her."

Yuji closed a fist, facing the crowd, daring anyone to say anything. When they didn't, he simply bowed next to Uzume.

"Until her exile is over, my life is hers to command."

"Is that right?"

Standing at the back of the room was Tsunade herself. Even Yuji's stoic mask shattered.

"My Lady? What are--"

"I'm here because the Fire Daimyo asked me to be. As for you Yuji...I'm surprised at you."

She walked closer, her shoes thudding heavily on the floor. She couldn't even be bothered to remove them in a temple?

"You know very well that you're involved in protecting those two. Whether they need it or not, you're there for them."

She was now right in front of Yuji. Everyone took a big step back. Yuji held his ground, looking her right in the eyes.

"I owe her a great deal. I won't leave until my debt to her is paid. Besides, as it was pointed out to me...what WERE your exact words, Master Jiraiya? Something to the effect of "they don't need someone running at their heels"? Something to that effect.

The prophecy is dissolved."

Tsunade ruffled Yuji's hair. "It's nice you think that. But no...it's not. It's not dissolved until / say it is. Remember your loyalty."

"I do," Yuji whispered. "I remember all the Leaf has done for me. And all I've sacrificed to see this prophecy through. Those two are together because they were meant to be, right? And it was my role to sacrifice everything to make sure that happened. They are family."

Yuji looked at Uzume.

"And the last thing I'll do is burden family. If Uzume would have me, I want to go with her. Call it selfish; call it a crime; call it whatever. But to let her take the blame for something that wasn't her fault...that I can't do."

Tsunade could only sigh as she looked at Yuji's unwavering eyes.

They've seen their share of pain, haven't they...he's grown up to be a good person. Trustworthy. Loyal. And willing to do anything for those he loves. And what has it gotten him? I've forced him to see his dreams lived out by another man in front of his eyes, day after day. I can't imagine how painful that must be...

"Three months only. That is how long both exiles are to last. As per my discussion with the Fire Daimyo. There will be no further discussion on the matter."

Pause. Collective sigh. But then:

"However, Yuji, you've broken too many rules. I don't want to punish you, but you leave me no choice. You will have an additional exile in Heat Devil Village, with a time to be determined."

No one believed for a second that that was a real punishment, except for Naruto and Sakura. Everyone else could tell it was just a formality to announce such a thing. In reality, Yuji had requested this as a means to really separate himself from his duties to Naruto and Sakura. Being away for that long might just help them to forget him. Or maybe he'd find something else. Or wind up in the Land of Waves with Azami. Either way, this was going to be three months of vacation for Yuji, with one month of under-cover work to find out more about Shoki. For once, all the cards were in Yuji's favor.

Except one- an important one. His health.

While his tattoo was under control, he was by no means completely in the clear. He had to restrain his chakra flow severely to keep from being burned. And now that his subconscious self could lend him

power, he had the mental strain of that as well.

Taking a last look at her home, Uzume made the preparations mentally to pass on the title. Asuna was well equipped for it, so that, at least, didn't concern Uzume. And she wouldn't be alone in her exile—that, too, was a relief. That her companion was someone she trusted so intimately was even more relaxing.

“Asuna, are you ready?” Uzume asked quietly, reaching for the last bit of that which tied her to her position. In her hair, a hairpin depicting the sun and moon held her long locks in check. She pulled it out slowly; reverently. Her jet-black hair fell to her waist, no longer bridled by the pin of her duties.

“With this artifact from the first Uzume, I pass on the name and all the responsibility with it to you, Asuna Hideyama. You now hold the title of ‘Uzume’.”

--

“It's not forever.”

“Right. It's not. We need to cheer up and support him.”

“Yeah, it's kinda nice he's doing that, you know?”

“That's Ryo...er, Yuji for you.”

“...Wonder if she's hot for him?”

“...Your perverted mind still astounds me.”

It was Naruto and Sakura discussing this in low, rapid tones. They had decided to say goodbye to Yuji in a dignified way. They wouldn't beg for him to come back. They would show him that his lessons weren't lost on them. He was bidding them goodbye as their caretaker. When he returned, he would be their friend once again. At least, they hoped.

Dressed in his long coat, Yuji made his way over to the meeting spot, stopping shy of Naruto and Sakura. He put down his rucksack and Uzume's case. Then he bowed; from the waist and low.

“My failure to adequately fulfill my duties has not tainted your training. Despite what M'lady says, there is no such prophecy. People CHOOSE what to make of their lives. We are not gods. We are bound by nothing which we do not choose to be bound by. Our actions are our own.”

Straightening up, a noticeable tremor in his left hand, Yuji looked at the two. Despite himself, he felt proud.

“To see how far you've come as an observer has truly been my honor. If I've played even the tiniest role in that development...then I'll consider myself lucky.”

To Naruto, Yuji offered a handshake. Naruto took a hug.

“You're so noble it's stupid...but I get it,” Naruto managed around a tearful smile.

“Naruto-dono, take good care of her, okay? I withdrew any possible attempts to gain her heart as a lover...but friends are different, eh? Just...make her...and yourself...happy. Remember that happiness—even before duty.”

Now THOSE were strange words to be spoken by a shinobi. Naruto's questioning glance. Yuji shook

his head, chuckling to himself.

“Your duty is to her now. It doesn’t mean forget your duty to the village...it just means don’t disregard her as an everyday thing. Don’t take her for granted.”

Naruto didn’t understand half of that, but nodded solemnly anyway. Yuji was apparently satisfied with that. He focused his attention to Sakura now, offering her a hand. She also took a hug.

“You’re glowing, you know? Since you and Naruto have been together. You compliment each other perfectly. Don’t take your bond for granted. You’re the level-headed one here.”

Sakura stepped back, and Yuji put his hands on her shoulder, a half-smirk on his face.

“Remember, he’s still Naruto. THAT won’t ever change.”

Looking at them both, Yuji gave one last sad smile.

“My last show of emotion is for the two of you. I...regret that I cannot be a simple ‘friend’ to you. For me, duty is what it is. I do not have anyone to disregard duty for. But I will cherish the bond the two of you have. That is the only part of my duty I have succeeded in. Suffice it to say, that makes me...happy.”

“And what of our bond, Yuji?”

“Yeah, between the three of us?”

Yuji’s face went blank.

“If you believe it exists, it probably does. However, you’ll be happier and more powerful once you’ve cut that bond with me. There’s a certain...romantic element, isn’t there? For a man and woman to take on the world, alone?”

Yuji looked out of the corner of his eye, seeing Uzume waiting, holding Shoki’s hand. So he forced himself to remain emotionless as he said:

“All the best, you two. I’ll miss you. See you when I get back.”

54 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh- Chapter 4

The Land of Trees was a lonely place, as it turned out. Very tall and very old trees of all shapes, sizes, and varieties stood proudly against the sea landscape that was beyond them. The place was overgrown, and largely deserted of all human life. Only a small outpost town about 5 miles from their place of exile was populated by humans. The place Yuji, Uzume, and Shoki were to live for the next three months was a cabin -really barely a shack -in the middle of a particularly deep forest. The rundown cabin was half hidden by trees, but even then you could see that the wood was rotted and the place was desperate for maintenance. But it was nice in a rustic sort of way. Certainly not the worst place in the world for an exile. Considering that no one believed in exile was necessary, the state of luxury was almost expected.

"Looks like we'll have to rebuild the place," Yuji said, not sounding disappointed by the prospect. "We should probably gather firewood, food, and water after we get settled."

Yuji raised an eyebrow at Shoki. "This is a good place to further your training. We've certainly got the time."

- - -

The inside of the cabin was in better shape than the outside. It had been abandoned for years, and had been left to rot. But the windows and doors kept out of the worst of the elements and insects, and the inside was actually laid out in a good way. There were two small rooms on the bottom floor, a large open sitting area\kitchen furnished with a big oak table, and a narrow staircase that led to a loft. A large stone hearth sat in one corner of the room, along with a great for cooking fish and meat. The rest of the furniture would need to be purchased or made. It was times like these that Yuji wished he had abilities like Yamato-senpai.

"Are you showing us emotion, Yuji?"

Uzume had caught him. So Yuji owned up to it.

"I'm trying not to. I'm just miserable, but I don't want anyone to worry about me. So...yeah. Stupid, I know, but..."

"Not wanting your friends to worry about you is admirable," Uzume told him. "But, let's just get back to our current situation. Since I'm not 'Uzume' anymore, please call me 'Miko'."

"Miko? As in, a priestess?" Yuji asked, confused. (a 'miko' is a Shinto priestess.)

"No. As in 'Crimson Truth'. Different kanji. It was my name before I inherited the Uzume title."

Somehow, it had never occurred to Yuji that Uzume had a name before inheriting her title. Her name seemed very fitting, different kanji aside. Yuji's had heard that the name given to a person held a lot of power. If someone with a goofy name like 'Naruto' could become so powerful, it made Yuji doubt that sentiment.

Shoki, meanwhile, had taken to exploring his new home. He was displaying the most excitement Yuji had ever seen from the boy. He darted from room to room, peered into corners, and gave a broad smile whenever he found something of interest.

It had already been decided that Uzume and Shoki would take the bedrooms downstairs, leaving Yuji the loft. Of the three he required the least amount of privacy. As Uzume was Shoki's prime caretaker, she needed to be close to him.

"Yuji, could you step outside for a bit? I need to tell Shoki something... About him and I."

"Of course," Yuji responded graciously. He had been planning to investigate the surrounding area as well as the town. It was always good to find hiding places and escape routes in your surroundings, not to mention see what kind of people were around. Were they nosy? Helpful? And the town- was it well stocked? What were the local authorities like? There were a great many questions to be answered before Yuji could settle down here even remotely.

Beyond that, there were things he needed to take care of in private himself.

--

Shoki sat down obediently at Miko's request. He was not immediately disturbed by the request, due to his lifestyle. He trusted Miko to the fullest extent. Whatever it was she had to say couldn't be all that bad.

Miko had been sitting still for a few minutes now, phrasing things. At the end of it, she gave herself a small self-deprecating smile. The obvious way to tell him was just that- to TELL him.

"Shoki, I'm going to say this, and I'm going to say it frankly because I don't know how else to do it."

Taking one more fortifying breath, Miko made her voice stay strong as she said:

"I am your half-sister. The second Uzume was our mother. My father died of a disease that spread through his here at one time. Our mother stopped the disease using some of the abilities of the Uzume line, but was unable to save her lover. He...forbade it, actually. As her power waned, he insisted that she focus on quelling the epidemic and healing the others. When she was done, she had power enough to only heal one person. And my father insisted that she heal herself.

For eight months after that, she was distraught. I'm told that she felt better upon my birth. Suitors were arranged once her good favor returned. The only one to make it past her judgement was your father- Ryunosuke Doumeki. As if the name wasn't ironic enough ('Domeki' meaning 'hundred eyes demon'), he was a member of Heat Devil village, and a follow of Jashin. But he renounced those beliefs to wed our mother.

But then he was murdered savagely by his former Jashin congregation, leaving our mother alone and pregnant yet again.

Then came the attack...

-Flashback

Crossbows launching fire arrows set many buildings on fire. The clang of weapons was heard non-stop. As the destruction reached the Daimyo's property, one woman set out, alone.

Clothed in the white top and red hakama of a shrine maiden, holding only a naginata for a weapon, she became incredibly fast using what we now understand to be chakra. It was unheard of- a priestess using ninja abilities. But she weaved her way in and out of the fray, forcing herself to dispassionately kill the

fifty leaders of the rebellion, knowing that the ensuing chaos would force the enemies to surrender with little further bloodshed.

However, she was wrong. The previous Fire Daimyo, angered at the affront to his power, ordered all of the prisoners executed.

The final death toll was never tabulated. The prisoners themselves were disregarded; even said to have never existed.

“...our mother gave up her title, shamed at what had happened. She had tried to end this with the only blood being shed on her conscience. But instead, her actions gave way to untold slaughter.

After that, she passed the Uzume title onto her sister- our aunt- Hitomi. Another ironic name (Hitomi means 'pupil of the eye'). Your father had the Issekigan. Despite the fact he never came into contact with our aunt, she had somehow begun to acquire the traits of Issekigan. They never had an affair, or anything of the sort. The only words they ever exchanged were at the first o-miai (arranged marriage) meeting between our mother and your father. That's why it's believed the Issekigan can be 'learned'. It is considered a kekkai-genkai because it's only ever manifested itself in your bloodline.”

Uzume closed her eyes, taking a long breath.

“I spent years researching any possible ways our sides of the family could have intersected with the Issekigan. But I've never found anything.”

Shoki sat back, stunned beyond belief. He had always felt a connection to Miko, but he never would have guessed that she was his half-sister! Or that he had come from such a line of powerful people.

“Is that why...I get it?” he asked, more timid than usual for him. “Ninjutsu, I mean?”

Miko stood up, made handsigns, and then took a stance. A beam of light- was it light?- shot across the room and shattered a cup left behind by the previous occupants.

“Light Style: Light Archery,” she intoned, holding her pose. “My personal style of ninjutsu. I've always had the ability to command chakra, Shoki. Both mine AND other people's, when the right conditions are met.”

Shoki thought back to Itachi Uchiha's Amaterasu attack activating itself. Then he thought back to all the techniques he saw Miko use when she was still 'Uzume'. Once his thoughts were less jumbled, he started a question:

“Then why...”

“Why didn't I teach you ninjutsu myself?” Miko finished. She looked out the window, seeing Yuji chopping wood. “Because that boy needed it. The way I needed you for family, that boy had need of an apprentice. He's more powerful than I when it comes to ninjutsu, despite his hardships. But more importantly, were he left alone with no one after the prophecy shattered his sense of self...he would have perished. And that...I could not allow to happen.”

Shoki looked out the window, watching Yuji chop wood. There was a faraway look on the boy's face. Comparing it to his previous mental images, Shoki could guess he was thinking about Naruto and Sakura again.

“My big brother...and my older sister...I have real family. ... I’m not sure what to think of that. Is that...okay?”

Miko smoothed Shoki’s now completely gray hair. “It’s natural. You’re confused; possibly even angry at me for not telling you this sooner.”

“I’m not angry. I don’t feel angry, anyway. You and Yuji have protected me...you’ve raised me; Yuji’s taught me how to defend myself; and you both told me that I don’t HAVE to do what I was born to do. I don’t need to be a weapon against the bad guys. I’m allowed to be the person I want. I owe you both a lot. I’m going to work hard- I’m going to train so hard, I’ll be as strong as Yuji! No, stronger! I’ll be so strong that he won’t have to fight to protect me anymore! So strong that I can help bring peace without being a weapon!”

Shoki ran to his room and changed as quickly as he could into his training clothes.
“I’m going to go outside to train! I’ll bring the firewood, too! I’ve gotta get stronger!”

-

As he ran off, Miko felt a swell of pride she knew she didn’t deserve. She hadn’t raised Shoki- at least not completely- so she didn’t feel she had the right to value his happiness like that.

He adores Yuji...that means a lot to me. And to Yuji, too. He glows when he can instruct and pass on what he’s learned. I wish that I could give Shoki a stable family...but perhaps this kind of adversity will give him the strength he’ll need. I hope I’m wrong, but I don’t foresee his life being an easy, carefree, healthy existence.

And Yuji...I’ve never seen such a clouded future. What lies ahead is almost indeterminable. Could it be the “Ten no Kishootsu” power?

55 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh- Chapter 5

Naruto, Sakura, and the others were discussing their duty shifts for guarding the Daimyo, all of them a little bit intrigued by the new duty. Though he was more or less ceremonial, meeting someone as renowned as the Fire Daimyo would be incredible. They'd never seen anything but his outline as he approached his curtain once in a while. Most of the time, he was in the back of the mansion, working.

"Hey, knock knock!"

Jiraiya entered, a big smile on his face

"Pervy Sage!" Naruto declared, giving him a big grin. "Whatsamatter, all outta girls to peep a- ow!"

Jiraiya smacked Naruto on the head. "You little idiot! I TOLD you not to call me that in front of other people!"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever, you perv! OW!"

Asuma looked up from his shogi game and cigarette.

"Something I can help with, Master Jiraiya?"

Jiraiya stood with his hands on his hips. "No, no, just here to grab Naruto. He's due for some more training. I'd like to tell you about it, Asuma. It would mean your group having to stay here for a while..."

The rising intonation at the end made Asuma think there was something to what Jiraiya was saying. So he nodded to Shikamaru, putting their game on pause, and made his way over to Jiraiya.

-

Naruto and Sakura exchanged glances. Jiraiya in a private conference with Naruto somehow worried Sakura.

Like they're going to take Naruto away or something. But Master Jiraiya would never be so happy about that...right? So what is this about? I'm just starting to get used to having him around. I don't know what I'll do if they take him away. Will it be another three years? Can I wait for him that long?

This time, Sakura wouldn't have Yuji for company; at least for a while. It seemed he was dead serious about serving this faux exile. She had let the matter drop; hopefully some time away would do wonders for his abysmal health. But she couldn't help feeling lonely. Maybe even deserted.

He loved me...and for nearly five years, he said nothing. Then he was forced to serve me; all the while he had to watch me with another boy. And in the end, I ended up loving that boy. And...he knew. The whole time. He knew that's what was likely to happen. I...I can't imagine how painful that must have been. It's no wonder he had to get away. After putting up with it for so long...

Sakura put a hand to her mouth.

I'm such an idiot! Naruto and I have been so busy getting closer that I never stopped to realize...Oh, Yuji...

--

Naruto didn't have any of those thoughts. His thoughts were on his training. Yuji had helped sharpen his basic skills to a fine point; Naruto had learned how to deal with genjutsu as well. And Yuji was clever as hell. You underestimated him to your downfall. He looked as though he was sickly; but if you crossed him, or managed to force him to show strength, you couldn't take the time to regret your mistake. Time and again Yuji had forced this lesson down Naruto's throat. Naruto's Rasengan would tear through Yuji's defenses; Yuji would counter somehow. One time in particular, Yuji told Naruto that he relied on Shadow Clones and the Rasengan too much. He said that 'Your average moron will come up with a way to counter a move even of that caliber if it's repeated several times throughout the course of a single fight'.

"Naruto."

The single name was spoken by Jiraiya. He was a little more serious now, but not like anything was wrong.

"Are you ready to continue your training? It's time for you to progress. The most honored, sacred, secret 'technique' I can help you learn it next. And given the Akatsuki's determination..."

"I'll need to be prepared. Right. I'm ready."

Naruto was ready to go instantly, having finished Jiraiya's sentence for him. Unlike when he left for three years a few months ago, this time he felt a niggling feeling holding him back.

Sakura...

He looked to her, suddenly feeling as though he was deserting her. She put on a brave face, but Naruto could tell she didn't want him to leave. So he stopped and said it straight:

"Pervy Sage, I can't. I just...can't."

Jiraiya grumbled under his breath, despite a smile inside. He needed to continue this bit of cruelty if Naruto was to ever have the best of both worlds- love and skill.

"I knew it! I knew that little bastard put thoughts into your head!" Jiraiya roared, striking a tree hard enough to topple it. Withdrawing his bleeding fist, he swung an outstretched finger toward Naruto.

"Yuji stuck this in your head, didn't he?! He told you to 'be happy with her,' didn't he?!"

"So what if he did?!" Naruto fired back, his hands balled into tight fists. "He's right!"

"He's an idiot! An incompetent fool who spouted pretty words to justify abandoning his duty! And you learned from him!"

The last bit was spoken in a dismissive sneer. Contempt for Yuji exuded from every pore of Jiraiya's body.

Come on, take the bait.

But Naruto didn't. He simply took Sakura's hand and pulled her away.

"I'll find my own way to be Hokage. I don't think I can learn from you anymore. I'll do it. Together, with Sakura. And Yuji. He deserves to be involved, too."

After a moment's hesitation, Naruto added: "Thanks for everything, pervy sage. I mean it. Thanks."

--

Yuji stared at nothing. The greens and browns of the forest were starting to blend together for him. It was like staring at one, jumbled, unending mass. It was tranquilizing and horrifying at the same time.

A wind kicked up, tossing Yuji's coat around and causing a small tornado of leaves to swirl by. All at once, possibly due to the brisk air, Yuji felt his energy spike. He planted his feet, turning them both inward so that his stance was solid. He felt his chakra gather, just like usual. But he felt something different. Something that was somehow familiar...

? Azami's training? But I never understood what she was trying to accomplish...maybe if I do this...

Yuji gulped in air as if he was going to perform a regular fire jutsu. But instead of exhaling hard, he actually yelled. Sort of. It was actually a silent scream. A violent wind clustered around the dead tree he had aimed his fury at. It swirled around, blowing the dead leaves on the ground back into the air. Then the leaves burst into tiny flames. The fire spread up the swirling chakra, until it hit the tree. PWOOF!

The tree was up in smoke; roasted down to the roots. But it wasn't a fire jutsu Yuji had just cast.

That was just a release of chakra! I always do that to maintain a fighting edge! But that-

Sweat rolled down Yuji's face as he watched the fire quench itself and the wind die down.

That wasn't anything like what usually happens. I've never seen chakra do that. It's as if my chakra started out neutral, then changed form in mid-jutsu.

--

"Say it again? I don't follow..."

Yuji drew a diagram on some spare parchment. Miko was watching intently, fascinated despite not understanding. Shoki, who had actually seen the move (and was so shocked he dropped the load of firewood he'd been carrying, half expecting it to spontaneously combust), was engrossed in the explanation.

"See, chakra starts as a force inside the body. Through hand seals, those with the right skill can use this energy and direct it accordingly. At a young age, our chakra is immature-" Yuji nodded to Shoki

"-Present company an exception. In most cases, the chakra takes no discernable element until we begin to use jutsu. To some degree, you can control what element you are- I believe, anyway. An entire research and development team would debate this point for hours."

Yuji finished his diagram. It was a crude drawing of a person. Wavy lines here and there represented different energy flows.

"Due to my training with the Third Hokage, I became a fire and earth type chakra. My proficiency for genjutsu is a reflection of my personality. Now, when doing a fire jutsu, you intake air, then exhale. The hand seal decides what kind of jutsu you're performing. When you exhale the air with the tiger

handsign, you get a fire jutsu.”

Yuji demonstrated with his Dragon’s Ember Jutsu. A piece of wood in the fireplace lit up.

“The fire and chakra mix early, creating a steady stream,” he narrated, opening a window. “Now, instead of that, what I just stumbled on thanks to Azami is this:”

Leaning out the window, Yuji aimed his chakra at a log he had set about twenty meters out. The log met the same fate as the tree before.

“Amazing...” Miko managed, the fire reflecting in her eyes. “This must be the next stage of ‘Ten no Kishootsu’...”

Excited, Yuji went on with his explanation. “My illness was the key. The burning. Azami burned me during training, but I didn’t see her point. Now, it’s obvious: One element of my chakra has been strengthened. In addition, I’ve regained the ability to use ‘neutral’ chakra.”

Shoki frowned. There was something that he didn’t get. “What good is neutral chakra? It’s not very powerful...”

“No. Not by itself,” Yuji admitted. “But...well, let’s fight. Real quick. All you have to do is stand there and feel my chakra.”

-

Lining up across from each other, Yuji aimed his fire jutsus- old and new- in Shoki’s general direction. Shoki felt his chakra, just like usual. Then, it disappeared. It took Shoki a few seconds to realize Yuji was using ‘neutral’ chakra.

“I see! It’s like I can’t sense you anymore!”

“That’s the beauty of it!” Yuji exclaimed. “Your senses are more keen than most shinobi’s. If even *you* took a few seconds to realize it, with my telling you what I was doing, then that gives me a huge advantage over any opponent who can sense chakra with any skill. And that means a way to combat the Sharingan. And more importantly...”

Yuji knelt down, his hand on Shoki’s shoulder, and his eyes more alive than Shoki had ever seen them. “...It means that I can fight Pain’s eyes. And we don’t need to make you into a weapon. I promised you we didn’t need to at all. Now we don’t even need to consider the thought.”

Shoki reached out for a hug. With a genuinely happy smile, Yuji supplied one. Miko smiled contently, wondering vaguely if these two were the ones actually related, instead of her and Shoki. But something niggled at her.

Yuji, I hope you don’t believe your own words. You know it’s a lie, don’t you? Pain doesn’t sense chakra- he has all six types. Shoki may still need to be the weapon you’re doing your best not to create.

Watching the two playfully wrestle, Miko was pulled towards a fantasy of having a stable life for Shoki. And for herself as well. She never considered Yuji as anything more than a reliable friend. But maybe that was enough, she wondered sometimes, for him to marry her. Even if it wasn’t love, maybe for

Shoki's sake, he'd become permanent.

Being that Miko was also honest with herself, she knew that she wanted that kind of stability as much for herself as for Shoki. What she didn't know was how Yuji would react.

When she felt a certain chakra coming, she became even more worried. Yuji didn't need this right now!

56 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh- Chapter 6

Yuji's friendly match with Shoki turned sour quickly. Yuji sensed the chakra first. It was Jiraiya. Before Yuji could even spin around to warn Jiraiya off, he found the sannin with his hands raised, approaching peacefully, with a meaningful look on his face.

"We need to talk."

Yuji strode forward, his hand covered in a chakra scalpel. He was definitely on edge and dangerous. "We tried that. It didn't work well."

"I know," Jiraiya said calmly, before his tone turned a little more firm. "But this is different."

Yuji kept walking forward, warding Jiraiya off. Jiraiya could have handled Yuji easily enough (he thought, anyway. What kind of power the kid had gained wasn't something that was evident to him right now), but Yuji's help was essential. Even if it meant beating Yuji down...or even letting him win. There was more at stake here than Yuji could fathom.

"Look, I made a mistake. I didn't treat you right, and I'm sorry. I tried to do it for Naruto's sake. I went too far, and he won't hear me out."

Yuji's expression softened a bit, but he didn't release his Chakra Scalpel just yet. "Go on..."

"He needs to learn a new level of jutsu. The problem is, he'd be separated from Sakura for at least a month. He didn't like that, so I tried to put the idea in his head that your influence on him was making him weak."

Yuji's mouth moved, but no sound came out. It was as if he was tasting Jiraiya's words. His face stiffened, as though he was about to be more stubborn. Jiraiya decided to keep pushing. There was too much to lose...

"I was wrong there, too. Those two both rebelled at that, swearing up and down that you were the best thing for them. And they might be right. Which is why I'm asking- no, I'm BEGGING- I'm begging you to tell Naruto to go through with the training."

Yuji stopped his slow advance, finally letting his Chakra Scalpel fade. "This is the truth?"

"I wouldn't have come otherwise. I planned to keep egging you on to get stronger. That won't happen now...that's why I really am sorry for the things I said to you. It didn't seem like I had a choice."

Yuji could hear the sincerity in Jiraiya's voice, and he decided to believe him. But he couldn't let him off that easy.

“In six months, my exile will end. Leave Naruto and Sakura be until then. Rather, let me help them indirectly. Let everyone involved cool off. At the end of six months, I will return and persuade Naruto to go along with your training. And then I’ll spend time with Sakura, and hopefully train her AND kill her loneliness. I’ll see to it that the six months aren’t wasted.”

Sitting down and biting his thumb, Yuji opened a scroll. He ran his thumb down it, then pressed his palm to the ground. There was a puff of smoke that was typical when summoning creatures. When the smoke cleared, Yuji saw that he had summoned a bird. It was a good size, with a wingspan that would make flying a cinch.

Yuji wrote a quick letter, then offered it to the bird. It obediently stuck out it’s right leg, allowing Yuji to tie the letter into place. He stepped back to let it fly off, but it held still, now raising it’s other leg. A small leather pouch was tied to the leg, and a note was sticking out of it. Yuji opened the note and read it aloud (his eye twitched and a vein popped as he did):

“500 Ryo to use’...damn her. I should’ve known. Azami doesn’t do anything for free...”

--

Jiraiya waited patiently in the moonlight, sipping chilled sake and thinking. Life had been unfair and difficult for so many people. How could peace ever be achieved? Privately, he placed his bets on Naruto. Hyperactive, knuckleheaded- and everything the shinobi world needed. A spark of genius. And should he and Sakura wind up together, so much the better.

For him, anyway. But does he have to be a sacrifice? For Naruto to be complete, must Yuji be destroyed? He’s a bit player in this; yet he’s been dealt a pivotal role.

As if summoned by those words, the gaunt young form of Yuji strode into the small stand. It seemed as if he had donned a new uniform. It had been a long time since he’d worn shinobi attire. For his exile, at least, he’d changed entirely.

Full-fingered black gloves adorned his hands. Around one wrist were prayer beads- solid stone. On his feet were black boots, as opposed to his normal black sandals. Black pants; a charcoal gray shirt, and a black trench coat finished the look, save for one more touch around his neck- a pendant with a tooth of some kind of animal. Clearly, there was also a sword on Yuji’s back; his coat didn’t entirely conceal the bulge left by the weapon.

Clunk.

In plain sight, Yuji laid a sword down on the table. Jiraiya decided that this would be a good object to open their conversation. He also supposed he was to take it as a warning to keep in line. If that’s how they were going to play, fine.

“Wakizashi?” he said, reaching for it. Yuji’s hand snapped across it, blocking Jiraiya’s.

“Kodachi,” the younger man replied, not withdrawing his hand. Jiraiya guessed that, at this point, it would be up to him to be the polite one. Dealing with this new, on-edge Yuji was going to be hard.

It's only been two weeks since this exile began, but he's changed so much. If not for his eyes, he'd look healthier.

That was true; Yuji was in better shape than before. Even with the coat hiding his frame, Yuji was more muscular. Any fat he had before, which wasn't much, had been morphed into muscle. To look at him, you could tell he was in peak condition. All but his eyes; they were dead, despite the respite from one part of his personal hell.

"I've dealt with my Sakura issue," Yuji began, not waiting for any further prompt. "It wasn't hard. I promised Naruto I would not chase her. So I won't. More to the point, I've spent the last two weeks largely in meditation. My mind is centered and focused. My body has begun to mend."

Pausing a beat, Yuji met Jiraiya's gaze with a stare of his own. It was a hard, mirthless gaze. It almost made Jiraiya shiver- Yuji suddenly looked more like a villain than the good guy Jiraiya knew he was.

"I'm glad to hear you're better. The fact is, that's what I was hoping to hear. Since we've last talked, I've come to the conclusion that I owe you an apology and a debt."

Yuji had a cup of sake in front of him, but made no move to consume it. He held an unlit cigarette in his hand, waiting for Jiraiya to continue. When Jiraiya seemed to stop, Yuji piped up:

"Apology? Debt? What account do you possibly owe me?"

Jiraiya gulped down the last dregs of sake and intimidation both. "The apology- I said some things to you that you didn't deserve to hear. When we fought, I had no right to humiliate you like that- not when I asked for a match and you granted my request honorably. Instead of letting you learn from the match, I drove you into a corner and into more solitary training. Even if it was the right thing to do, I could have done things differently. And when I've insulted you, please understand- I didn't mean it. We have one common goal- Naruto's growth. And that was why I insulted you- someone he identifies with. It forced him to work harder, too."

Yuji didn't even blink nor say anything to accept the apology.

"And the debt?"

"The debt...that's a little harder to repay. I doubt you were even aware of it, but you're a bit player in this fight who has taken on a surprising role. You're the lynch pin for Naruto and Sakura; AND you're the bridge connecting Shoki with our salvation."

"I won't use him as a weapon."

The sheer venom in Yuji's voice made Jiraiya's blood run cold. There were shades of malice in there, combining with the protection of an 'older brother'.

"I've told Shoki that only he will decide his fate. Not me- not you- not anyone. If he chooses to be a weapon, then I will see him alive at the end of the affair, whatever the cost may be. My honor, my life- no matter."

"He's our best weapon against the other eye types! You can't mean that you would stop him from fighting!" Jiraiya exclaimed, taking care to keep his voice down.

“No. I have no objection to his fighting,” Yuji said bluntly, eyes narrowed. “But when he fights, it will be of his own accord. I will allow no one to hot-drop him into a battlefield and demand that he both bear witness to and effectively cause the execution of someone else- no matter their crimes. A twelve year old boy should not suffer that way. This war that our generations have started holds no place for him.”

“What if it saves lives? Hundreds? Thousands? Millions?!” Jiraiya’s fist hit the small table with a loud thud. “At what point do you decide that it’s okay for him to join the fight?”

“I don’t. He does.”

“And you leaving the choice up to a twelve year old is any more sane than involving him in the first place?!”

“He isn’t Naruto!” Yuji yelled, his fist now smacking the beleaguered table. “This is a sheltered boy! He’s lived for the best part of his life on temple grounds, receiving training as a monk and only recently as a warrior! He’s never interacted with others; never formed social bonds-”

“And did that stop you?” Jiraiya asked quietly. His eyes bored into Yuji’s eyes. Yuji’s eyes were still unreadable, but Jiraiya’s eyes danced with passion. “You see yourself in him, so you’re protecting him. He’s your legacy...the same way the Fourth Hokage and Naruto are my legacies.”

That took the wind out of Yuji’s sails quickly. He sat down with a thud, a hand rubbing his tired brow. “So I’ve coddled him... I’ve made the situation worse...I swore I wouldn’t let him get too close to me...”

Jiraiya put a bracing hand on Yuji’s shoulder. By touch, he could feel the burdens the young man was carrying. It was astonishing to think someone would voluntarily carry such weight.

“You aren’t alone anymore, and you’re not a naïve kid. You’re a warrior who a great many people have come to respect and depend on. The Third Hokage said that you would be a pillar of strength for the Leaf Village. Even if the rest of his prophecy is wrong, that much is truth. Your duty to Naruto and Sakura as a mentor may be done, but your duty to them as a friend is now paramount. If Naruto is to continue his training, he’ll need to know that Sakura is taken care of. And for that, he needs to trust you. He needs you to be her strength in his absence.”

Yuji sunk to his knees, the last bit of stoicism now falling away from him as tears flowed freely. “WHY AM I BEING TORTURED LIKE THIS?!” he shouted, his throat and lungs hoarse from that yell. “To see someone else with the woman I love...to be forced to play lackey to them...to know that I’ll never be the strongest...it’s too much...too cruel.”

Jiraiya hauled Yuji up by his coat, setting him down on his feet. He pulled the boy into a gentle hug. “Before you let the weight of these burdens crush you, remember that no one expects you to do this alone. Push everyone away if you want, but know they’ll push back to get to you even harder. Those are the kinds of people you’ve gotten close to.”

Letting go, Jiraiya contemplated Yuji, completely seeing the scared boy that Yuji hid so desperately. He looked out of place, with all his weapons and dark clothes. Could he have felt out of place, too?

“Shoki and Miko are counting on you right now. Your duty is to them. Put everything else out of your mind.”

Yuji wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, forcing himself to take a few shallow breaths before he gulped in air.

“shoot...an emotional outburst...”

“Which you *needed*,” Jiraiya told him firmly. “No man is an island. Not even you, Yuji. Now, get that stoic mask back on and get back to work. That’s the only way to beat these demons you’ve got.”

Yuji wiped his eyes and nose, more ashamed than ever. Privately, he wondered if Jiraiya was right. But that was an extreme statement. *No man had ever been an island?* Maybe that was his calling? It would sure as hell hurt less.

“I...should be alone. Both girls I’ve fallen in love with don’t have room for me in that regard. Maybe my shinobi way should include abstinence from any relationship, save for business.”

Jiraiya decided now was a good time to pass on a pearl of wisdom. “Yuji, men are built to accept; no, grow, from being turned down. Happiness isn’t for us. We strive to make women happy; we strive to make our friends happy. You think your position on ‘there is no room for me in my philosophy’ is unique. But you’re wrong. It’s not unique. If it WAS, then more people would be happy, and maybe we’d see the world peace I dream of.”

“So you’re asking me if I have the guts to make myself happy?”

It was a point-blank, blunt, uncomfortable question. But it was the one Jiraiya had hoped he’d ask.

57 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh- Chapter 7

Naruto and Sakura had several days to themselves. They wandered around, separately and together. Meaningless ambles that they filled with conversation. It was a typical way to get to know someone. Typical of shinobi, they also sparred each other, both physically and verbally. Their increases in strength stunned them- when had it happened? They couldn't recall doing anything to grow this much so quickly.

All the same, things still felt a bit empty. Each harbored guilt that they had been the one to drive Yuji away.

Sakura blamed herself for loving Naruto. Naruto blamed himself for 'taking' Sakura. It felt so incredibly right to them both that it was hard to fathom that was the problem. Was it, as Yuji had said, not really about them? The situation wasn't fair to him; that much was evident.

--

--

In the shadow of a tree, two eyes peered up. Lashing out quickly, two hands snagged Naruto and Sakura and dragged them down into the shadows.

-

--

Azami waited patiently for the two to wake up. This kind of travel was both taxing and unsettling to someone who'd never experienced it before.

Eats up less chakra than outright summoning. Besides, I'm still not well liked in the Leaf.

Chewing thoughtfully on her lip, Azami spared a thought for Yuji. She had received his message, asking her to train these two in a similar way she had trained him. But she'd yet to see hide or hair of him. He wasn't angry with her (his letter had expressed that much), but he didn't say what he was doing or where he was. Or why he hadn't visited her yet.

Still thinking about that, Azami wandered down the stairs from her loft and into the kitchen. It was a brightly lit room with plenty of windows that overlooked the water. It was so relaxing here; the people were accepting and very welcoming to a powerful savior who helped them build a civilian defense force. It seemed like it was ages ago that Azami operated in the shadows as a bounty hunter.

Again, she found herself thinking about the bounty that did her in. Yuji hadn't really won, per say. But he had forced Azami to think in a way she hadn't for years. And he had forgiven her, all the while lamenting that it wasn't his place to do so. The fun they'd had- the good-natured teasing; the harsh training in which they each pushed each other to their limits...it was a relationship Azami cherished.

And yet she did not deserve him. That was her feeling. Yuji had all but admitted feelings for her, and she had turned him away. Maybe once she'd suffered enough to feel like she' made reparations for her horrible crimes...then maybe...

Shaking her head, she left the kitchen and stood out on the deck. From there, the white sands of a

beach were just below her. A light breeze tossed her long, black hair about, making for a stunningly gorgeous picture that could charm any man. Her figure wouldn't fail to do that, either. But Azami was no one's 'catch of the day'- she had made THAT perfectly clear to the drooling sleazebags that had hit on her already. Now, she was met with a kind of reverence.

At age nineteen, Azami wasn't too old yet to stop frolicking on the beach. All the same, she was old enough to wish there was a boy with her. She held on to fantasies of running through the sand, playfully splashing each other with water, and staring appreciatively at one another in rather revealing swimsuits. It was a part of growing up she had missed out on because she had been scarred by the rape attempt. She knew someone else who had missed such a childhood. His reasons were less clear-cut, but not any less valid. She knew that much for sure.

Hearing a muffled sound, Azami smirked. Her two new charges were awake and demanded to know what was going on.

Fair enough. 'Suppose I'd better indulge them. I'd be pissed if I was kidnapped, too, I suppose. Wonder what they'll say when I tell them that Yuji told me to? Well, okay, he didn't say 'kidnap', just 'train'. But still, he should know better than to assume I'll do things by the book.

--

Naruto and Sakura had woken up in a comfortable bed, unrestrained, with food right in front of them. But being kidnapped at their skill level didn't exactly make them feel great about themselves. Their first question was 'who'; their second was 'where'?

"Who would kidnap us without hurting us, and where would they take us?"

Sakura was already calmly climbing down the small staircase (which was closer to a ladder, really), a Chakra Scalpel ready, pressed against her chest. She peered around a corner, saw a target, and attacked.

-

Azami spun deftly out of the way, landing on the other side of the room, her arms in the air.

"Relax, relax! I had orders to pick you two up!"

Clearly that seemed to be a lie to Sakura, as she took exception and attacked again. This time Azami grabbed her arm, spun her around, and held her in a headlock.

"NOW are we done? Will you hear me-!"

Azami ducked as Sakura's glowing hand cut hard at her neck. She let go of the log she had been holding hostage, spun, and kicked low, barely nicking Sakura's shin as she skipped backward. Naruto roared in from the other side, in the opening stages of a Shadow Clone Jutsu. Azami reached out one hand and snatched one of his hands, prying back the fingers until he released the hand sign. Using those two fingers, she flung him at Sakura.

“NOW will you listen, please? I was ASKED to bring you here for training. If you don't like it, take it up with Yuji!”

That earned silence from the two Leaf Shinobi. They still didn't fully trust Azami. Sakura had an additional problem with Azami. She knew two things: They needed training, and she had a very important question for Azami.

“Answer this, then,” Sakura challenged, drawing herself up to her full height. “Were you ever serious about Yuji? Or was he just a plaything for you?”

Azami spun quickly, but Sakura could see the hurt look in her eyes. The solid black pools of her eyes had shimmered briefly with sorrow.

“I was serious,” Azami told them after a moment. “And so was he. But...I don't know how else to say it...Yuji is more than I deserve.”

Sakura didn't expect that. Neither had Naruto. His face was screwed up in confusion as he tried to wrap his mind around the 'why' part of Azami's befuddling statement.

“His heart and soul are pure, but his mind is dark. He needs a light to his darkness. But I myself am a 'darkness'. Not to get too deep, but Yuji would have been a perfect compliment to me despite that, and I to him. But it came down to one thing...”

“And that is?” Sakura prompted. **If she had just returned his love...then would he have come so close to self-destructing?**

Azami bowed her head, her voice barely audible despite the conviction behind it.

“He was willing to look past my dark days as a bounty hunter and murderer-for-hire. He told me that ‘I was only surviving the only way I could’, and that survival wasn't evil. I only ever killed scum, true. But I still killed. And Yuji...he's never stained his hands with another's death.”

Azami beckoned the two out onto her deck, overlooking the majestic water of the Land of Waves. The breeze tossed her jet-black hair, leaving a tantalizing image to any male, and a vision of beauty that even the most jealous female could behold without envy.

“...He told me how he felt, and I turned him down. All because I don't feel like I deserve him. I kill; he doesn't. I've connived, stolen, cheated, and done everything but sleep with men to get what I needed to survive. Yuji saw past that and saw the true me. A girl who genuinely wants to be accepted and loved. A warrior who needs a place to swear allegiance to. And a human being who needs companionship.”

Sakura sputtered “Then-then why? Why tell him no? If he saw through all that, he must really like you...”

“Yes. He does. He admitted love, even,” Azami admitted, blushing at the memory. “And he gave me three chances to accept that love. But the burden of my guilt- of my own conscience- wouldn't allow me to accept. I need to suffer longer before I can accept any love. It's my penance for my crimes, and I will never be content until I've accepted my punishment.”

Azami clearly wanted to end the conversation there. Naruto started to speak up, but Sakura put an arm

on his, shaking her head to ward off his comments. They had heard a lot of personal things in that statement, and hopefully helped Azami get all that off her chest. Maybe they could help her save herself.

--

After a week's worth of training, Sakura and Naruto had trimmed almost all the excess movement away from their attacks and defenses. When they punched or kicked, they achieved an amazing amount of force with much less energy and effort. When they blocked, their bodies hardly moved, but their blocks became more effective. Those were Kakashi level skills. And they hadn't even gotten to chakra use yet!

Azami had told them a few things. How to summon chakra in advance and keep it close to the surface for an instant use. She had them perform their usual jutsus, but with fewer and fewer handsigns (in Sakura's case) through greater chakra precision- something Sakura was surprised to realize she had more to learn about. Her master, Tsunade, was as powerful as she was because of her chakra control. After that, it was time to learn genjutsu and put her natural abilities to use.

Naruto learned how to use less chakra in his jutsu. Azami had him visualize that his tenketsu were barely wider than a needle, and he needed to 'thread' chakra through them. It took him a while, but after a few days he found that he doubled the number of Shadow Clones he could produce. That meant more chakra for Rasengans, enabling him to make more of them or to add to their density, making the move that much more deadly. He could control the power behind the move, too, creating both a 'kill Rasengan' and a 'stun Rasengan'.

Each night, the three ate together. They talked, joked, and had a good time. Azami made sure that the other two had time to frolic on the beach in their swimsuits. They played and splashed, swam and sunned. And as she watched, Azami could only think of herself out there, with Yuji beside her.

Is this what you live with, Yuji? Do you see the future you wish you could have lived out by others? Is this what has taken such a horrible toll on your body?

58 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh- Chapter 8

It had been another week of seclusion. Miko was praying, but not like before. She seemed to be more interested in ninjutsu these days. After a life of nothing but prayer, Yuji could hardly blame her. He had the need for spiritual guidance, too, but he also wanted to enjoy living.

Despite all that, it was surprising when, one day, Yuji walked back into the sparsely furnished wooden cabin to find Miko in full priestess dress. Red hakama, white top, and hair tied back in a ponytail. She looked clean, pure, and incredibly beautiful.

“I’m every otaku’s dream right now, huh?” she murmured, smiling as a slight red hue crept across her pale face.

“More than the otaku of the world could dream of,” he replied, as if they were in love. They weren’t—were they? Yuji hadn’t had the experience necessary to discern between friendship and love.

“Thanks. I, uh...I need a favor, Yuji. This is normally done with another priestess, but...well, you’ll do. You’ve got a pure soul.”

“How can I help?” he answered instantly.

“Get in your hakama. I’m almost done preparing here...”

As Yuji went off to do what she said, Miko kept working. She had drawn a diagram on the floor with white liquid squeezed from a white flower’s petals. She had made roughly a rectangle shape on the floor. It was large enough to take up almost the entire first floor of the cabin. Now she took up a red liquid, from a red flower. She marked two spots on the floor. They were lines, identical in length.

Yuji returned, a curious look on his face. It seemed he was more relaxed these days, though his weapons never left his sides. His dark-eyed glances didn’t hold the malice they once did, and his body seemed to move as though it were lighter.

“Yuji, this is a ritual. It’s non-denominational, so it shouldn’t offend your personal beliefs.”

Miko knelt down at one of the red lines. She gestured for Yuji to join her. He knelt across from her, not feeling foolish in the least, despite playing the role meant for a priestess.

“Okay, now you need to take put a line on your palms; red on the left; white on the right. I’ll be doing the same.”

Yuji dipped his finger into the liquid, finding it to be surprisingly thick. Almost of a blood consistency. He didn’t ask why he was doing this; it seemed too important to Miko to question.

“Good. Now, hold out your hands. I’m going to touch them, then hold them, folded like in prayer...”

Yuji looked around, noting the four corners of the strange markings, thinking it to be like a barrier jutsu. “What is this ritual called? Or, what does it do? If you can’t tell me, that’s okay. I’m just curious...”

Miko took Yuji’s right hand.

“It’s called ‘Purging of the Spirit’. It’s one way the most high-ranked priestesses are taught to keep themselves pure. That’s why they can stay pure, even when they’re married and have children. But in my case...our case...it’s a cleansing ritual. It raises emotions through a sort of ninjutsu. It will feel awkward at first, but if you bear with it, you’ll feel lighter. Like your soul has just bathed in a pool of light.”

Yuji felt Miko take his left hand. Her hand wasn’t large, but it was powerful. She gripped his hand with conviction. He, in turn, returned that conviction. He had no reason to doubt the faith her had in her.

“Ready?” she asked simply, to which he nodded. “Okay. Here we go.”

Miko put her forehead to Yuji’s.

“Let your chakra flow freely. Mine will be doing the same. Let them mix outside of our bodies and form the protective shell necessary to expel our inner demons.”

This felt like...well, intimate. Not like sex (not that Yuji would know), but...close. Closeness, trust, warmth- all the things that friendship and love should be. Yuji vaguely wondered again if he was feeling love for Miko. And if it WAS love, what *kind* of love?

Then he felt the sensation, exactly as she had described. It felt like he water was running over him. It was neither hot nor cold. It’s sensation was beyond description.

All around the two of them, the white lines of the ground lit up. The colors of their chakras- close to white and close to red- ran through the lines, meeting up and creating light. It was a barrier, just as Miko had said. It felt powerful; protecting; safe. It was like being cradled by an immense chakra that had no malice to it.

The chakra shined, as though it was a fine mist lit by powerful light. Yuji could have described it as a ‘mist of blood’, but in the midst of such...purity, the word didn’t even feel right.

This is so comforting...it’s like my soul is being purified. I can’t believe such a feeling exists!

Yuji wondered for a half-second how he would get by if he could never feel this again. Was it like a drug? Addictive? But he instantly realized that wasn’t the case. It couldn’t be. This was a mortal feeling of fulfillment, in which the first experience was the most powerful.

All too soon, the ritual was over, and Yuji and Miko were kneeling next to each other, their hands still locked and foreheads still touching. Yuji looked across, and saw Miko crying. He was surprised to find he was, too.

“Emotions...” Miko choked out. “It’s what we’re feeling, but so powerfully that we cry. From the depths of our soul, the tears dispel the blackness in our hearts. And it allows us emotional freedom to say what we need to.”

Yuji wasn't composed yet, so Miko did the talking. Her voice was free and happy, even as tears streamed down her face.

"You need to know. Yuji, I'm still going to die soon. I don't know how or why, but my fate is sealed."

"I won't accept that!" Yuji exclaimed with surprising restraint. "I will make sure you live. I'll do whatever it takes. *Anything* it takes."

"Yuji...just let this time be happy instead. What is set in stone is set in stone."

Yuji wanted to shout back at her. Ask her why she was so sure she was damned like this. But then, he always felt the same way. Like he was next to die. So maybe it wasn't his place to question that. So another question came forward, and most likely because of the emotions that were now flowing freely. "Why tell me, if there's nothing I can do about it?"

Miko struggled for a moment, needing to get her breathing back to normal. She was still gulping in air to stop the tears. As they kept raining down her beautiful, pale face, she placed yet another burden on Yuji's shoulders.

"Shoki..." she said simply, then trailed off.

"But I can't adopt him. That was the first warning I received! What could I possibly do for him?"

"...Once I'm dead, he'll have no one. You don't need to adopt him; you only need to watch over him long enough for him to find a new home, or someone to love him. The Leaf will take him in; of that I'm sure. And with his determination to get stronger, he'll do good things. He'll become powerful; and necessary."

Miko's eyes locked with Yuji's; her emotions were now controlled perfectly. The dark orbs didn't blink as they said one sentence that was absolutely firm:

"He'll be come necessary; the same goal you strive for. He'll achieve it; and when he does, you'll get the confirmation you need that YOU mattered, too. That's the one thing I fear I'll never be able to force you to understand."

I'm hearing this a lot lately, Yuji remembered, thinking of Jiraiya, Sakura, and Naruto and their words of wisdom. **Maybe that should be enough, but it's more likely she's right, and I won't realize it until Shoki reaches his potential. I'm stubborn if nothing else.**

"Thank you for allowing me to be a part of this, Miko. I can sense the absolute bond of trust needed to make this work. And I can sense that this ritual was more for my sake than yours, despite what you just told me. Your strength is something I can aspire to. And that," he murmured, sinking into a lower bow before her, "is something that I can get behind with all the effort in this body. Though unworthy, I WILL play my part in this."

And Yuji meant every word. He just didn't tell her his personal little 'footnote' to that monologue: **That means not letting you die. No matter how certain you are, maybe if I deny it hard enough, you will, too. How can you not have the strength to survive, Miko? How, if you can do all these amazing things, not have the ability for self-preservation? I don't buy it, and I don't think you want to, either.**

After another few minutes, the feelings of tranquility had receded completely. The warmth had not yet left their bodies, but they were drained of energy. It was a satisfying feeling. Like the feeling Yuji got after a workout, when he was totally spent, but still felt a sort of latent energy being tapped, and a feeling of fulfillment..

“Miko, I’ve been thinking...I don’t know if you’ll like this or not, but...”

Getting down on one knee, Yuji looked up at her. He stayed still for a few moments, drawing up the courage to say what needed to be said. Miko was thinking that he was going to pledge his loyalty, as he’d done before.

And she wasn’t wrong. He just said it different than usual. It was the last thing she ever saw coming.

“...Marry me?”

59 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh- Chapter 9

For the first time since he had known her, Miko was clearly stunned. She had no idea what to do with her hands, apparently, as they moved about as though they were trying to answer. She met Yuji's eyes, and saw nothing but sincerity in them.

"But...we agreed we aren't in love!"

Yuji nodded, reaching into his coat pocket. "I know. But we both love Shoki. And he needs a family."

Pausing, Yuji met Miko's eyes, appreciating how pretty they were. He COULD fall in love with her, but that would take time they didn't have. Instead, perhaps she could agree to unite for Shoki's sake. And maybe for his own, too.

Not to mention that, if we're married, I've got an excuse to protect her. And if I can't, then at least she'll die knowing someone will handle her affairs.

"Shoki needs us. Granted, we're more of a big brother and sister to him, but we're close enough to his age to relate to him. We can help him. Even if it's to give him the slightest taste of what a family feels like. That might help him find his own. At most, three years."

Tugging up one corner of his mouth, Yuji told Miko:

"It's not like you have to sleep with me."

Miko smiled in return, taking Yuji's hand. "I'll need to think about it. Marriage isn't something to be taken lightly. And if we're planning to end it, it defeats the point of the unity of marriage. But Shoki would benefit from this..."

"You can adopt him. I can't," Yuji pointed out. "If I'm married to you, then I'll have adopted him indirectly, and can lay claim to protecting him legally. And believe me, this is as awkward for me as it is for you. I'm a big believer in the sanctity of marriage. And marriage should be a thing of love, not obligation. But it's the best solution I can think of to this problem."

"A sham marriage solving a real problem," Miko quipped, giving Yuji's hand a squeeze. "There might be an easier way to do this. But I'll think about it. And, if nothing else, Yuji- I'm honored. I can only love you platonically. But there's no one alive that wouldn't be happy to hear they're loved in some way. So...thanks."

Her smile warmed his jaded heart, and Yuji knew that if circumstances were different, he might very easily have fallen in love with Miko.

--

--

Azami had Naruto and Sakura stand opposite her on the beach behind her home. The pleasant breeze never seemed to die down, and the beach was an endless stretch of white, clean sand.

In a loose white dress, Azami looked very much like an exotic beauty. She WAS, but you'd never guess that she was as deadly an assassin and combatant as they came. She was, without a doubt- hot.

"Now then," she said, regaining Naruto and Sakura's attention. Both had focused on Azami, for different reasons.

Wow. She's got...like...wow. This is Sexy Jutsu material!

Sakura's thoughts were a bit different and full of exasperation. **Damn her, she's got all the right curves in all the right places, AND she's insanely strong! Is this what Lady Tsunade was like in her prime?**

Azami ignored Naruto's lustful looks and Sakura's exasperated expression for now, focusing on her mission.

"Yuji asked me to train you for two reasons. One: Naruto, like you, I use a wind-style chakra. I can help you gain mastery of it. And two: Sakura, you're a genjutsu type, despite your destructive abilities. Yuji's plan was to teach you genjutsu next. He has asked me to do the same, as I defeated him in genjutsu combat-

"You did?! When was that?!" Naruto exclaimed. Yuji's strength in genjutsu had become evident to him once he had seen the paradise Yuji created for himself in his own mind, and made it realistic and available for access.

"Oh, when we first met. We were in the hot spring. Tch! He was more interested in fighting than looking! I was worried I wasn't attractive enough to get his attention..."

While Azami smiled wistfully, Naruto and Sakura huddled up.

"Huh, hot spring?! Together?!" Naruto

"That's what she said..." Sakura

"Like, what kind of stuff did they-" Naruto

"I don't know! Yuji's got 'virgin's eyes', so..." Sakura

"Huh? 'Virgin's eyes'? How the heck can you tell that?" Naruto.

"Women's intuition, but that's not the point!"

"How the hell did he ignore *that*, in the flesh? OW! Don't hit me! I'm with you, aren't I?" Naruto

"Why? 'Cause I'm convenient?!" Sakura

A sweat drop formed on Azami's cheek. **Maybe I should've left that detail out...**

--

--

Naruto and Sakura stood across from each other on the water. After two weeks, they were ready to try out their new skills. The water rippled with intensity generated by their chakra. They had both taken to Azami's training as a fit for the most natural thing in the world. She had condensed for them what would normally take six months into a two week session. It was remarkable that they had picked up what they had. It took raw talent and drive to accomplish anything of that magnitude.

Now let's see if their training took... Best to let them spar it out first. This way I can just watch. But I have to admit -I'm anxious to get a match in against them.

As the match unfolded, Azami realized that the prophecy Yuji had often spoke about to her could be very real. The way these two had absorbed which she had taught in such a short amount of time was astonishing. As the two clashed it again, and more than half the water in their immediate area was displaced by a massive explosion caused by two powerful chakras meeting, Azami could see Yuji's desperation to get stronger.

He has a major inferiority complex as it is. Seeing these two constantly evolving beyond his scope of strength must be terribly frustrating. Hell, even I'm motivated to train harder after seeing these two.

Naruto hadn't invented any new jutsu, but he had improved his old ones in some very impressive ways. He had managed to hide a Rasengan by disguising it as a shadow clone. His clones could also distort themselves if will, becoming longer while holding a Rasengan, allowing them to stretch out with the effectiveness of a spear.

This new attack was part of the reason the beach had all but disappeared by the freak tides the two were causing with their high powered attacks.

Sakura had focused on genjutsu. She had managed to combine genjutsu with her prowess as a medical shinobi and her sheer power. She had learned to load her chakra into her fist and send the genjutsu along the current of destruction she caused by smashing the ground, sometimes even being able to create a blanket effect genjutsu to affect every living thing in surrounding area. She transmitted her genjutsu by the touch of her chakra. It fit her style well.

The only downside to all this was that Naruto was semi distracted by Sakura. He was tending not to give it his all when facing her. Luckily, that was a one sided problem, as Sakura had no problem blasting Naruto almost as hard as she could. Still, maybe it was a good thing that Naruto can show a little bit of restraint?

I'll let you Yuji the judge of that. They're still his problem, and I don't want to step on his toes...

Brushing her long hair out with her hand and adjusting her bangs, Azami reflected on the other things Yuji had told her. He had been secretive -even by his normal standards. Normal enough, but Azami prided herself on the fact that he could tell her anything - and usually did. If there was something that's troublesome on the horizon, Yuji would need all the strength he could get. Even borrowed strength, if necessary.

We'll all be in for a hell of a fight. Pain is almost unstoppable.

And yet, Azami was surprised to find that she wasn't as worried as she felt she should be. Maybe it was the two rapidly blooming shinobi be in front of her.

They're the future... A whole different kind of strength.

Heh. No wonder Yuji's feeling outdated. I'm starting to feel it, too.

--

--

Yuji was busy stacking wood as quietly as he could so as not to wake Shoki. He occasionally exchange glances with Miko. They smiled like newlyweds, though there was nothing between them but a genuine concern for the future, and a good deal of friendship.

This is what married life is like. At least, as I always imagined it. Two strong, independent people joined together to make an even stronger person. Two parts of the same whole.

They were about to exchange conversation when something rippled through both of their chakras.

Yuji felt it first. He and Miko exchanged glances.

"No..." she whispered, seemingly terrified for the first time since Yuji had known her. If anything, it strengthened his resolve to protect her. Shoki was awake now, and though quiet, clearly he wanted to know what was going on.

There was no time to think. The chakras were getting closer. Yuji physically picked up Shoki and Miko and put them in the center of the room. He unfurled a scroll, writing on it in his blood. He threw the scroll to the ceiling, where it stuck, then unfurled all the way down to the floor. All around Shoki and Miko a barrier of red came up.

Just like the 'Cleansing of the Spirit'! He couldn't have developed this technique so quickly! The 'Temper of Heaven Protection'! I knew he would develop it eventually, but so quickly after seeing my version!

Putting a hand out, Miko felt the barrier. It was strong, but not perfectly so. From this, she understood Yuji's thought process. He had no choice but to do all he could, and now.

"Shadow Clone Justsu! Four-Pillar Barrier Seal!"

Four of Yuji's clones made a perimeter around Shoki and Miko. They all sat down, their hands set in seals and their chakra focused. A second barrier sprang up, this one black and so dark that peering through it was like looking through a screen. It was like watching silhouettes in the moonlight. It was a horrifying experience. Miko had to conceal a shiver.

No time. Focus your chakra. This is the 'dire circumstance' that will require my ninjutsu.

60 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh- Chapter 10

Yuji was certainly surprised that his enemies chose to just walk through the door. Even worse was the fact that he recognized more than one of them, despite having never seen them.

“Pain...”

The ‘chief’ Pain, whose name Yuji did not know, was at the forefront of a group. With it was a very similar looking fellow, with orange hair and piercings. To the right of the ‘chief’ Pain was a gaunt looking female with purple hair and a piercing on her chin.

Their collective chakras were oppressive. Yuji could feel it. And yet, he didn’t feel helpless yet.

“Go,” he whispered. A small toad popped out of his vest pocket. The female of the group threw something at it, but it disappeared just in time.

The lead Pain spoke up. “A useless gesture. You will know pain.”

“Why?” Yuji asked, his hands on his weapons. “Why would you keep targeting us? She’s no longer the priestess.”

“The boy. Now.”

This from the female. Her voice was cold, but not without a small touch of caring. Yuji noticed her glance at the head Pain frequently. A weakness?

“Not now or ever,” Yuji replied instantly. Then he gasped and spun quickly, his swords flashing down on the other Pain’s arm. The arm had reached through his barrier jutsu and grabbed for Miko. As the swords cut through it, the arm fell to the ground. Yuji, possessed by a killing instinct, didn’t stop there. His kodachi cut through the being’s head and neck. At the end of it, he used a fire ninjutsu to singe the body.

“Are you alright?!” he called in to Asuna.

“I..he had...my soul...” she called out faintly.

He grabbed me right through the barrier! That barrier shouldn’t be penetrable by simple human flesh! That man is no human. He’s...I don’t know. Something else. Something that I can’t pinpoint. I never had any visions regarding this person. But what does that mean?

Before Yuji could ponder that, paper trapped his arms to his sides, forcing his weapons out of his hands. “the hell!”

The girl had turned into slips of paper. And one of those slips was aiming for his neck like a shuriken! Yuji threw himself to the ground, narrowly avoiding the kill shot. Several more of the odd papers came toward him on the ground. He rolled quickly. With his arms trapped, he couldn’t perform ninjutsu- and

yet, he could feel the familiar sensation in his chest. He drew in a breath, then blew it out as hard as he could.

A small tornado blew the papers off, and tossed them around like leaves. Then an explosion engulfed the girl, scattering her paper body all over. The loose bits of paper caught fire and burned quickly.

I can do my new attack?

Yuji caught the lead Pain moving his arms. He remembered all too well what that meant. He focused his chakra and shifted his weight to a low stance, just like he taught Shoki.

“Almighty Push!”

Yuji grunted, but held his ground. As the force of the blow died down, he saw the lead Pain roaring in after it. With his stance so settled, Yuji couldn't dodge. So his only options were 'block' and 'strike'. Pain's hands and feet were incredibly quick, and it was all Yuji could do to block, never mind counter. And in two seconds, Pain could attack again.

WHAM!

Yuji fell down hard, having run into something from behind him. He rolled over quickly and kicked, then scrambled to his feet to keep moving.

“!”

The other Pain had pulled himself together-literally. His hand reached out. Yuji automatically moved to block him, but heard Miko's shout.

“Don't touch him with your bare hands!”

Yuji pulled up short, skipping back instead.

“Universal Pull.”

Before he could fully react, Pain had pulled Yuji backward onto one of his black swords. It pierced Yuji through the back and stomach. Suspended in the air by the sword, Yuji coughed up blood.

“Your effort was impressive,” the head Pain intoned, “but futile. We will have the boy now. And you will die, knowing the pain of defeat.”

“I...already know that pain!” Yuji coughed out. Blood cascaded down his chest, both from the wound and from his mouth. It was a gruesome site, seeing him held up there by that ominous looking sword that jutted out from both sides of him. “But I won't know it because of you!”

The other Pain was advancing forward. Only now could Yuji make out the figure of something behind him. It looked like a demon. Yuji could *hear* the screams of souls coming from it. The hand reached for Yuji's chest. He could feel something pulling at the inside of his body, but not touching him at the same time.

Now or never!

Yuji's hand reached into his stomach and pulled. He made sure the effort was explosive. Both Pain's tumbled backward, while Shoki and Miko were free of harm from the blast.

Holding his palm to his wound, Yuji closed it. He stepped forward lightly once, then hit his top speed a stride later, pushing the lead Pain through a wall and outside. Pivoting, he spun and used his fire jutsu again. It hit the other Pain squarely in the chest, driving him out of the house the opposite way. Facing the lead Pain again, Yuji stomped his foot down across his neck. Or tried to.

"Almighty Push!"

Yuji didn't have time to lock his feet this time, so he crossed his arms and took the blast. With his heightened chakra, he withstood it easily, and didn't fly too far. Well within Pain's five-second window, Yuji kicked out with fire-laced chakra to reverse his momentum, and sailed back toward Pain.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Making one more Shadow Clone than usually possible for him, Yuji and his twin approached Pain. The clone pushed Yuji away and flew into Pain, two kunai in each hand. They began a struggle.

Yuji aimed for the other Pain, landing just shy of him, he took a swing. Pain moved to block it, but Yuji was gone; he had taken his back with a Body Flicker.

"Earth Style: Mud Wall!"

"Fire Style: Burning Earth Jutsu!"

The earthen wall came from under Pain, and rocketed him upward, trapping him against the unforgiving wood of the ceiling. The fire jutsu sent a jet of flames up the mud wall. With nowhere to go, Pain was incinerated. Amazingly, Yuji's control of his chakra kept the house from going up in flames.

Yuji sagged, a little exhausted, but still ready to go.

"Yuji, let the barrier go!" Miko called. "It didn't keep him out anyway. You need the chakra!"

Yuji let the barrier go, agreeing with that sentiment. He let himself rest for a moment, his clone still battling Pain for the time being.

"How's your wound, sempai?" Shoki asked, looking at the cut area on Yuji's back. There was strangely little blood for such a devastating wound.

"It's healed. I can hear Sakura yelling at me now. Something about how I shouldn't use fire to sear my wounds shut..."

Miko rolled her eyes, but said nothing, as there was clearly no alternative. She could also hear Sakura admonishing Yuji for the stunt, though. It would have brought a smile to her face, were the situation less grave.

“If we run, they’ll catch us,” she said simply. “We need to stop them here. And now. Before more people get hurt.”

Yuji ran a hand through his hair, a worried expression on his face. “That might not be possible. But I’ve got an idea. You two run for it, while I hold him off.”

That was met with two resounding ‘no’s’, as Yuji expected.

“Then we fight,” he said plainly, nodding in expectance of their disagreement with his suggestion. “Right...how?”

Shoki looked up at the Pain on the ceiling, still being roasted by Yuji’s continuous jutsu. He thought about all the things Yuji had said and done, and all the things he had learned from Miko. “There’s three of them, and three of us. If I mess with his eyes, then Yuji can finish him. And Miko can keep the girl off our backs.”

Yuji frowned instantly. “The girl? She’s dead- isn’t she?”

“No. I can feel her chakra.” Shoki pointed solemnly to the corner. The paper-girl had reformed.

Miko tugged at Yuji’s sleeve. “You can’t let your promise get in the way now. For Shoki’s sake...take care of him instead. I’ll fight the girl.”

“But- I can’t do that!”

Miko showed Yuji her finger. On it was the ring he had given her.

“I accepted, Yuji. If we get through this, I’ll marry you. We may not feel romantic love toward each other, but there IS some kind of love. Now, please...as my husband...take care of my little brother.”

Yuji was absolutely dumbfounded by that. He’d never expected to hear a request like that! He’d never expected her to accept his proposal, for that matter. Why would such a pure being deign to be with him, the opposite; someone so far from perfection? He didn’t understand her reasoning at all, despite how happy he was to hear it. So, in spite of his shock, he agreed. Paper-girl hadn’t been much of a threat so far. So, reluctant as he was, he allowed Miko to do as she wished. Up until the point of letting her die, of course!

Shoki looked to Yuji, seeing him only slightly rattled, despite the chaos. He matched Yuji’s expression and determination.

“Shoki...you ready to fight?” Yuji asked quietly. Wide-eyed, Shoki nodded all the same. He wanted to fight so bad he could taste it.

“Good. Use the ‘neutral chakra’ we talked about, and use your jutsu. This won’t work for long, but hopefully we can do enough damage to hold out or ward them off.”

“Right. I’ve got your back, senpai.”

Shoki clasped his hands together, letting his chakra flow. As he did, he silently whispered the jutsu he

had honed for use against Pain:

“Awasekagami (Opposite Mirrors).”

Shoki’s body began to fade. His legs first, then his arms, and finally his gray hair became a vapor. The vapor floated low to the ground, becoming a heavy mist. The mist began to settle, then move across the grass.

Yuji maintained his justu on the second Pain while aiming for the chief Pain. His clone had lasted up until a second ago. Now it was only Yuji out there.

“You are a mystery, ‘Yuji,’” Pain stated simply. “By all accounts, with the depth of the Akatsuki research confirming it, you should not exist. You do not exist. And yet, you appear as a roadblock to my cleansing of this world.”

Yuji didn’t know why, but he decided to show some bravado. “ ‘Heaven’s Temper’ will always appear as a roadblock to the evil of the Akatsuki. Be it Naruto, Shoki, the Fire Daimyo, or Lady Uzume, I will always descend upon you and ruin you.”

“A champion of justice.”

Yuji felt the first of the bloody red ‘X’s’ appear over his left eye. He lowered his eyes, letting the blood flow as he looked up from under his bangs.

“No. I’m no champion of justice. My soul is host to many sins. Envy among them. But I do my part to repent by protecting the purest of souls, and protecting the most honest of relationships, and by serving the sanctuary to both those things. I will not retreat!”

Yuji coated his hands and feet in the dregs of his firey chakra, then allowed his ‘neutral’ chakra to flow. He charged Pain, swinging mightily. Pain withdrew his odd black sword, parrying, expecting to slice Yuji’s hand off. Yuji blocked with the back of his hand and threw the back of his fist upward, sending the sword toppling end-over-end into the distance. Yuji’s foot then met Pain’s stomach, lifting him into the air. They proceeded to attack and dodge and block almost as one, as if trapped in a vulgar dance. Pain spun Yuji, then stabbed for his back. The bottom of Yuji’s foot blocked the blade. He pushed off it, spun around, and punched Pain hard, sending hurtling to the ground. A mushroom cloud of dust rose up as Pain hit.

Blood was dripping down Yuji’s face now. The rest of his body was covered, but he could tell the red ‘X’s’ were forming all over. He looked up, closing one eye to block the blood flow into it. As he felt the blood coagulate and force his eye shut, he had a thought:

I’ll never be this powerful again. But please...

Yuji felt a strange new power now, confirming his belief that he’d never be this strong again. He had stayed up in the air longer than possible for a normal shinobi. The fire of his chakra had protected him again, granting him an odd ability.

A pair of long, firey-red wings were extended out from Yuji’s back. He instinctively knew how to use them. He took aim from up in the sky, spotting Pain’s form.

...Please, let this be enough!

61 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh- Chapter 11

His hands together, Yuji put the fire to them, forming a spear. He rocketed downward toward Pain, repeating his silent pleading that this would be enough to kill the monster.

Miko's chakra was focused now, and coated her in a yellow glow. She waited for her opponent to reform, knowing any attack before then would be wasted. Once the gaunt girl was facing her again, Miko made a polite request.

"Your name?"

Surprisingly, Miko got an answer.

"Konan."

"I see. Konan, then? Well, Konan, is there any great need for us to fight?"

Konan drew herself up, taking in a breath and closing her eyes. "Pain's orders are absolute."

Miko threw up a screen of light just in time, as paper shuriken were aiming for her face. She wasted no more time talking. Instead, she put her chakra to good use.

"Light Style: Light Archer!"

As fast as she could point her fingers, she could shoot arrows made of light. One barely nicked Konan's sleeve, but a good portion of her paper arm burned instantly, leaving no ashes.

"I see. The damage to a body that could feel pain would be significant. To keep your powers concealed..." Konan looked toward Miko's stomach.

Miko nodded solemnly. "Yes. The procedure I used on Yuji...it was developed for me, and the Uzume before me, to keep our abilities hidden. Our chakra would be easily sensed otherwise. And as killing is something we abstain from..."

Konan's paper shuriken hit Miko high up on the chest, almost at the shoulder. She tumbled backward, but rolled gracefully to one knee.

"I take no pleasure in your death."

Miko got to her feet. Her shoulder hurt, but that was nothing right now. She met her opponent's eyes, giving a grim nod.

"Likewise."

--

Shoki watched the other Pain being roasted alive, wondering how much longer Yuji could keep it up. With his curse bindings removed, it wouldn't be much longer until he collapsed from exhaustion and needed to go into his protective genjutsu. One Pain was the most he could handle. So Shoki began to

plan how to attack. And as much as he disliked it, he needed to become a weapon. In the midst of his Awasekagami Jutsu, he was just that. But there was no choice.

Allowing himself to reform, Shoki's body split in two. One version was in color, the other was a gray outline. The gray one stepped in front of the color version. It wouldn't be much longer now...

--

Yuji speared himself through Pain and into the ground. He had created an enormous hole in the center of Pain's body, all but cutting him in half. Yuji had wanted to aim for the head, but took the sure body hit instead. This should be the end of the fight. It HAD to be.

The red 'X's' were now plainly forming all over Yuji's face. He wobbled, fell down to one knee, then collapsed altogether. For better or worse, he had given all he could.

--

The other Pain hit the ground gracefully, immediately reaching for Shoki, without any hesitation. His hand hit the gray Shoki, and stopped. The in-color Shoki met Pain's eyes, and he froze.

"Issekigan, the 'discerning eye', combined with 'Awasekagami'- opposite mirrors," Shoki intoned effortlessly, holding his jutsu with no sign of strain. "My jutsu mirrors your movements and even your chakra flow, so I can halt any attack to a stalemate. You could withdraw, except for my eye- THAT traps you in a freeze-frame as long as I can maintain my chakra."

Shoki looked to Yuji, seeing that he was out of commission immediately, and had a split-second to decide what to do. In that split-second, his decision was handled for him.

--

Miko's fingertips still glowed from the Light Archer Jutsu shot she had just taken at Pain's heart. As that Pain toppled over, in one smooth motion, she shot another beam at Konan, backing her into a corner. Konan came back out, moving towards taijutsu. Miko dodged and countered efficiently, eventually driving Konan back into the corner. One hand held two extended fingers, firing another shot at pain. The other hand Miko brought to her face.

"Light Prism Jutsu!"

Barriers of light penned Konan in, holding her in suspended animation.

One Pain was down with most of his midsection incinerated.
The other Pain was down, his heart destroyed by light itself.
Konan was incapacitated, unable to move, let alone cast any jutsu.

Only Yuji was down, but not out, as he stumbled back into the cabin. Disbelief was written all over his normally stoic face as he said aloud: "Did we just win?"

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

Then:

“shoot! Look out!”

Yuji tucked and rolled, pulling Miko and Shoki out the last window of the cabin that still had glass. They crashed through, unharmed save for the miniscule cuts on Yuji’s arms. Seconds later, the cabin was crushed by a massive orange foot. What on earth the demon dog-thing was, none of them knew, but the man on top controlling it...

“Not another damned-! how many of them are there?!” Yuji cursed. He was totally spent at this point. He could maybe force a Summoning Jutsu. But if he did...
No time to think of that. He had to.

Then there were four. The lead Pain, the ‘other’ Pain, and now the Pain on the demonic dogs. Konan had been freed by the blast, and she joined them. It was an imposing lineup. There was no way to ward the four of them together off...

Miko strode forward purposefully. Yuji reached a hand toward her, but found it repelled by an invisible barrier.

No! Not invisible! It’s...light! But how...

“Yuji...Let your chakra flow. Just enough so I can feel it...”

Miko had spoken, but her voice sounded disembodied. Like she was speaking through a filter or something like that.

“Can you stand?”

Yuji found he could, with some effort. Miko took his hands and put their foreheads together.
“You’ll make good use of this chakra. I’ll give you enough to end this fight.”

Yuji inclined his head. “Fine, but keep enough for yourself. We’re all going to get through this. ALL of us.”

Miko smiled, her hair being tossed around by the force of her barrier. Yuji found that now he could go right into her barrier.
Then she kissed him.

Strictly speaking, it actually wasn’t a kiss. It was a little-used technique- chakra transfusion. Chakra types need to match for this to work, just like blood types.

“My chakra is the ‘O-type’ of the chakra world. It can be given to anyone. Light is purity, and so my chakra can adapt to any other chakra. Even a chakra that is it’s strict antithesis.”

Yuji didn’t need her to explain. He knew about his chakra.

“My chakra is black; dark and deep. Like a swamp. The exact opposite of yours...”

“Your chakra is black; but your heart and soul...”

Her hand brushed Yuji’s hair out of his face, taking some of the blood with it.

“Those are pure.”

Seemingly effortlessly, Miko shot a beam of light that sliced the four legs off the dog-thing. It sent Pain crashing to the ground. Moving faster than he thought possibly, Yuji was on this ‘summoning Pain’, a kunai through his throat within a second. He kept moving, dragging the Pain with him, until the head and body separated cleanly. Even then, he kept mutilating the body, until all the limbs were separated from the torso.

The lead Pain was moving towards Shoki, a black sword in hand. Shoki stared Pain down, their eyes meeting and locking. Pain seemed to hesitate, at least for an instant. His eyes closed, then opened wider than before. He began his stabbing motion, this time making certain he would kill the boy.

He struck nothing but vapor as the ‘Mirror Shoki’ halted the blade before it hit the real Shoki. The blade was stuck. And Shoki’s stare interfered with Pain’s eyes. Pain still had his jutsu, and was about to put it to good use.

“Don’t. Then you really will make me a weapon,” Shoki told him plainly. “My mirror copy, Awasekagami, will reflect the same force back at you. Even you couldn’t withstand that.”

That was a bold move. Shoki knew for a fact that he would be destroyed. But if Pain went for it, they would get some answers. These bodies kept coming back to life, but there had to be a limit. And this one in particular- the ‘Lead’ Pain- seemed different than the others. They were almost identical, yet this one spoke for them. Why this one? What was special about this Pain?

Pain began to raise his arms. A beam of light hit him squarely in the temple and exited out the other side. Staying in place, the light expanded in the middle of his head, until the top and bottom halves of Pain’s face separated.

Shoki breathed a sigh of relief.

“Know pain.”

Shoki only saw Pain’s jaw moving (despite the upper part of his face being gone) for a split second before being blasted by chakra. He tried to focus chakra to his feet, but couldn’t get enough in place in time, and went sailing. He flew through the air until a pair of arms caught him gently, but not tenderly.

“Target captured, Lord Pain,” came Konan’s impassive voice.

62 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh- Chapter 12

Fwoosh!

Yuji was right behind her, the bright, firey wings out of his back again. Using a fire jutsu, he set Konan's wings on fire before swooping in himself and snatching Shoki.

"Almighty Push!"

Yuji closed his wings around himself and Shoki, letting him and Shoki drop, shielded by the fire from Pain's attack. The wings slid back into Yuji, then dispersed, coating him in a layer of fire.

"You okay?" Yuji asked, his voice hurried. At Shoki's nod, he half-grinned, then spun to face Pain. What he saw astounded him.

The 'summoning' Pain had apparently come back, but was dissected by Miko. The 'lead' Pain was missing an arm. The Pain that could grab souls was also missing an arm. And behind all of them was a Pain Yuji hadn't seen. Apparently, Miko had managed to make this one explode, from the inside out, as the body was completely incinerated, and the concave burn wounds showed the attack had come from inside; like swallowing a paper bomb.

But Yuji didn't really see all that. All he saw was Miko, held in place by the lead Pain's Universal Pull Jutsu. She must have been struggling, because now he saw the one-armed 'soul' Pain reaching for her.

Yuji knew he'd never make it in time. There was nothing he could do. He ran toward the fight, but was met with two paper shuriken to his legs, sending him crashing. From the ground, he began to weave signs, until paper bound his arms. He concentrated as hard as he could, aiming a genjutsu at the Pains. More paper shuriken put a stop to that.

Shoki ran forward, but stopped when he saw Miko's eyes glaze over. Even he knew that it was the end.

Just as she had predicted, Miko had perished without a scratch on her.

The pain would come later, Yuji knew. Now, he could afford to feel nothing. At this moment, he had one more life to protect. The Pains were in bad shape. He needed to take advantage.

"Just like we practiced, Shoki," he muttered, his voice firm. He cast a glance at Miko's body being held by the soul-sucking Pain. Moving with speed he never thought possible, he slashed off Pain's arm with a mix of a Chakra Scalpel and the fire coating his body. He caught Miko's body, used a Replacement Jutsu, and landed a good distance away. He gently laid Miko down under a tree, pausing to look at her face one more time. They had never been married, but even despite that Yuji felt an affinity towards her. He crossed her arms over her chest, pausing again to look at her face. He closed his eyes, reached a hand out, and gently pulled her eyelids shut.

As her eyelids closed for the final time, Shoki realized that this was his sister, and yet Yuji didn't seem angry. Weren't they going to be married?

Then it hit him. Yuji had shifted to neutral chakra, devoid of any element. That was the key to the attack he was about to use.

Shoki 'dissolved' again, reappearing in front of the three remaining Pains. All three tried to grab him, but were rebounding from the Awasekagami Jutsu Shoki was casting. The gray 'mirror self' could block any physical blow or ninjutsu, apparently. And it wasn't limited to one 'self'. Rather, it was like 'mirror shadow clones'.

Yuji had since seen how Miko managed to kill one of the Pains. It took an internal injury so severe that there was instant paralysis, and so much damage that death would follow. That meant Yuji's new jutsu would do it. He had named this one himself, after working with it for a while. Before he could use it, he needed to do something else.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu! Sickle Moon Dance!"

Three clones spread out and attacked the stunned Pains. Each one managed to get their swords in and pry open a hole, leading to the innards of Pain. With Yuji directing, all three used the same jutsu:

"Fire Style: Shoukyaku Jutsu (Destroy by Fire Jutsu)!"

Exhaling neutral chakra into the wounds they had made, the clones disappeared, leaving only Yuji as their attacks finished. The fire that had reduced entire trees to ashes during practice in the open was now being confined to the size of a human body. That much power in such a small area...

BOOOM!

...had to be fatal. This HAD to work. Yuji had nothing left.

The smoke cleared, and the smoldering remains of the Pains fell to the ground. Burned chunks of body fell from the sky, landing all over with stomach-churning, squishy sounds coupled with the 'crick' of burnt flesh and internal organs.

Yuji fell to one knee, spent from the effort. Shoki was with him immediately.

"Are they finally dead?" Shoki asked, not seeing any movement. He looked to Yuji, who nodded.

"Yeah...They're de-"

As one, the Pains stood up, seemingly unscathed. Yuji pushed Shoki behind him, shielding him. He knew he could only give the boy a few extra seconds of life this way, but anything could happen in those few seconds.

"Yuji-senpai..."

Shoki's voice held a note of desperation. Yuji hated hearing the boy sound so worried. Yuji was the only

one the boy had left; at least, until he could find a better home for him. This attack, more than anything, made Yuji believe he would die early himself. But he wouldn't let himself die until he'd done all he could to make his friends happy.

As the Pains advanced, Yuji let his mind wander for a moment.

I never...had friends before. All this time I've tried to push them away. All because Naruto found happiness with Sakura. All because I was jealous. All because I could never measure up. Not to Naruto, but to myself. I demand perfection of myself...

Yuji tapped his sandal on the ground, loosening the hidden blade in the heel. He spun and kicked, sending the blade into the crowd of Pains coming toward him. It struck the throat of the 'Soul' Pain, but he might as well have sneezed at them for all the good it did.

Fumbling for a cigarette, Yuji dropped the first one, still pushing Shoki back while backpedaling himself, his eyes locked with the lead Pain.

...It was so stupid of me to resist. I could have been happy, even if I wasn't as strong as they were. But I chose this. And I guess I would always make that choice. I just can't live peacefully, knowing I could be doing more...

Yuji clicked his tongue, flicking aside the fake top on a hollowed-out tooth in the back. He clicked his tongue again to free a small black pellet that had been lodged inside the tooth. In the same motion, he spat it towards the coming crowd. It exploded nastily. While the residue of the explosive was still in the air, Yuji threw a string of kunai tied with razor wire. On the wire were exploding tags. He hit the Pains successfully. With seconds until detonation, Yuji spun Shoki away from the explosion, shielding him with his own body, his back toward the explosion.

That did some damage, buying a few extra seconds. The air was hot and stifling, burning with the scent of cinders and explosives. But the Pains just kept coming, seemingly unstoppable.

...I guess that'll be my downfall, then. But even if it's the end of me, I hope that I can at least save Shoki. I can cover him long enough to escape, I think...

As he moved to do that, Pain's sword slashed down. Yuji pushed Shoki away, then rolled backward himself, his foot coming up in a kick. Pain's sword was coming faster, so Yuji withdrew his foot and spun. As he did, he pulled a kunai out of his waist pouch.

Thunk.

The dull sound came from Yuji's back hitting a tree in mid-turn. Shoki was on the other side, peering around. Yuji had only looked for a second to check on him when he felt a presence immediately in front of him. Pain was right there, and his sword was thrusting toward Yuji.

I can't dodge it! If I move, it'll go right into Shoki! This is it!

Yuji moved just enough to avoid a critical hit. The tip of the sword went through Yuji's left shoulder, out

the other side of the tree, and stopped just shy of Shoki's face.

"Shoki! Go!" Yuji shouted, throwing his kunai into Pain's face.

"Know pain. Almighty Pu-"

63 - Arc VIII: Death of the Flesh-Chapter 13

((If you are able, please listen to the following song during this chapter:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbjnNPu01ms&NR=1>

Song: Akai Namida

Artist: Mami Kawada

Lyrics at the link below

[:http://atashi.wordpress.com/2007/09/23/shakugan-no-shana-the-movie-insert-theme-akai-namida/](http://atashi.wordpress.com/2007/09/23/shakugan-no-shana-the-movie-insert-theme-akai-namida/)

))

At that range, Yuji's arm would have been torn off. But Pain had stopped his jutsu. Or, rather, Yuji didn't hear it. Instead, he found himself surrounded by a pink, fleshy tunnel. Something had dissolved the tree, which freed Yuji.

Shoki was right there, checking Yuji's arm. He had a hypodermic needle in his hand, taken from Yuji's pack. Yuji was no medic-nin, so he carried medicines with him. The shot hurt for a second, but then relief from the pain kicked in. And when the haze cleared, Yuji realized where he was.

"You okay, kid?"

The voice of Jiraiya was the one questioning Yuji. He knelt down in front of him.

"You did good, Yuji. You kept Shoki safe."

Yuji groaned and sat up further. "And Pain?"

Jiraiya exhaled, apparently tired. "You gave them a hell of a fight. They weren't ready for me when I showed up. I managed to run them off. The tracker toad you dispatched got to me just in time."

The toad croaked in apparent agreement. Jiraiya must have come in through its mouth.

Yuji leaned his head back, eyes closed. "But Miko...she didn't make it...damn it."

Through the wall of the toad stomach (as Yuji now realized it was) came Miko's body. It came through the wall with a 'squelch' sound, and plopped down at Yuji's feet.

"I thought you'd like to bring her body back to the temple," Jiraiya told Yuji solemnly. "And I'm sorry. I know you were going to marry her..."

Yuji looked at the ring on Miko's finger, and the matching ring on his. He choked back tears.

"Yeah. We weren't in love romantically...at least I don't think so...but still...It was a bad idea to begin with. I wanted to adopt Shoki after we'd been married long enough. It was supposed to be only for a couple years, until Shoki could go to the ninja academy and find a better home. She was going to go back to being Uzume, and I was going to...go back to what I do now."

Jiraiya gave a slight smile, clapping Yuji on the shoulder. "It's better you don't adopt Shoki. You don't need to be tied down right now, Yuji. Besides, you're the trainer he needs, and the big brother he'd hoped to have. That's a good position for both of you."

Yuji agreed by nodding quietly. He noticed that Jiraiya's feet had taken an odd shape, and his nose was slightly different somehow. He looked questioningly at Jiraiya, who sighed.

"The next part of Naruto's training. Sage Jutsu."

--
--

Yuji carried Miko's body back the whole way. He had covered her with his jacket. His shirt had been burned away by his own fire wings, but he didn't care at this point. He just walked forward, his eyes straight ahead. No one got in his way, even when he reached the temple. When Asuna came to perform a ritual, Yuji stayed near the body. He didn't hear any of the prayers; he just looked at Miko's face. Not a scratch on it, or anywhere on her.

Her predication had come true.

She told me there was nothing I could do. But I couldn't accept that. And I still can't. Even though I couldn't save her...I just can't accept it.

Storing some of his remaining chakra in the ring on his finger, he slid it off and opened Miko's mouth. She was not yet stiff with rigor mortis. He pushed the ring in and under her tongue.

It's her chakra. It can't bring her back, but-

Miko sat up, blinked her eyes, and smiled at Yuji. Her hand caressed his shocked face.

"Thank you, Yuji. You would have made a good husband. Even if there was nothing between us, companionship for even the shortest while would have been welcome. And I didn't die alone. So...don't be hard on yourself, okay? That's not what I want, and not what you deserve."

She slumped back down, eyes closed peacefully, a small smile on her lips. Yuji sank to his knees, stunned. He felt a hand on his shoulder. He whipped his head around, seeing Asuna looking at him curiously.

"What happened? Are you okay?"

Yuji blinked, shaking his head. "You...didn't hear that? Or see that?"

Asuna narrowed her eyes. "See what? You've been standing here the whole time."

Yuji started to tell her what happened, but snapped his mouth shut. "I was just...dreaming. Sorry. I didn't mean to nod off."

Asuna seemed to understand. She gave him a sympathetic hug, then left. The others filed away as well. All but Jiraiya, Shoki, Sakura, and Naruto. Sakura wanted to tend to Yuji's wounds, but held back.

"I..." Yuji began, but couldn't finish.

"I heard it, too, sempai. She talked to me, too."

Shoki had been quiet as well. Now Yuji knew why.

"It must have been the chakra in the ring. It was her chakra; the chakra she had given me. She's amazing. I..."

Yuji felt the need to tell the whole story to Sakura and Naruto. And he did. They were shocked to hear he was going to be married to Miko, even when they heard why. Eventually, they left Yuji and Shoki alone with her body.

"A grave...We need to make a grave. Come on, Shoki."

--

An hour later, the two boys had dug a deep grave and made a grave marker. Using their collective abilities, they fashioned a stone cross with her name engraved on it. Yuji had used his coat as a burial shroud, and so still stood shirtless.

"Our exile is over, Shoki. Now we go to Head Devil Village. To learn more about your eye."

"That's good, sempai," Shoki told him. "My eye is...changing."

--

Yuji had quietly asked Naruto, Sakura, and Asuna/Uzume to watch his back while he healed himself. His stomach release was still undone, although he had since cleaned up the blood that was all over himself. The little 'X's' still showed up now and then, but they were minor.

"In case Pain attacks again, I just need cover long enough to snap out of my genjutsu and re-release the seal," he explained, hating to ask for help. "This is my first time doing it. Re-trying my curse binds, I mean. I'm not sure what it entails exactly, but Miko gave me instructions. So..."

"I'm really sorry for your loss, Yuji," Asuna told him. Her eyes were still moist from her tears, though she had maintained her dignity the whole time. She truly was a strong girl. "Miko and I were like sisters. So I...really can understand."

"Were you ever really married?" Naruto asked, earning him smacks in the head from the others.

"You idiot!" Sakura hissed, giving Naruto a smack on the head. "You don't just say that!"

Yuji rolled his neck, trying to loosen up. "I don't mind. No, we never actually got married. Like I said, it wasn't a romantic love thing. It was for Shoki's future...and her protection. I didn't tell her that, but I suspect she knew."

"Huh? Protection?" Naruto's tone held a question.

“Yes. She told me that she was going to die. I thought that if I married her and stayed close to her, I could protect her. But there was nothing else I could have done. I’ve run the scenario in my head a thousand times. No matter what, the option I...we chose. The option we chose was the best one, with the best odds of succeeding. And since it’s really thanks to her that Shoki and I made it...”

Yuji shook his head, exhaling as he did.

“I didn’t get much more intel on Pain, either. But he’s really afraid of Shoki’s abilities. And now that we’ve tested them, we know they’re effective. And protecting him is even more imperative.”

Shifting to a kneeling position, then bowing so low his head hit the floor, Yuji faced Naruto and Sakura, his eyes down.

“Should the worst happen to me, please see to it that Shoki is adopted in the Leaf. I know they’ll take care of him there. Until then, please watch over him...”

Raising his eyes, Yuji almost physically swallowed his pride.

“I beg you, Ojousama; Naruto-dono. He may be our best chance. But I don’t want it to come to that. I can trust no one else...OW!”

Asuna gave Yuji a smack. “You can’t trust anyone else?! What the hell am I?! And what about your girlfriend, Azami?! Idiot! You’ve got all the back-up in the world!”

Yuji just kept his head down. “Yes...I do. I have the best comrades a man could ask for. Which is why I’m able to beg like this. I swore I’d approach no one on bended knee like this...but pride doesn’t exist among comrades.”

That was the first time Naruto and Sakura had heard Yuji talk that way since he had been made their servant. And though his actual time spent as their servant was short, it had been a miserable period for him. To see him calling them ‘comrades’ now was welcome relief.

Sakura and Naruto each grabbed an arm. “You know you can count on us, Yuji. I’m just glad you realized it, too.” (Sakura)

“Yeah! We’ll get him in the academy and everything! But you’ll be there, too, so none of this ‘if I don’t make it’ crap!” (Naruto)

“And of course, you’ve also got me to rely on. In fact, you should, Yuji,” Asuna said thoughtfully. “I know about this ‘exile’ thing, but I also know it’s a sham. And with Miko dead, you don’t need to go there. Not right away.”

“I shouldn’t stay here...if Pain comes back...”

Asuna grabbed Yuji’s shirt, holding him up. “And what? Pain comes back, you get killed, and Shoki is screwed since he’s with you! Wake up to reality! You can’t protect everyone! Now, you’re going to stay here until you heal completely. Understood?”

“I-”

“UNDERSTOOD?!”

Yuji nodded. "The powers of a female are truly remarkable..."

"Nice of you to notice," Asuna shot back, tossing her head back to snap her hair into place. "And wise of you to notice, too. Since you'll totally wind up tied to some girl's apron strings."

"Or her hakama cords, hmm???" Naruto wheedled, leaning in closer to Asuna, a smirk on his face. "You're not looking' to get into HIS hakama, are ya?"

"Heh. I have the worst luck with women," Yuji chimed in, chuckling. "I never bothered to tell my first crush how I felt; my second crush tried to kill me, then told me I was too good for her- go figure THAT one- and then, when I forget about love and try to get married anyway, my wife-to-be gets killed. Maybe I'm just bad luck to girls. They know that instinctively, so they keep their distance..."

Everyone burst out laughing at that, despite the sad truths that lay within the statement. If Yuji was joking about it, he couldn't be feeling too bad. Even so, Yuji's mind was on his next task?

"Would you care to join me? Naruto-dono? Ojousama, I would request your presence, if possible..."

Yuji was about to go into his protective genjutsu. But this time, he was going to attempt to re-seal his own curse bindings. He'd never done it before, and even in a genjutsu where he didn't allow himself to get hurt, his real self might react and his genjutsu might collapse. If so, then Sakura could be of help. Naruto...he was only there to be sure that Yuji didn't try anything with Sakura. It was at Yuji's request, as a gesture of good faith.

-

Yuji entered his genjutsu state, followed shortly by Naruto and Sakura. He strolled through it, unconcerned with his paradise. Sakura had been here before, but not Naruto. This was a first for him, and he was amazed. This really was perfect. The temperature, the light feeling...everything.

He nudged Sakura, whispering "If he can do this, does this mean he's mastered genjutsu?"

"Come to think, he can do it without hand signs. Kind of like Itachi..." Sakura murmured in reply, understanding Naruto's thought process. "But he's no genius. He's not outright as powerful, but he may be clever enough to give Itachi a decent fight..."

Itachi would lead to Sasuke, they knew. Maybe Yuji would be the ally they needed to reach him.

Slowly, they became aware that Yuji had stopped. There was a dark corner to his paradise. The last time Sakura was here, she had seen doors sectioning it off. Inside was a Yuji that was constantly tormented and hurt. This time, there were no doors. Sakura could see right inside the dark area, and she wished she couldn't. With all her heart, she wished she couldn't. Even more, she wished she could help.

The 'other' Yuji was standing there normally, but there was a tight collar around his neck. In front of him was a grave with a headstone in the shape of a cross. Above the cross floated two purple eyes, with pupils like the ripples in a pond.

Out of nowhere, black swords pierced the 'other' Yuji from all angles. He cried out and cringed in pain, but couldn't move due to the collar.

Yuji himself stared blankly at the scene.

"I...don't understand. I...I..."

He shook his head, looking away while raising two fingers. A wall sprang up around his other self, with only a small window on the top of the structure. The structure itself was gray stone. Large stone blocks that even a Rasengan couldn't break. It was clear enough that Yuji didn't want to deal with this right now.

"I'm going to begin the healing process now..."

Damn them. The Akatsuki. Pain will pay for this.

With that, Yuji manipulated his real body, forcing his hand to use the Transparent Hand Jutsu and begin to tie the knot inside his stomach. He was glad he was in this genjutsu where illness was not allowed. The feeling of his own innards made him feel sure he would vomit any time now.

Naruto and Sakura were supportive and as kind as could be. Yuji would have welcomed that any other time. But now, everything felt condescending. The universe itself was mocking Yuji's inability to protect Miko. Even his own genjutsu paradise had thumbed the nose at him. He didn't need any more motivation to want to rip Pain to shreds. But he didn't want any motivation to hurt these two. So he smiled when he wasn't totally freaking out that he was tying a knot around the area of his digestive system.

64 - Arc IX: In Demon's Hands- Chapter 1

As soon as he could be packed, Yuji was ready to leave, save for Asuna's insistence that he stay put until he was healed. That was almost impossible for Yuji, but he made sure to slow down for Shoki's sake. There were still people Shoki needed to talk to, and things he needed to pack. Yuji told him they'd leave the next day.

So he sat at Miko's grave for a full twenty-four hours. Many things ran through his head during that time. He thought about revenge on and off; about what he could have done differently in that battle; about himself. Could he have had the other two run for it, and he held the Pains and Konan off? It was the norm for Yuji- questions, but no answers.

He was vaguely aware that Naruto and Sakura had dropped by at about the twentieth hour of his vigil. They didn't say anything or make a move. They just respected Yuji's space and let him have his silence. He owed them a debt of gratitude for that, he felt.

I hope you've found peace, Miko. Rest easy- I will protect Shoki. And I'll do all I can to make sure he grows up happy, healthy, and with the right to be whatever he wants.

Yuji stood up, his coat swishing as he turned quickly, fearing that he would cry yet again over what he'd lost. Now was not the time for that. Now was the time to look toward the future.

--
--

At the temple, Naruto and Sakura were waiting with Master Jiraiya. Yuji and Shoki were prepared to leave. They looked like different individuals now. Shoki had changed to wearing a white shirt, charcoal gray pants, and a black band on his upper arm. The black band was his memorial to Miko. Yuji had replaced his coat and physically looked better. But he seemed to be less focused- as if there was something going on in the back of his mind.

"Naruto-dono..."

Naruto had been thinking so hard about Yuji's trance that he put himself in one.

"Uh, yeah?"

"In three months, when I come back, go with Master Jiraiya for your next round of training. While you're gone, Shoki and I will protect Sakura."

Naruto's face shifted just a bit- just enough so Yuji could tell he was uncomfortable about this prospect. "I gave you my word, Naruto-dono, that I wouldn't pursue her. You've never known me to break my word. I'm not going to start now. In fact...I'll take her to the Land of Waves. To visit Azami. They can have girl time, or whatever. If nothing else, you can count on Azami keeping my attention." With a wry grin, Yuji added:

“Because I never can tell if she’ll kiss me or kill me.”

Hesitating, Yuji decided to amend his statement.

“Rather, I should say, if it’s okay with Sakura. I’ve no business dictating anything to my...masters.”

After another slight pause, Yuji sank to one knee, his fist planted on the ground, his eyes down.

“That is, if you’ll allow me to serve you once again when I return. After this obligation, I would be honored to serve the two of you. I swear to give you the distance and respect that go with both your ages and your stations, of course...”

They were stunned, as Yuji had hoped they’d be. That allowed him a smooth departure.

“Please think it over. You’ve got three months to consider it, so please make the decision at your leisure.”

Yuji turned his attention to Master Jiraiya.

“Master Jiraiya, may I ask that you join Shoki and I, at least briefly? I think there’s something we need to discuss...”

--

Sitting quietly in the back of a bar, the three stared at each other for a long time. Yuji was waging an internal conflict, but ultimately one side needed to win. And he knew which side would from the start.

“Master Jiraiya...Shoki needs specialized skills. What he’s come up with is brilliant, and he’s done it largely on his own. He needs better training than I can give him. I am his guardian for the time being, and I know that’s a dangerous arrangement. For him and me.”

Yuji paused, letting the silence fall for a few minutes. He put his hand on the table, fingers flexing, forcing the tiniest bit of tension out of his body.

“That’s why I’m asking you to come with us to Heat Devil Village. My plan is to scout myself. All I ask is that you keep Shoki safe, and give him some kind of exercise that will enrich his training. Even the slightest bit will do. I’m going in to this truly not knowing what awaits me. They tried to assassinate Miko at one point...they know my face. I’m honor-bound to go, and I can’t stop Shoki. But I can see he gets something out of this trip. And Shoki himself has something he wishes to discuss with you. Something that I cannot hear.”

Yuji bowed until his head hit the table. “Master Jiraiya...consider this the last request I’ll ever make of you. Please help me to ensure Miko’s gift isn’t wasted. She saved my life...and Shoki’s.”

--

Asuna cautioned her new attendant, Akari, not to disturb her. The new, young miko was very pretty, if a little subdued. The temple of the Fire Daimyo was to be the girl’s orphanage. Her entire family had been wiped out. She had no memory of them. But she pushed herself to find a purpose in her life. And for now, being a miko was her reason for living. She did well at it, so it was no stretch for Asuna/Uzume to choose her as an attendant.

Closing the black curtain behind her, Asuna sat down on the pillow that Miko used to frequent. The same pin in her hair that Miko used to wear, she sat down and focused. Her world went black, then slowly reformed in shades of light and dark; black and white. Only the flickering candle that she kept in front of

her was a constant from this world and the next.

Asuna walked along, seeing many spirits. All of them were attached to tall, thin grave markers. There were a few demons among the spirits, doing grotesque things with their faces and bodies in an attempt to draw Asuna's attention.

She walked straight forward, steadfastly approaching her target. In the distance, she spotted her target. Even from this distance, she could tell that her target was sad. A lifetime of suppressed emotion was exiting her now, before her final transition to peace. But her clothes were ragged, her hair had lost its sheen, and the dignity she projected was gone.

The Shinigami's stomach...it's a horrifying place.

--

The people here were all dead, to be sure. But their deaths were not naturally occurring. They had been ingested by the Shinigami himself through the use of various jutsu over the years. It was a horrifying thought that *one* jutsu could cause the Shinigami to appear; the hundreds of jutsu evidenced by the number of victims here was unthinkable.

"Hello there, young lady. Might you have a moment?"

The Third Hokage approached Asuna, his hands behind his back, a cheerful smile on his face. "I'm sorry to disturb your question, but I believe you are acquainted with my apprentice? He goes by 'Yuji' now, but I knew him as Ryouko."

Asuna closed her eyes, placing a name with the face. "That's correct, Lord Third Hokage. Am I to assume that you have some message for him?"

Sarutobi gave a small smile. "Well, I hoped for a little more than that. That young woman at the end...she possessed the skill to call people back from the dead for a short time. She swore off it, of course. But there's a grave danger approaching. My apprentice will play a vital role in many lives, if he survives. If I can speak with him, even for a moment, it may make all the difference. And if he sees his bride-to-be alive one more time..."

It hit Asuna suddenly. The feeling she'd gotten from Yuji at the burial of the fourth Uzume. There was none. With her heightened sensory abilities, that wasn't right. She should have felt a lot more than that. The most conspicuous emotion was missing.

"Revenge!"

Sarutobi produced a pipe and began to smoke. It emitted smoke, but no smell. "If he attempts revenge as he is now, he will die. If he dies, so will the two of the prophecy. If they die, all hope is lost."

Asuna shook her head. "Even if he's successful..."

Sarutobi narrowed his eyes. "Yes. The worst could still happen. If he kills that threat, a worse one will come about. Even I cannot foresee what that would be..."

Asuna concealed her panic. Focusing her almost white chakra, she slashed through the chain that

bound Sarutobi to his grave marker.

“Come with me. We have someone else to save, too.”

Yuji strode through Heat Devil Village by himself. Every eye was on him. Outsiders weren't rare, but not many had the nerve to march through town alone, asking questions about a kekkeigenkai that was thought to be long gone.

--
--

Jiraiya had accompanied them all the way to Heat Devil Village, but couldn't stay with them beyond that. Yuji begged him to take Shoki upon seeing what this place looked like. Jiraiya agreed, apparently thinking the same thing as Yuji: If a place qualified as hell on earth, this was it. People impaling themselves and others in the street en masse, blood everywhere. The place stank of death. And yet, there were no graves.

Approaching a saloon of sorts, Yuji entered it, looking immediately to the bartender. They heard a lot of information. For a price, he would likely talk. If Yuji lived that long. He was constantly aware of people scanning him.

The bar was simple; just a few tables and a long counter made of wood. There were windows only in the front, and one door in the back. Yuji noted those in case he needed to beat a hasty retreat.

Going up to the bar, he leaned against it, buying the most expensive drink right away. Like he'd drink anything they served here, but it endeared him to the bartender right away. Especially when he tipped well.

“You know, I bet you hear a lot of things behind that bar...” Yuji began. He let a coin drop on the counter. It bounced to the bartender.

“A fair amount. I'd be interested enough in passing along what I know...”

Another coin hit the bar. This one Yuji placed between his thumb and the bar, and gave it a spin. It spun right into the bartender's hands.

“I'm looking for information on the Issekigan. It's an eye condition...”

The bartender turned away from Yuji.

“You've been a nice guy. Leave, quickly.”

Yuji didn't get that, but he figured it out quickly enough. When he turned around, he saw a whole bunch of people with symbols around their neck.

Church of Jashin symbol? The one's who murdered Shoki's father...no wonder I've been getting stares...

They must've killed everyone who could have learned the Issekigan. Now I'm asking about it. Of course they'd be suspicious of that. I'd better think fast, or-

CRASH!

An axe that had to weigh two hundred pounds crashed down on the bar, smashing it. Yuji escaped just

in time, using his chakra to stick to the back wall. That axe wasn't the only weapon down their, either. There were a good half-dozen of weapon-wielding zealots.

They're immortal, so you don't have to hold back.

Yuji smirked a little; these guys had no skill, or he'd be in pieces by now. This would be easy, if he played his cards right.

65 - Arc IX: In Demon's Hands- Chapter 2

Shoki demonstrated what he could do, while Jiraiya evaluated him. Truthfully, his mind was only maybe a third on Shoki. He had other thoughts in his head.

Three months and then Naruto will start his Sage training. Hopefully, being with Yuji, Sakura will level up her genjutsu. That's Naruto's weak spot by far, and she'll be a perfect compliment to him that way.

Maybe a better question is why Yuji decided to entrust Shoki to me. After I made it clear that Shoki's eye should be used against the Rinnegan, and Yuji vehemently protested. Surely he had options. That Shinmaru fellow, for example, or Azami...

Shoki's jutsu ended and he stopped, waiting for Jiraiya's appraisal. The sannin was impressed, even for paying less than half attention.

"I wish I could show you more, but I don't know enough about my eye to really..." Shoki began, apologizing humbly.

"No, it's okay. I'm going to help your fundamentals. You've got a good grasp on them already. Now, you know your chakra types, right?"

"Yes. Lightning and Earth," Shoki replied. He paused a moment, deciding to elaborate. "Yuji thinks that this is why I'm able to use the Issekigan. My chakras are opposites, allowing me almost a full range of offense and defense against any chakra type."

Jiraiya wondered about something right there. He decided to try something.

"Shoki, I'm going to attack you with a fire attack. I want you to block it the way you talked about blocking Yuji's fire attack."

Shoki set himself the way he had practiced and waited patiently. Jiraiya used his Toad Oil Flame Bomb attack. Shoki's eye captured the image of the fire and froze it as if on a mirror's surface. On the bottom of the mirror was a small character that said 'fire'.

"Amazing..."

This could be why it affects the other special eye types. Rinnegan can use all six types of chakra. If the conditions Yuji is guessing are correct, then the Issekigan can be used to defend against all six types.

The Sage of Six Paths created new jutsu with his Rinnegan. It stands to reason there would be an opposite to the Rinnegan, similar to the way the Byakugan and Sharigan have similar abilities. Now, what would happen if...

"Shoki, try defending against my Shadow Clone this time. I want you to block it the same way you did the fire attack."

Shoki nodded, wondering what this was about. Yuji never had him do that. How could he block a Shadow Clone that way? Freezing the image of a person using the Awasekagami (Opposite Mirror) Jutsu was one thing, but this was different entirely. Still, he had nothing to lose by trying. Jiraiya would not seriously hurt him.

The Shadow Clone came in, straight and moving slowly since this was a test run. Shoki captured the image and immediately felt a strain on his chakra. The clone slowed first, then ground to a complete halt, just like the fire attack.

“Good! Okay, I know this is a hit on your chakra, so we’ll make this the last thing for today,” Jiraiya told him. This was shaping up to be very interesting indeed. “You can physically touch the ‘mirror’ that your eye casts to capture an image in the real world, right?”

Shoki nodded in the affirmative. “But I can’t feel, for example, the heat of a fire. The feeling is...neutral. Like touching my own skin.”

“Mm. That should work. Okay, I want you to smash the mirror that’s holding my clone. Use any attack you want. Taijutsu might be best at this point, since your chakra is being used up with your eye...”

Shoki chose to use a standard kick. His foot shattered the mirror. The Shadow Clone disappeared as if it had taken normal damage.

“Aaghh! Damn, that hurt.”

Shoki spun to see Jiraiya holding a sizeable wound on the center of his chest. Blood was spurting from it. The strange part was that the wound was in the same place that Shoki had kicked the Shadow Clone.

“I thought so,” Jiraiya murmured, rubbing some special ointment on his wound. “There’s always a kick-back when it comes to Shadow Clones, but this confirms my theory.”

Turning to Shoki, Jiraiya smiled in a friendly way, so as not to alarm the boy. He now held a very powerful and dangerous ability within him. With some fine-tuning, it would be a match for almost anything.

“Shoki, you destroyed a Shadow Clone there. It didn’t have a lot of my chakra, so I’ll live. But imagine if you caught a real person in there- you’ve done that before, against Pain, if Yuji is correct-then the person himself would be shattered, just like the ‘mirror’ that holds the image.’

Jiraiya didn’t need to elaborate further. The way to defeat, or at least severely weaken Pain, was now evident.

“But-” Jiraiya added, thinking of Yuji as he did, “This power is yours. If and when you use it is up to you. You don’t need to become a weapon. There’s good and bad about that decision, but Yuji is right. Now that I’ve met you, I understand what he was saying. It’s your choice now, Shoki. To fight or not. You’re intelligent and more than competent. But don’t let that stress you out. If you need help making the decision, you should ask whoever you trust.”

Shoki stayed silent for a moment, turning his thoughts over in his head. When he finally spoke, he spoke

slowly, as if tasting each word as he said it.

“Master...what if I don’t want to do what I thought? I mean...there’s something else I’d like to do. ...”

“Oh? Like what?”

Shoki drew himself up, looking at the ground even as he tried to sound certain. “I want to be a medical shinobi. Yuji keeps getting hurt, and Lady Sakura is so amazing...”

“*Lady Sakura?*”

“If Yuji serves them, I do as well. And maybe I can learn from them, since I can’t teach them...”

Jiraiya chuckled to himself. **If only you knew, Shoki. You could probably teach us *all* a thing or two.**

“Well, then that’s what you should do. Shinobi like Sakura are rare, but I think you’ve got the talent to pull it off.”

“Will you keep training me? I don’t want to be useless in combat. If anything, I’d like to know more. The more I know, the more I can help people, and the less people need to be hurt by me not wanting to be a weapon.”

--

--

Asuna and Sarutobi approached Miko carefully. Of all the souls tortured in the stomach of the shinigami, she seemed the most miserable. Her hair and clothes were tattered, and her face held no life. The only flicker of emotion was fear in her eyes that never subsided.

“To bring someone back to life...from death...it’s amazing that such a jutsu exists...”

Asuna shook her head to Sarutobi’s comment. “It’s amazing, and so wrong. Death is natural. This place is wretched, but it’s the reason this works.”

Sarutobi held a question in his eyes. Asuna didn’t need to look to know it was there.

“This technique works because these are the souls that did not die a natural death. To have your soul swallowed by a god of death is not the same as dying naturally. The souls here are condemned to suffer. Which is the only reason that I, as a miko, can interfere and perhaps help put you to real eternal rest.”

Kneeling down, she gently pulled the chain off of Miko’s neck. Miko reacted by jumping backward on all fours, curling up into a ball and covering her ears, eyes shut tightly, with incoherent gurgling coming out of her mouth.

Asuna knelt down and put both her hands under Miko’s chin, cupping it and forcing their eyes to meet. Miko breathed out, stunned at first, then her eyes slowly calmed, and her body relaxed.

“This...is truly hell.”

The first words she spoke. She held on Asuna's sleeve, even as Asuna forced her into a gentle hug, rubbing Miko's hair and back soothingly.

"Hell is not your place, Miko. Neither is it yours, Sarutobi."

Lifting Miko's chin, Asuna again looked her in the eyes.

"You have to go back. Fight. One more battle. Then your body and soul will know true peace. You know that I speak the truth, Miko. It was you who taught it to me."

Sarutobi still smiled serenely. "This hell...my death was unnatural, but of my own design. I must return here. I've condemned my own soul."

"Yuji won't like it..." Asuna warned him.

"Yes, I know. But he is an upright man who understands duty, if nothing else."

Asuna smiled a little at the description. Yes, that was Yuji to be sure.

"I expected I'd have to yank his soul out of here by now."

"Were he the Yuji of old, you would have," Sarutobi admitted judiciously. "It may seem contrary to the visible eye, but his will to live is stronger now. He is self-sacrificing, but when his time comes, he will not die foolishly. All the better if he never uses the last jutsu I was able to teach him..."

--
--

Yuji was surrounded by what had to be the entire Church of Jashin congregation. And not one of them looked unhappy about it. Since he didn't have to hold back or worry about killing, he could just let off his frustration now. If he survived. The tricky part was that he didn't know the nuances of their abilities. For all he knew, Hidan was a special case with the blood eating deal. Immortality was in the church's doctrine, so that was a definite yes. Best to fight as efficiently as possible.

"SHOUKYAKU JUTSU!" Yuji roared, exhaling neutral chakra at the crowd. A small tornado of fire opened up in the center of the bar, then exploded outward, shattering the windows and sending the tables and chairs flying. People scrambled around, trying to avoid the sudden burst. By then, Yuji was in the midst of the confusion, dealing damage at a rapid-fire pace. By the time his jutsu calmed down, he had removed two-thirds of the opposing force. The remaining group wasn't as excited to fight as before.

"Why do you want to know about the Issekigan?" called out one of those who had avoided the blast. She was an older woman, gone gray and gaunt. Due to the fact that everyone shut up when she began to speak, and judging by the ceremonial-looking shawl across her shoulders, Yuji guessed she was of some importance.

"I cannot say. It's not for my own gain, nor is it to wage war on your church. Beyond that..." Yuji made an 'I can't say' gesture.

The old woman nodded, holding up a hand. Everyone's weapons were stowed back into their clothes, and they all shuffled away, heads down.

Leaning close, the old woman asked Yuji if he would be interested in making a deal.

“What kind of deal?”

“If I tell you the conditions of the Issekigan, you take my son and his wife and kids with you when you leave. They’ve seen too much senseless bloodshed already...”

Yuji readily agreed.

“Follow me, then,” the old woman requested, beckoning Yuji toward a building roughly half a mile away. Yuji had noticed it right away when coming in to town; it stood out somehow, without him ever knowing what it was.

“To our church, where the records are kept. There I can give you answers.”

--

--

Naruto and Sakura were training, punching and kicking back and forth, when Jiraiya approached them, Shoki in tow. Shoki stayed back while Jiraiya spoke quietly to Sakura. Naruto wandered over to Shoki to talk, and they started a little sparring match of their own. That was Naruto’s way of giving Sakura and Jiraiya room to talk.

-

“So he wants to be a medical ninja, like you,” Jiraiya finished. “He’s trained with Yuji, and frankly, were he to pursue that line of training, he would be jonin level in a short time. But he looks up to Yuji, and is determined to stay by his side. And Yuji’s place is by your side. Yours and Naruto’s.”

Sakura hadn’t yet considered taking on an apprentice. She hadn’t really felt like she mastered all of Lady Tsunade’s teachings. But, then again, sometimes teaching was the easiest way to learn. And besides, if she taught Shoki, then Yuji might be forced to stay friends with her. Even in a serious relationship with Naruto, Sakura wanted to maintain a friendship with Yuji.

“Well, okay, I guess. It would be kind of nice to train someone,” she said to Jiraiya.

Then the Sannin got more serious.

“Sakura, in a couple months, you realize Naruto needs to go to finish his training. I know it’ll be hard on you, but if he doesn’t go, he won’t stand a chance.”

Sakura lowered her eyes. “I know. I’ve promised myself I’ll be strong. And if I’ve got an apprentice, then I’ll be busy and won’t worry so much.”

She tried to smile bravely at the end.

“Yuji will be back at that point. To train you, actually,” Jiraiya added. “In genjutsu. We can tap that ability further. You’re built for genjutsu, but you aren’t making the most of that potential. Tsunade was never stellar at genjutsu herself, which is probably why it hasn’t come up.”

“Yuji...Master, are you sure? Lately I’ve realized just how hard it must have been for him. To be in love with me, to be forced to not only sit back and watch, but encourage my relationship with another man, and then have to watch it blossom. I can’t even imagine...”

Jiraiya gave her a grin. "Well, I think that you thought like that would make Yuji's day. But whatever you do, don't waver. You're with Naruto; as long as you're serious, stay true to him. If it turns out he's not the one, well, then it turns out that way. But the most painful thing for Yuji would be to see you break up with Naruto over feelings of misplaced guilt."

66 - Arc IX: In Demon's Hands- Chapter 3

Yuji walked into the church, following the old woman. What he saw made him shiver. If there was ever a house of demonic torture, this was it.

Lining the walls were torture devices. One smiling man hung from a noose; another was pulling the cord on a guillotine, through which his own head was laying. Shaking coffin-like devices full of spikes held fervently-praying worshippers. Up on some kind of altar, one man was slowly impaling himself on a spike, face-down.

“Forgive me, Jashin! I broke your most sacred commandment...”

Yuji forced himself to look away, and to keep following the woman. She led him to the back of the church, giving Yuji the full view of it for the first time.

It was an older building, a rare two-story wooden structure with a cathedral ceiling. The wood was dark, and the inside was lit only by candles. The place felt haunted, especially with all the sadistic torture devices lining the walls. There were screams of pleasure, but none of agony.

Yuji shook his head, trying to clear his mind. He needed to focus. When he turned around, he noticed the woman bending over, digging for a scroll amongst lots of dusty other scrolls and bound manuscripts. She found the one she was looking for. On it was an occult-like symbol that was shaped vaguely like an eye.

“This will tell you all we have discovered. But it will do you little good without a living user of the Issekigan.”

Yuji didn't feel right, talking about Shoki, so he nodded his thanks without elaborating.
“Now, your son and his family...Can they move freely?”

“Oh, yes! They're not prisoners. I just with a better life for them. They refuse to worship Jashin, though they were born into the religion. I myself am the leader of this church, so you can understand my frustration with them. But their life is their own.”

Yuji frowned, thinking of the best way to do this.
“When do you congregate next?”

“In two hours time.”

“Alright, I'll get them out of here then. Have them meet me outside the church doors, wearing something so that their faces are hidden. I'll work out the rest.”

--

--

Well, it was a plan, alright. A good plan? Maybe not. A simple one, yes.

Plan A: Sneak out while everyone impaled themselves on pikes in tribute to Jashin (or whatever they did at their version of worship).

Plan B: Run like hell while incapacitating anyone who came near the group.

Yuji wanted Plan A to work. The four with him, though immortal, were not fighters. If they were incapacitated, he'd have to drag them out, slowing everyone down and increasing the chances of casualties. Not to mention lessening the chance of death for the only mortal of the group- Yuji himself.

But there were no holes in the plan. They escaped without a hitch. Things went smoothly. Too smoothly, in Yuji's opinion. Some little instinct screamed at him, because he turned around to see the group of four staring at him with odd expressions. Yuji stared back for a moment before realizing it-

They're under genjutsu!

Out came their weapons, and all four directed their attacks on Yuji. Some part of him had prepared for this. He dodged back, taking aim with his neutral chakra ability, and gave a loud yell.

"Shoukyaku Jutsu!"

The space between the four erupted with an explosion that rattled the teeth of the four. It also did damage physically, taking out their legs. Yuji didn't know who had put them under genjutsu for certain, but felt sure that the old woman who gave him the scroll had done it. If so, he had to move fast.

Before he left, he looked at the four. Maybe they were dupes, or maybe they were in on it. Either way, Yuji wasn't going to leave them there.

Damn my good nature.

"Summoning Jutsu! Yo-O, to the Hidden Leaf. I can't carry them all, and this way we'll get home faster."

As an afterthought, Yuji laid out the scroll from the church of Jashin. He drew an elaborate circle made of his own blood. He gave a small bow, and put a Sealing Jutsu on the scroll. That would contain it, be it booby-trapped with genjutsu or an explosion.

Time to go home. For the first time in a long time. Yuji had a lot to think about on the way home.

--

Being summoned by Lady Tsunade was nothing new for Naruto and Sakura. However, when they say what was awaiting them, they were more than a little surprised.

Before Lady Tsunade lay a number of relics from the Third Hokage's time, including his crystal ball, and a mysterious black scroll, bound by a thick white cord. Tsunade herself was looking particularly grim. Her expression lightened when the two entered, but otherwise the dark mood of the room did not

change.

Without waiting for a prompt, Tsunade began:

“I think it’s only fair that you two know that the prophecy is close to fulfillment. It is also fair that you see the document that has caused you so much trouble. Well, ‘see’ isn’t the right word, as it won’t be legible to you,” Tsunade added thoughtfully. “‘Feel’ may be a better choice of words. It emits an aura that is ominous. It almost has a chakra of it’s own.”

Sakura and Naruto could tell that much right away. The temperature in the room had dropped probably ten degrees below the normal comfortable temperature. Neither Naruto or Sakura were really accustomed to the cold, so they were shivering uncomfortably. When Tsunade mentioned the scroll, their curiosity beat out the chill in their bones.

Sakura took the scroll carefully, just holding it, weighing it in her hands. It was ordinary paper; nothing special about the weight or color. But the cord holding it...

It reminds me of the one in Yuji’s stomach, she decided. It’s more powerful than it looks, and if I think about removing it, I get chills. Not the good kind of chills.

Naruto felt the same but he still undid the cord and ripped open the scroll.

The letter was either too sloppy or too old to be read. Some of the kanji was outdated. Naruto barely knew the kanji needed for everyday life, so there was no way he could decipher this. It looked like one, long, run-on kanji.

“The point,” Tsunade said, regaining their attention, “is that you’ve gotten part of the prophecy. You two are a couple now, which is mentioned. However, mentioned with it is that your power must equal and surpass every other shinobi’s. And therein lies the problem.”

Tsunade stood up suddenly, hearing the beating of large wings. That was followed by a rap on her window.

Yuji was hanging, upside-down, outside of her window, patiently waiting to be let in. Tsunade opened the window, chuckling to herself.

“What, you couldn’t find the door? It’s only been a few months!”

Yuji didn’t even crack a smile.

“My Lady, I have four...people. I don’t know if they’re prisoners or dupes, but there’s a new war going on that you need to know about.”

--

Once Yuji was inside, and the four he had brought with him in ANBU’s care, there were a lot of questions.

Yuji looked a little healthier. He had filled out a bit more in the chest and shoulders. He had also gained

a bit of intensity, but at the same time projected a quiet sadness. The ring he wore as a pendant around his neck left no one guessing as to the cause.

Yuji explained about the Church of Jashin, and their declaration of war on the Leaf by their attack on the Fire Daimyo's temple. By forcing Miko to defend herself, they had given cause to conflict. And Yuji was determined to see the war through.

"Put me on the front lines by myself. I'm going to take care of them. This is where my religious tolerance ends."

Tsunade nodded weakly, wanting to avoid another conflict for the moment. She resumed her speech after catching Yuji up.

"The problem is this: You two must be 'either the strongest, or in love'. You have met the conditions of that, with the second condition. This raises the question- is the prophecy dissolved now, or does it continue on until the other stipulation is met. The part I have cited to you is what you already know, and the language is clear enough. But there are later parts to this prophecy that point out other things. Not the least of which that a third person must compliment you. A new group of legends, if you will."

"Sasuke..." Yuji muttered darkly. Every head in the room snapped toward him. He looked up, met their eyes quickly, and then lowered his.

"It would be either him or me. Even the description could fit either one of us."

"Description?" Sakura asked, looking at Tsunade.

"Yes. I didn't mention it, but Yuji makes a good point. The description calls the third party a 'dark-haired avenger breathing fire'. Pretty terms, but it refers to two points that could be either Yuji or Sasuke."

Yuji was still speaking quietly, in the monotone voice that usually accompanied great mental anguish. "Further, my Lady...from the prophecy directed at me. The 'Ten no Kishootsu' prophecy...it tells of a battle between me and a 'raven-haired shinobi with eyes the color of blood'..."

Yuji looked away, ashamed at his eyes betraying him with tears.

"It was something Miko told me before she died. I just never...well, I never put two and two together."

"You're gonna fight Sasuke?!" Naruto shouted, his chair falling over behind him as he stood up in a rush. Sakura joined him, slightly more calmly. Both of their gazes washed over Yuji. If possible, he paled further.

"It also says that one or both of us will perish during the battle."

67 - Arc X: True Form- Chapter 1

In a battle between Sasuke and I, he has the clear advantage. He has fire and lightning to my fire and earth styles. His lightning trumps my earth style, and my fire style will likely fall short of his Uchiha-enhanced fire ninjutsu. His genjutsu will also always defeat mine.

My advantage is neutral chakra. He may be unable to read it, or at the very least have a difficult time following it.

Taijutsu may be a mutual point. A point worth expanding upon, somehow. He's copied Lee's speed, and has since built up the physical parameters to withstand it. I need to surpass the speed he saw and copied.

Hands folded, Yuji contemplated his next, and bigger, problem.

Do I win? Even if I have the ability, winning means killing Sasuke. But I don't kill unless I'm defending someone. Do I count as 'someone'? More to the point, if I kill him, will Naruto and Sakura ever forgive me?

And yet, what choice do I have? I don't care about accolades as a 'legend'. I'm resigned to a life of service to those two, and I'm finally okay with it. But this just kills everything.

Dropping his head into his hands in despair, he tried to weight his options, but came up with more bad news:

Fighting is all I know. Fighting is what I love. But what if I changed my destiny? What if I gave up fighting? If I were to terminate the Ten no Kishootsu prophecy...

I would be weak. Pathetically weak.

But then, I would no longer 'need' to fight Sasuke. It's not impossible for me to learn a new way of life, and maybe even enjoy serving the two of them. But...

But this feeling of cowardice. I'm avoiding this because it is unpleasant. Even so, lives hang in the balance. I need to make a decision.

With that, Yuji slipped into his genjutsu world. He saw his tower in the distance, where his inner self that represented his demons were hidden. He had bonded with the beast within once; perhaps one more time would give him some kind of wisdom he was currently lacking.

And if not, the pain would remind him he was alive for the time being. Who knew when Sasuke would show up? And with the war with the Church of Jashin he planned to wage (with or without the Leaf for backup), his life could be at an end at any time. But that was no different than usual. Just one more crisis. His only consolation was that fear could be like pain- if you felt it often enough, with enough force, or if you felt it beyond the limit of your tolerance, the pain stopped. Maybe the fear would, too.

--

It was awful for Sakura. She was torn between the thought of Sasuke coming home and the hell that had defined Yuji's life for more than a year now.

I want Sasuke back. But at what cost? I don't know if Yuji could or would kill Sasuke. But I know Sasuke is both capable and willing to kill. It worries me so much. I don't want to be involved. I wish I didn't know about this.

An image of Yuji's battered, broken body being carried into a hospital room seeped into her mind. She watched his last pitiful attempts at breath, and then his chest stopped heaving, and he died, miserable to the end. So much left undone. So much potential wasted in senseless violence.

No! I don't want that to happen to Yuji! There must be a way out for everyone! These prophecies be damned! I don't want any of my friends to die!

Sakura resolved then and there to solve this problem. It didn't take her long to realize there was only one solution.

If Yuji gave up his abilities as this 'Heaven's Temper'...then that prophecy would be shattered! He wouldn't have to die or kill Sasuke! But that would also mean giving up an ability he's worked so hard for. But if it's the only way...

--

Naruto didn't like this at all. But his concerns were more for the moment than about any prophecy.

Yuji looked ready to cry. He's tough, and won't show us that side of him, but he's dying inside. This whole damn this is unfair. And now, we know Sasuke is supposed to come back...but he's going to kill Yuji or be killed by Yuji? That's not how it was supposed to work. Maybe if I bring Sasuke back first...

No, even if I COULD, he and Yuji would just fight. Damn it! There's no solution!

Naruto thought back to his lonely days. He knew firsthand that the most crowded room could be the most lonely place. Naruto had been an outcast for things that hadn't been his fault. Yuji didn't fit in, and that wasn't his fault, either. It was all like some sick joke.

I had to work so hard to get anyone to accept me. And when they did, I was happy. Beyond happy. The only acceptance Yuji got was a prophecy that put his life in me and Sakura's hands. And worse yet...

Naruto's fist tightened painfully, causing his knuckles to turn first red then white with strain.

Worse yet, I find out I'm living his dream. Sakura, power, a good teacher. He's been denied all of that. What makes him any less worthy than me?

Naruto knew that didn't matter either. Luck, karma, fate, hitsuzen, whatever you called it, this was the hand that had been dealt. And Yuji was not the type to fold. Naruto knew that much.

I'm going to be more of a buddy to him. And if I can't be a buddy, then I'll *find* other people who can. If he has to serve us, he's going to enjoy it, whether he likes it or not!

Naruto briefly wondered about that Azami chick and what her deal was. He could tell from first glance that she could make just about anyone happy, if she wanted. And she had a special affinity for Yuji as it was. But then, Yuji had obviously tried to get somewhere with her, and it hadn't worked, for whatever reason.

--

For three days straight, Yuji and his mirror-image battled in their genjutsu environment. Finally freed from his prison, Yuji's other self was devious and attacked. Yuji's first thought was to subdue him again, but decided instead to fight. Instinct kicked in, and he fought himself over and over again, in a never-ending battle that resembled a vulgar dance. He took care never to kill his other self, lest he suffer a serious backlash.

"Aren't you done yet? I've beaten you ten times!" Yuji demanded, a chakra scalpel at his image's neck. "I need to absorb you. It says so on the scroll."

His mirror self got up and kicked; Yuji cut his leg off with the chakra scalpel.

"Take all the time you want. I'm going to absorb you and make your power mine," Yuji told 'himself' viciously. "I need it. I'm going to fight, and I'm not going to die. And if I'm going to fight Sasuke at full-power and not kill him or get killed, then I need this power. Only you can give it to me."

"Power comes from within. She taught you that, I suppose? The she-demon in hell?"

Yuji gave a vicious kick to his counterpart. "I don't need to be made more angry. I wish I could have saved her. I wish I could have traded places with her. At least then this nightmare would be over. But because it's not, I won't waste her sacrifice."

Yuji checked the time. His body was due to collapse in real life. More importantly, ANBU was suppose to have the scroll returned to him. The one with the Issekigan's history in it. He needed rest before he tackled that beast.

Time enough to beat this other guy, then. I need that power; no bluffing there. I also need the 'Ten no Kishootsu' scroll to know the full extent of what I'm up against. But I can't leave...

--

--

Azami had just finished a good training session on the white sands of the beach below her home. She never got tired of the brimy breeze, or the beautiful view, or the lack of real combat. She kept her skills sharp, because she was still wanted. But most of the villages had given up. Her name had spread, and

as she had wiped out a number of her former comrades who were on the shadier side in the process of cleaning up her new home, most considered her reformed.

“Hey, Azami!”

That was Kojiro, a fisherman whose father had helped build the Great Naruto Bridge. Azami had hit it off with him pretty well. They were both a little on the lonely side. Fishing all day didn’t leave much of a time to get to know anyone else. And Azami was untouchable. That had been the downside to cleaning up this place single-handedly. People feared her.

But not Kojiro. And, after a while, Azami noticed he was handsome in a rugged way. With the piece of knotted rope tied around his forehead, a chest bare save for a tattered best, bronzed from work in the sun, and a muscular frame, he was an attractive catch for any girl.

Azami wasn’t sure she was fishing, though. She thought of her skinny, pale, mop-headed friend from the Leaf, as she did every day. He was night and day different compared to Kojiro. Save for them both being nice, they had precious little in common.

A large shadow blocked the sun for a few moments, causing Azami and Kojiro to both shield their eyes and look up. They didn’t need to look for long, as a miniature Yo-O fluttered down onto Azami’s shoulder.

“Oh? A letter from Yuji?” Azami said aloud.

“Your boyfriend?” Kojiro asked, his voice less amiable than usual.

Do I detect jealousy? Azami thought with amusement.

“Oh, no. Not even a fling,” she tossed over her shoulder, sliding the scroll out of the carrier pouch on Yo-O’s leg. “A good friend.”

Kojiro looked visibly relieved, causing Azami to visit her main objection to dating him.

Too bad he’s so dumb. Now, Yuji, he’s sharp. Kojiro has plenty of good points, though. Still not sure I’m in the game.

She unrolled the scroll, giving a grin at the contents.

“Get a sacred scroll, huh? That’ll take all of a day. Give me a hard one, Yuji!” she giggled, scribbling back a reply.

“Going for a few days? I’ll look after the place,” Kojiro offered. He often checked on Azami’s property while she was away, beating down the few thugs who bothered to come to the Land of Waves these days.

Azami kissed him on the cheek. “Thanks, Ko. I’ll be back soon. I might visit for a while. The Leaf should be having a festival. Last time I was there, I was a fugitive. I’m going to enjoy it this time.”

There was more to it than that, of course. Azami really wanted to see Yuji again, and to see how Naruto

and Sakura were doing. From Yuji's scribbled note, it was easy to tell he was busy or in pain. Probably both, true to form. He usually had good handwriting, but this letter had been written in haste. Besides that, there was no need for him to ask her to go the scroll. He could get it himself. Granted, she was faster, but Yuji was a loner. No, if he was asking her for a favor, then he was in a bind or had some kind of problem.

Mmm...It'd be so nice to go and have a fling with him. But I'm not that kind of girl. And he's not that kind of guy, for that matter. If I pushed him a little, maybe...

Who am I kidding? If I pushed him, he'd blush, get a nosebleed, and pass out.

Azami grinned sardonically, satisfied with that description of Yuji. She contented herself with thoughts of teasing him when she saw him.

68 - Arc X: True Form- Chapter 2

Jiraiya, Shoki, Yuji, and Inoichi Yamanaka sat around the scroll, about to open it. Inoichi teased Yuji good-naturedly about dating Ino. It made Yuji give a thin smile, but he was too tired to really fight back.

He's still getting over the illness Master Jiraiya briefed us about. It must have been bad... Inoichi thought, looking at Yuji out of the corner of his eye. There was a tired weariness in the boy, although he was pleased to see the younger man with some kind of crispness in his movements again.

"Right. This scroll is clear of any traps," Inoichi announced.

"That's surprising," Jiraiya intoned. "As dark a church as that, and they aren't jealously guarding their secrets?"

"They don't need to," Inoichi said. "Only someone using the Issekigan could open the scroll and read its contents. The eye automatically translates the undecipherable language within. So, Shoki, if you want us to know what it says, you'll have to read it aloud."

Shoki nodded his understanding. He opened the scroll without a problem, and unfurled it, setting about reading it. It was not a huge scroll, and didn't take very long to finish, but by the end of it, Shoki was beyond amazed.

He looked up shyly, seeing four eager adults. But he wanted to keep this stuff to himself. He had just learned about his heritage, and he wanted to keep it for himself; at least for now. He looked to Yuji, who gave him a tired smile and nod.

"Let's let him digest this," Yuji suggested. "He'll talk when he's ready."

--
--

Yuji sat down in his genjutsu, his other self walled off again for the moment. He took a minute to appreciate the cool breeze he replicated, and the feel of the cool blades of grass beneath him his shirtless body.

Ten no Kishootsu. 'Heaven's Temper'. What is he supposed to be? How different will this new self be from my old self?

Being honest, Yuji knew that he had several good qualities. Honesty, compassion, loyalty, love, generosity. He knew he was no saint or paragon of virtue. But he tried to be a good person. That was something, wasn't it? He was hardworking, the one thing no one could dispute.

He rolled over on his side, feeling the dull ache of a bruise on his ribs. It hurt to breathe unless Yuji laid on his side, putting pressure on the damage. He had allowed himself to feel pain in his paradise to make this experience feel more real. He didn't allow for catastrophic injuries, however.

I wonder what will happen once I can unlock that power fully?

From the scroll, Yuji had gathered that a person with a powerful fire chakra nature and a fighting spirit with blazing intensity was the only one who could inherit the mantle of Ten no Kishootsu. No one knew who the original one was, or even if he ever existed. But the steps to reaching the power had certain requirements that had to be met and nurtured.

As Yuji went over the requirements, he made an astonishing connection. **'Heaven's Temper' is a servant to stronger masters. Fighting for his own sake will not allow the power of Ten no Kishootsu to be drawn out.**

Yuji could now immediately see a connection between his prophecy and Naruto and Sakura's. The two prophecy's had to be linked! There were prophesized by the same person, after all. But that didn't mean they had to be connected. Now there was enough evidence to make that connection.

Fighting for his own sake...the only time Yuji had done that was in the middle of emotional turmoil, against Sasuke's Hebi group. When he tried to release the curse bindings in his abdomen and failed...then he was fighting for the sake of his own aggression.

No doubt about it, he decided. They're related. My role was cast right away. But what about the third that is supposed to join Sakura and Naruto as the strongest? It doesn't say anywhere whether I am or am not that person, and it does not discount me either.

Yuji frowned; this was getting complicated again. He needed to get his mind off that.

Let's try something. I've won fifty times. I'm not meeting some requirement, or I would feel it. But what am I missing?

Yuji thought about what requirement he could be missing, standing up and wandering around to alleviate the tension that was rapidly building in his extremities. He closed his eyes, rolling his shoulders, and thinking about everything that had happened. He thought about Miko, of course. One comment she had made had stuck to him.

"Your chakra is dark and deep, like a swamp. It's nearly black, if I had to put a color to it..." What did she mean by that?" Yuji wondered aloud. 'Ten no Kishootsu's' chakra was of a very pure fire nature. To Yuji, that meant red. His chakra was only black because it matched his mood. Maybe...

Yuji reached toward his stomach, feeling his hand go transparent. He could feel the cords inside himself. What would happen if he pulled them? It shouldn't affect his body at all...

Maybe I can learn how to tie them myself without any consequence was the biggest hope he had.

When he pulled the cord and felt the burst of chakra exploding outward from his freed abdomen, he felt the sensation he was looking for. The 'different' that he associated with the 'Heaven's Temper' abilities.

That was it! That was what I needed to do! Now I've got to defeat myself again. This time, as 'Heaven's Temper'. Once I absorb him, that should be it. I should have full command of this power. I don't know how I know, but it feels right.

--
--

Asuna gently awoke, super-conscious all at once. She had achieved the rare 'Soul Revival' Jutsu. At least, the first part. The second part required living hosts for the souls. Or, for what she had in mind, Yuji's genjutsu paradise. There, they could take physical form. The only question was Yuji himself.

It's a risk. It's not 'possession' by the strict definition, but it is a strain on the mind and body. Not that there's choice. Yuji needs this. Well, he might need it. I still can't read his future...

Akari, Uzume/Asuna's assistant, re-entered the chamber, sensing the return of Asuna's consciousness.

"We'll depart for the Leaf the first chance we get," Asuna said immediately.

"My Lady, you have a visitor. I did not recognize her, but she says her name is 'Azami'..."
Akari's tone held one of question, awaiting permission to let the guest in.

"Azami! Perfect!" Uzume/Asuna exclaimed. "Please see her in, Akari. She's going to cut time off our travel time!"

--
--

Sakura was more than a little surprised at Shoki's request to train him. The boy had never shown any interest in anything besides...well, he never showed an interest in anything that she had seen. And yet, here he was, begging to learn from her.

She decided to discuss it with Naruto first. But Jiraiya intercepted her, asking her to talk to Yuji first. He told her to remind Yuji about his promise of nearly three months ago. That confused her, but she went with it.

Naruto had walked in, looking for Sakura. The two of them set off to find Yuji, discussing the idea of Sakura having a student in quite tones.

"It could be fun. And I know I'd learn from it," Sakura told him. You found that you learned things anew when you passed on your knowledge. It was something Tsunade was fond of saying.

"Hey, if you're good with it, I am," Naruto commented. "Unless he makes a move on you..."

Sakura giggled at the notion. "I don't know if I could refuse him, Naruto. I can imagine myself running my hands through his silver hair, with his head in my lap..."

"Shut up!" Naruto told her, not quite keeping the quiver out of his voice. This whole 'girlfriend' thing was new to him.

“Oh, come on, I’m with *you*! Do you really think I’m the type of girl to flit from guy to guy like some kind of...some kind of...”

“Ino?” Naruto said in an innocent voice. They both broke out laughing at that. Poor Ino- she was so maligned just for being such an air headed blond diet-freak when she was younger.

Eventually, they found Yuji’s place. He was kneeling in the darkness of his apartment, deep in meditation. His hands were locked in a handsign at his chest. But strangely, his body was quivering with effort, and his eyes were fluttering as if in an REM state. Sweat poured down his brow and neck, straining his shirt.

“Naruto, look!” Sakura pointed to Yuji’s forehead. There was the telltale red ‘X’ of the Ten no Kishootsu state.

“But he hasn’t released his curse bindings!” Naruto pointed out. He knew them very well, as Yuji had used them to subdue the Nine-tailed fox when it took Naruto over.

“No...I think he’s in his genjutsu,” Sakura murmured, looking at Yuji from all angles. “We’re going in to make sure he’s okay!”

“Wait! Couldn’t we just wake him up?” Naruto asked. It was a valid question.

“We don’t know what that would do. With all this prophecy stuff floating around, I wouldn’t be surprised if he was up to something with that ‘Heaven’s Temper’ thing. Either way, we’ve got to check on him. That much strain on a body isn’t healthy!”

They looked at each other, nodded, and focused their chakra to prepare to enter Yuji’s genjutsu.

--
--

Yuji felt the wings forming. Fire ran from the top of his head down to his feet. His skin seemed to glow with a red tint, radiating his new powerful chakra. His hair cooled until it was a solid black color with a sheen to it, like obsidian from magma. The tattoo on his forehead also deepened in it’s shade of black until it had a shine to it that seemed to pulse energy.

The wings extended from his back gracefully, allowing him to take to the sky, moving as fast and freely as he wanted. When his feet touched the ground, fire shot out in front of him. When he kicked off, fire jetted out from the bottoms of his feet, propelling him forward with amazing speed.

It was amazing. For once, Yuji didn’t feel like an inferior being. He felt like he was powerful and in control. He raised his hand, and the walls containing his mirror self were blown to bits.

His mirror self smiled.

“I knew you had the power. All this time, my presence in you has held you back. So naturally, when your true potential finally burst forth, it was bound to be spectacular. But-”

Yuji watched as his other self grew a pair of black wings and took to the skies, radiating black energy in the same way Yuji radiated fire. He flew up to Yuji, his wings beating violently. Yuji could feel his 'old' chakra. The dark, swamp-like chakra. He could feel the difference between the two. Suddenly, he felt only half-full, and understood that he needed to absorb that other chakra. He needed retain his 'sense of self', alongside the new 'Heaven's Temper' Yuji.

"-But your new power is only borrowed until you defeat me. I represent your inner demons, in case you haven't figured it out. But you're me- you're a smart guy," the mirror self said with a genuine smile. "I think you might just earn this power."

Yuji smiled, albeit grimly. "I think you're right."

69 - Arc X: True Form- Chapter 3

The two took off, clashing a few times, testing each other, until they collided with a resounding 'bang!' in the center of the genjutsu paradise. Balls of red and black fire rained down from the sky as Yuji's two selves met in lethal combat. Each cut yielded not blood but fire, either red from Yuji or black from his mirror-self. The cuts healed instantly and hurt little. This wasn't about killing- this was about dominance. Yuji needed to overcome his demons, while his demons tried to overcome his growing influence.

I can do this! Yuji thought, genuinely feeling a ray of hope. **I'm going to do this!**

Yuji's mirror self felt the optimism and courage Yuji displayed, and smiled, drawing a black sword from his waist.

"Well then, Yuji. It comes to this. Can you, as 'Heaven's Temper', defeat me- the self that would have been? The self that may still be? To defeat me is not to silence me, but to accept me. Do you understand?"

Yuji nodded, again grim. "Yes, I do. It means that I will never eradicate you completely. You are me; I am you. Two sides of the same coin. However, I get to decide who is 'heads' and who is 'tails'." Yuji smirked.

"That about sum it up?"

His counterpart gave another genuine smile. "Yes. To win here today is to damn yourself to constant vigilance. Because I'm not satisfied as being 'tails'. You have momentum today- will that carry the rest of your life?"

"You know, I don't believe you have to be a part of me. I think I can win. I think that the people who tell me I can't are wrong. Even when I'm the one saying it."

Yuji drew his own sword- much like the one he used to carry in the real world, though this one was far more ornate and damaging. It felt like a feather in his hand, and the hilt fit his palm like no other. He held the sword out with one hand, pointing at his mirror-self.

"I will defeat you. You've ruled enough of my life. It's time I took control."

Yuji put the sword up in an overhead position. His mirror counterpart did the same thing. They both narrowed their eyes and nodded, kicking off red and black fire.

That was when Naruto and Sakura chose to enter. Amazed; no, beyond amazed, they watched Yuji clash with himself. They couldn't tell which was the 'real' Yuji. But they knew enough not to interfere.

Yuji (red), the real Yuji, made his cut, passing off on the side of Yuji (black), the demon Yuji. Red Yuji's left shoulder was cut. Black Yuji...

"Control is yours. For now, 'Ten no Kishootsu'. Master your power- and mine."

The demon Yuji exploded into a million fragments. Black balls of fire stained the pristine landscape, burning all it touched.

“Bastard. Couldn’t have just died quietly,” Yuji murmured, smiling despite his complaint. For once, he felt it. Power. Control. Over himself. Something most people had felt everyday and took for granted now belonged to Yuji. For one who ached to belong but didn’t now how to do it, it was the ultimate prize.

Yuji raised one hand, drawing in the black fire balls. They coated him for a moment, covering even his wings. Slowly, controlled, he let himself fall back to ‘earth’.

His hair lost it’s black color, returning to it’s normal dark brown. His skin lost it’s red tint, returning to its usual pale state. Other than that, Yuji didn’t change again. The power he radiated stayed. And the smile on his face remained.

--
-

Sakura and Naruto remained speechless as Yuji tied the curse bindings inside his stomach without twinging from pain or discomfort.

“Oh, hi! Sorry, sorry, didn’t mean to ignore you. I just wanted to finish that,” he told them simply. “We can get out of here now, if you want.”

They weren’t in any rush. This was the best place for the discussion they had in mind.

“Master Jiriaya asked me to remind you of your promise from a few months ago...” Sakura’s voice held a note of question, wondering about the contents of this promise. It quickly dawned on Yuji that she could only be talking about one thing.

“Right, right, I did promise that...” he muttered. He took a few moments to breathe deeply. When he was composed, he turned to Naruto.

“You should take that training, Naruto. Sage Jutsu will be handy, if not necessary. I promise to look after Sakura. Look, but not touch,” Yuji added. “You know I’m nothing if not a man of my word. You need that training; Sakura needs company. I won’t do anything I wouldn’t do in front of you.”

Naruto still looked a little apprehensive, and was more than a little distracted over the power Yuji had just displayed. God knew there were questions he wanted to ask. But he contented himself with just listening for now.

“Oh, there’s one other thing that helps this situation,” Sakura noted. “Shoki wants to learn medical ninjutsu from me. With your permission, I’ll train him. That’ll keep me busy for a little while.”

Sakura turned to Naruto, forgetting that Yuji was with them for the moment.

“It would only be for a little while, and I won’t love you any less, you know. I’ve stuck with you this long, haven’t I?”

Yuji mentally distanced himself from this conversation, dreaming about having such a loyal girl waiting patiently for him. 'Heaven's Temper' may have been complete, but Yuji was not. Not yet.

--
--

With Sakura training Shoki for a few hours a day now, Yuji was spending an increasing amount of time with the remains of Team Kakashi. He and Yamato wound up sparring a lot, while Kakashi observed, offering advice to Yuji and occasionally Yamato. Yuji loved this, as it was the first time since the Third Hokage that he'd had a real teacher.

At one stoppage, when he and Yamato were toweling off and drinking water, Kakashi ambled over, looking at Yuji closely with his Sharingan eye.

"Something's different about you. A different level of power. A change in chakra..."

Yuji gave a genuine smile. "Glad you noticed. Care for a demo? I don't think I've shown you or Yamato-senpai this yet..."

--
--

Shoki rubbed his eyes, pawing at the bright dots swimming before his eyes. Those surgery lights were bright as all heck, especially when the rest of the emergency room was so dim.

Sakura had showed him a few basic techniques. Chakra Scalpel, Poison Removal, Healing Palm, and so on. The boy picked up the techniques with relative ease. They had started at eight in the morning or so. By noon, Shoki's eye hurt. By one, he realized there was a real problem.

So that's what the scroll meant... he thought, leaning against a surgical table. He could hear Sakura in the distance, even though she was right next to him.

"Don't worry. I knew it was coming," Shoki told her. "In the scroll. The one about my eye. It's 'evolving'."

I might have said I knew it was coming, but that's not right. I knew it was *possible*. I never thought I would get my eye to that level, though. It's all theory. The scroll said 'mastery of the three disciplines will enable growth'. If medicine is one discipline, and combat another, what is the third I'm supposed to have mastered?

After a few minutes, the spell had passed. Shoki's eye now had three pupils, one in each diamond (or half-diamond). His vision was unchanged, however. The change was merely cosmetic at this point. But Shoki knew that his eye was not done evolving yet. The only thing he knew for certain was that the end result was not something that had been document effectively. No one had successful attained an advanced state of the Issekigan. How the eye would change or what it was called was a mystery to Shoki. He aimed to solve that mystery.

If I'm going to be a weapon, or even just a good human, I need to have mastery over myself in every aspect. This eye is the perfect place to start.

-

The village spent the entire day preparing for the festival celebrating the Chinese New Year. It was a rare treat to get away from work for a whole night like this. Most of the other villages also held celebrations, so missions were more or less nonexistent for the night. That meant more time with your loved ones- or people you *hoped* to have as your loved ones.

Yuji allowed himself a small half-smirk. Sure, he was alone again this year. But he now felt whole for the first time in a long while. If feeling that satisfaction came at the price of a relationship that probably wouldn't last then it was well worth it.

Besides, I need to keep a strong front up for those two. If I waver, it will be in private.

In spite of himself, Yuji felt a small ripple of concern. He might have inherited a new attitude with this new power, but the same thoughts still drove Yuji. And he had to wonder if Naruto remembered the significance of this particular festival. God help him if he didn't. Yuji had considered reminding him, but decided that it wouldn't be fair to act as a safety net for Naruto.

I read somewhere that staying celibate into your twenties can affect you in a bad way, Yuji thought with a hint of amusement. He hadn't found himself thinking so much about his lack of...well, anything having to do with girls. Seeing all the happy couples, and even the people who were clearly out just to hook up for one night made him seriously think about relationships again. He had always thought himself to be above a one night stand, but was it really so immoral? Was there really any harm in it?

It just wouldn't be me. It's not a matter of principle; it's a matter of me being a different breed of cat.

Yuji found that the thought amused him a little. He chuckled to himself, not realizing that the smile on his face had earned him some attention from a crop of cute, giggling girls in yukatas. They knew Yuji from before; a lot of people did. But they'd never seen him so relaxed and...happy. It made him seem human.

"I hadn't noticed it before, but Yuji-kun is on the hot side," commented Satoko. She had just turned eighteen a few weeks ago, and was definitely in the market for a boyfriend to celebrate. Or at least a hot fling with a good looking guy.

"Mmm. Wonder why we didn't notice before? I mean, he's not an ANBU agent or something..." added Kuroko. She was conservative in nature, and very pretty when she let her hair down. The other girls privately thought she might be a good match for Yuji, as she tended to keep to herself.

The last girl, a small blond girl name Kasumi stammered her two cents. "B-but Yuji-san trains a lot, right? Co-Could any of us keep up?"

"Girl shy," Satoko instantly said. "I could eat him alive. Have him on a leash in a second."

"You're talking out of your @\$\$," Kuroko chimed in flatly. "He's very clearly not into superficial, high-maintenance girls."

Silence. Solid point by Kuroko. She reached up behind her head. The other girls gasped- Kuroko only did this when she was going in for the kill!

“No way...” Satoko said in barely a whisper. Kuroko had done it. If there was a ‘cursed seal’ on Kuroko, it was her hair. She kept it tied up behind her head, either in a short ponytail or in a bun. But she had released it. With a shake of her head, her flowing black mane fanned out across her shoulders. Her eyes came to sharper points than the other girls without losing any of the round shape they held. It made her look exotic. Truthfully, she was breathtaking when she felt like being breathtaking. She could turn her charm on and off at will, giving her the ability to fit in anywhere. That was a huge asset for a kunoichi.

“And damn it, your voice isn’t fair!” Satoko snapped, an accusing finger pointed towards Kuroko. “You get that low, sultry tone, with those looks, and you can get the boys eating out of your hand!”

“But I don’t,” Kuroko bluntly informed her. “I’m picky when it comes to boys. I don’t just saunter up and ‘turn on the charm’ unless I happen to like them. And that isn’t often.”

Another point Satoko had to agree with. And damned if that didn’t sound like the sort of thing that a mysterious, newly-emerged hottie like Yuji wouldn’t respond to!

70 - Arc X: True Form- Chapter 4

Yuji was approached by the breathtaking creature. He was genuinely surprised and didn't know how to react. He did not know her at all; and yet she was approaching him. Did that denote a sexual attraction, he wondered? Or was there another purpose to her attention?

"You're Yuji, aren't you?" Kuroko began the conversation.

Break the ice slowly. I don't know how he'll react. He seems like the dominant type at first glance, but I suspect he's actually more gentle...The girl-shy types usually are.

Kuroko didn't date often, and she didn't sleep around. But the girl-shy types were her specialty. She could reign in her personality to suit them, and then slowly re-assert herself. Satoko came at you like a hurricane, one short step from being slutty. That turned any decent guy wanting a relationship off in hot minute.

"I am. I'm sorry, but I don't think I've met you..."

"No, no, you haven't," she assured him, making sure to stay in control yet seem feminine. "My name is Kuroko. It's spelled with the kanji for 'black' and 'child'. Weird, I know..."

Give him an opening...

"No, not at all," he assured her. "I wish I could tell you what kanji my name uses, but I usually just use katakana..."

She gave him a dark-eyed glance, knowing that her pale skin made the deep obsidian of her hair and eyes stick out more. **He took the bait. I've got him talking, and I've probably made him feel like he knows me. Now, how to control this so it goes where I want...**

"Pardon my asking, Yuji, but don't you usually hang out with those two..."

"Naruto and Sakura? Oh, yes. They're friends of mine. Also my job description."

shoot, he threw me a curveball!

Kuroko contained herself in an instant, flashing a toothy grin, revealing her very white teeth.

"Oh? How is that?"

"It's my job to serve them."

"Someone as powerful as you?"

"You flatter me. I'm not all that powerful."

Okay, apply a compliment. Everyone likes those. Kuroko thought, going through her playbook in her mind.

"I'm sure you're strong. I can tell. You've got a good, strong chakra about you. Besides, you practice a lot..."

Yuji offered her a sardonic grin. "It keeps me out of trouble."

Finally, something open to interpretation! Kuroko thought, congratulating herself on cracking him a little bit. It was no small feat. Maybe he was attracted to her already?

"Oh? Am I..."

She paused dramatically, taking in a breath, and nearly whispering the last word.

"...trouble?"

Yuji raised his eyebrows comically. "You tell me. I'd say it's a distinct possibility."

Yuji had planned to let this girl go. She was clearly trying to play him. He had to give her credit- she was good. Her mind was analytical, but lazily disciplined. Her intentions were obvious from the start, despite her apparent self-assurance otherwise. Perhaps the girl was unreadable to her friends? They didn't look like the brightest bunch.

Yuji inwardly frowned. That wasn't a fair judgment. They were the norm; not he. He, Yuji, was the one who was the oddball. This was a normal exchange between a guy and girl who both had physical contact on the mind. So why the hell was he analyzing this conversation like that?

At that point, he turned off that part of his mind and focused on the girl. She was attractive, apparently intelligent, and definitely not a girl who fit into any mold. An independent thinker. And apparently one who was used to being the smartest one in the group.

How would a normal guy react to this? Yuji wondered, not really needing an answer. He knew full well what would come next if he even attempted to be like a normal guy. Either he'd get a girlfriend out of the deal, or he'd get a one night stand with meaningless yet oddly fulfilling sex.

Huh.

Well, flirting didn't hurt anyone. He just wouldn't seal the deal. He wasn't super attracted to Kuroko, despite admitting that she'd be hot by anyone's standards. So he would just 'play the game' for now, and try to have a little fun. Heck, maybe this girl would loosen him up and he'd take her up on her 'offer'. He wasn't attached to anyone and had no prospects. As long as she didn't get pregnant, who did this hurt?

"Hey! Yuji!" came Naruto's voice.

Yuji looked up, grinned, and after telling Kuroko "Excuse me. I'll be right back. That's my job walking over to me," and made his way over. He gave Naruto and Sakura an appraising glance, nodding to himself. Naruto was wearing a pretty standard Yukata; a grey and black striped deal. Sakura was wearing a nicer one; pink with a gold obi. Her hair was done up a little bit. She looked cute with her bangs like that.

"You two look great! Having fun?"

They both replied in the affirmative. Yuji kept his grin in place, nodding cheerfully to whoever he

happened to know who walked by.

“It’s been a year, huh?” he intoned. “Amazing, isn’t it?”

That’s right! It’s our one-year anniversary! Mine and Naruto’s, I mean! Sakura thought, surprised. She wondered if Naruto remembered.

“You bet! Hey, Sakura, here!” Naruto declared, handing her a box with a bow on. He was grinning widely. “Betcha thought I forgot.”

Sakura smothered Naruto with a hug, so touched that he would remember this anniversary that she forgot Yuji was there. She met his eyes for a moment, and he just gave a small nod and a smile. Then he turned and walked away, a hand extended over his shoulder in a wave.

“Wonder who that girl is?” Naruto muttered idly, not really caring.

“I don’t know. Wonder what she wants with Yuji...”

Naruto raised his eyebrows. “Same thing as any normal girl. Didn’t know Yuji had normal impulses, though...”

Sakura was a little disturbed at the prospect of Yuji having a fling. It took her a moment to figure out why. **It’s just really out of character for him,** she decided. **Am I really going to think less of him for something like that?**

Sakura knew, better than anyone, what kind of therapy sex could be. She hadn’t experienced it firsthand, but it was a documented medical fact. God knew that if anyone needed some feel-good endorphins in his system, it was the perpetually dark Yuji.

Still feels off. But good luck anyway, Yuji.

She took Naruto’s hand to lead him off to a more secluded area. Naruto wouldn’t get sex out of her yet, but this was worth at least a little make out time.

--

Another hour, for good measure.

Yuji had drank, gambled, and even let a couple girls flirt with him. He had wound up turning down Kuroko’s offer. Whatever his body told him (or begged for him to indulge in), it just wasn’t his style. Kuroko wasn’t interested in any kind of relationship (Yuji had managed to get that out of her. To Yuji, a relationship came first. Kuroko wanted to see if they had chemistry. Rather than finding it to be slutty, Yuji found it to be intuitive behavior. She had clearly observed him for some time before deciding to ‘target’ him. He managed to make a friend of her in the end, which surprised them both). So he tried to relax and have some fun, with the promise of future contact with the lovely Kuroko ringing in his ears.

It was, of course, mirthless, fake fun. He tried to enjoy himself for real, and at times he succeeded. But most of the time, he could only lament a love that never happened and the girl he had come so close to marrying. But there was no reason to worry Naruto and Sakura over that. They should be enjoying themselves- not pitying him. So he made sure lots of people saw him having fun.

After an hour of this, he made his way to the top of the Hokage faces, deciding to stand and watch the party from up there for a while. In his hakama and black haori, he made for a heroic silhouette against the stars. He held a pipe in his hand, but he didn't smoke it. He just let the tobacco burn. It was partly a silent, inconspicuous offering to the dead; partly a relaxing, familiar scent.

He closed his eyes, and for a short moment felt a measure of contentment. This quiet time was just what he needed. The rich tobacco, the cool night air, the only sounds to be heard were in the distance.

How much longer will this last? This power...this life.

The prophecy that between him and Sasuke, one must die in their inevitable mortal combat hung uncomfortably in the air around him, dampening his spirits.

I don't want to die, for the first time in a while. I actually care for my own life. But I don't want to kill anyone, let alone their (Naruto and Sakura's) best friend. But what choice is there? One of us needs to die.

"Natural order. The stronger of us will live. As a warrior, I owe him nothing short of my personal best in combat. I don't know how he sees it, but that's the only recourse I can think of. Pure chance; a flip of the coin as to who lives or dies."

Speaking aloud helped Yuji organize his thoughts. He was amused at himself for thinking that way, instead of retreating into a secluded shell. He plopped down, not caring to sit formally, and began to nibble on a variety of snacks he had picked up over the course of the night.

71 - Arc X: True Form- Chapter 5

Asuna had to be careful where she aimed her head after 'falling up' through Azami's shadow. She wondered if it would have been better to just take the full day trip. Thirty seconds of that jutsu was thirty seconds too long.

The two females looked at each other, eyebrows raised. They had landed right near Naruto and Sakura in mid-kiss. A jubilant Sakura was wearing a new necklace, and was feeling very affectionate at the moment, as she had taken the lead in making out with Naruto in a semi-public area.

"Want to wander around a bit? Yuji will spot us eventually," Azami asked/stated, looking around longingly at the festival. This was the same festival she had first met him at, come to think. That made it special to her. She still remembered how she picked his pocket for fun and to test her skill, and how he caught her. He was so polite and sweet!

"How do you know?" Asuna wanted to know, calling Azami back from her trip down memory lane.

Azami pointed upward, toward the Hokage Faces. "He's up there, being antisocial as usual. He's got his eye on the whole place."

"Why not go join him?"

Something like pity crossed Azami's pretty features as she considered her answer. "Well, Yuji probably has a good reason for being alone. He'll come down when he's ready."

"You know him pretty well," Asuna stated in an even voice that didn't sound completely natural.

Whoa, THAT sounded like a jealousy-tinged challenge! Azami thought, noting the crisp tone that went with Asuna's words. Grinning despite herself, Azami couldn't resist saying:

"Don't worry; I'm not out to jump his bones. He knows that, too. Means he's a free man..."

Asuna waved a hand in a negative swipe. "No, no, he was married...almost married to my master. I could never replace her."

"You've given this some thought, then," Azami noted teasingly.

"Sh-shut up!" Asuna snapped in an un-Miko like manner. "Of COURSE it occurred to me; Yuji's a desirable and clearly single guy! But it's just...well...not a good idea."

"For you or him?"

Again, an instant answer, but this time with absolute conviction behind it.

"Both. As Uzume, I should not be involved...'romantically'. If he could be my husband without ever touching me, that would be another thing. But neither of us have the discipline for that! Second, every

time he looked at me, he'd see Miko. And that just isn't fair to him. Or to me," she finished sadly.

Azami agreed, and had known all this before Asuna had said anything. But she couldn't let it go peacefully.

"Aw, c'mon, you should let your hair down. Tonight, you're Asuna, not 'Lady Uzume'. Besides, we've all got impulses; we wouldn't have them if God or nature or whatever didn't want us acting on them."

With that, Azami began to move her way through the crowd.

Asuna gave a small sigh as her companion left. Azami was so gorgeous. With her long hair, a figure that not even the best artist could sculpt (men and women alike would be drooling over her too much to finish), and an incredible strength on the battlefield, she could have any man she wanted.

So why doesn't she want Yuji? She's plenty interested in him. She brings him up all the time when we talk. Even when she's teasing me, it's easy to see she's got the hots for him. So why not make her move? It's not like Yuji wouldn't jump at the chance.

Asuna suddenly felt very inferior in her dark red kimono, decorated with bright blue butterflies outlined in gold, tied closed with a gold obi. She was a tomboy and a priestess. She was good at what she did, but she knew the adage of 'it's lonely at the top' was a truism.

Focus, Asuna! No self pity! You're here because you know something Yuji doesn't, and you need to act fast to help him. You've got a small window of opportunity; miss that and Yuji either becomes a murderer, a corpse, or insane. There's no room for error!

Her resolve stiffened, Asuna decided to enjoy the festival. Her services wouldn't be needed yet. She prayed that she had interpreted things wrong. It was very possible. Never before had she seen such a clouded future. The cloud wasn't ominous; it wasn't good or bad. It just was. And that was the worst part.

Pray he doesn't need you to step in. If he's successfully acquired the power of Ten no Kishootsu; Heaven's Temper; then it's likely he won't need me.

Her lips jerked into a smile at that. That wasn't quite true, if she was totally honest. Yuji was nothing if not loyal, and he didn't desert a friend. And they were most certainly friends.

--

--

Yuji had enough quiet reflection after about a half hour. He could do no more to organize his thoughts or prepare his mind for the upcoming conflict. The prophecy was what it was at this point. There was no point in debating the semantics of the damn thing. Either it was true and there was no escape, or it was not true. Which would soon be evident.

But how nice would it be, Yuji mused, To stand as their equal, rather than kneel at their feet? This position prevents us from being true friends, at least in my view. And yet, who else do I have to trust? Being a loner gets old sometimes.

...

Maybe I should have taken Kuroko up on her offer. She'd look really cute with pigtails.

Yuji knew that it was thanks to the 'Heaven's Temper' state that he could think like that. It was as if part of his personality, long occupied by only a void, had dropped into place. He had grown a sense of self worth, and a burning desire to have others acknowledge his newfound strength. Yamato and Kakashi certainly had upon viewing his genjutsu paradise.

As quietly as he could, Yuji rejoined the festival, eventually sliding into the gambling hall where he had spoken to Tsunade last year. It was no surprise to him that she was here yet again. This year, the circumstances were different.

Yuji kicked off his sandals and took a place at the low table next to Tsunade. She noted his presence with a nod, as she was concentrating on her bet. Yuji wondered what there was to concentrate on. This was simple game of Han or Cho- evens or odds. But with that thought came another.

"Han," said Tsunade.

"Han," Yuji agreed. Tsunade turned to look at him. He gave her an impish grin.
"Maybe we'll get lucky."

The dice rolled.

"HAN!" said the dealer.

Tsunade and Yuji's faces drained. Whenever Tsunade won, something terrible happened. Yuji had hoped to use this as a gauge as to how things would go in the near future. Indeed so, really.

"I guess it's really going to happen, huh?" Yuji murmured, bowing to the congregation and leaving quickly.

Tsunade scrambled up her winnings and followed him.

--

"I've made my peace with it, My Lady."

A small, mostly empty teahouse was their meeting place of choice. A cute, young waitress bowed respectfully, setting their drinks down in front of them with a nervous smile. They both nodded, with Yuji remembering to try to smile kindly so as not to frighten the poor girl.

"...I'm glad to hear that. I really am. Because it looks like things will be as we feared," Tsunade intoned, looked darkly into her Darjeeling tea.

Yuji gave a small smile. His voice was tinged with a touch of sadness as he replied "Maybe not."

Tsunade made a small sound of question at that, prompting Yuji to continue.

"I'm always prepared to die in combat. But I've never been prepared to take a life..." Yuji told her calmly, his eyes studying his reflection in his tea. "I've come to value my life. It may hurt Naruto and Sakura, but I will not bow to Sasuke and admit defeat. Not without a fight. If the prophecy is true, even if

I DO surrender, he still must kill me. That-

He shook his head, his grip tightening on his tea cup.

“I will not allow. I aim to find peace in death or meaning in life.”

The cup in his hand shattered, cutting his hand and spilling it's contents. Yuji didn't seem to notice.

“...I'm glad you'll be fighting,” Tsunade said finally, breathing a small sigh of relief. “Even if you kill Sasuke, it will have been for the right reason. Your right to life is no less sacred than anyone else's, and it's time you realized that.”

Yuji looked at his hand for a long time, blood streaming from the cuts.

“Yes...or maybe it's that I have something to live for now.

..

But...”

Tsunade made a motion for him to continue, though she had a pretty good idea of what he was going to say next.

“Naruto and Sakura. If I kill Sasuke, they won't ever forgive me. That makes my decision more difficult. But it doesn't change it.”

His eyes narrowed on his hand as he closed it into a fist, showing determination.

“This time, I'm going to do what I think is right. This is not an instance where I'm serving them. This is my fight.”

--

--

It never occurred to Yuji to be selfish like that. It just seemed like the right thing to do in this case. He wanted to be counted among the strongest. He wanted to be the third of the 'legends' that Naruto and Sakura were fast becoming. And now, for the first time in his life, he believed he had the ability.

He returned to the hustle and bustle of the festival, pretending not to notice Naruto and Sakura attached at the lips as he walked by. He still felt a ripple of jealousy. Hell, he felt downright pain. He had lost that battle without ever fighting. Maybe that was why he was so set on fighting Sasuke. Even if the fates damned him to losing, he would do so with the best fight he could give. And if he was to win, so much the better.

Up ahead, he spotted Azami and Asuna. He called out, then hurried to catch up to them. Boy, did he have something to show them!

-

Naruto and Sakura leaned even closer, their shinobi abilities forgotten. Today, they were two teenagers in love. Their hands were intertwined tightly, not any less a romantic gesture for the sweat on them from anticipation and nervousness. They each fed off the others body heat, as if that alone drew them in closer.

Their lips met in moist embraces, a mix of childish innocence and adult depth in the kiss showing the mix of their growing responsibilities that contrasted their youth. Tonight, they belonged to each other.

Naruto's hand wandered toward Sakura's waist. Sakura thrust her pelvis forward, encouraging Naruto. She actually suppressed a moan of desire at this point. She felt so safe and protected; so warm. It was such a wonderful feeling, and all that she wanted.

Naruto wasn't acting out of lust. He just wanted to be close to her; to have their relationship progress. This was the girl he wanted to protect; the girl he wanted to protect him. In a world where you could count on so little, he had one certain ray of happiness.

Without realizing it, their thoughts had even crossed over each other, solidifying until they were of one mindset. Their emotions were pure and innocent; deep and terrifying. They both relished this moment, knowing there would never be another like it.

72 - Arc X: True Form- Chapter 6

Yuji let the girls talk first, hoping to catch up on news. Asuna didn't have anything new to report (at least, to Yuji), and Azami was much the same. Both girls were walking on eggshells around Yuji. He couldn't help but smirk, wondering if it was his newfound abilities leaking out, or if they were worried about his emotional collapse. He admittedly hadn't been in the best of shape the last time he'd seen them.

"Don't worry about me. I'll be fine," he said firmly, not even letting them voice their concerns. "The prophecy thing has me dealing with some stuff, but for the first time, I feel like I can really handle it. But..."

Asuna had a flash of insight.

"You want to know if I can gauge your ability...the way Miko did."

Yuji nodded slowly. He hadn't brought it up, not wanting to make Asuna feel inferior as the new Uzume in case she couldn't. Judging from her reaction, however, she did seem to know how, and was actually waiting for Yuji to ask.

"Three is the perfect number for this. Come with me!"

--

The small temple on the outskirts of the Leaf Village was uninhabited at the moment. It was small, and really closer to a shrine, save for the saiguden (ritual implement storage area), which was almost the same size as the shrine itself.

"We need a few things."

Asuna rattled off a list. At Yuji's questioning glance, she shrugged a little and told him that "I haven't been Uzume for long. The ritual tools make the task easier for me. Miko didn't have time to pass on everything to me. Usually, there is a training period, but the circumstances..."

Yuji left to collect the tools on the list, while Azami and Asuna changed. Asuna slipped into her Uzume robes, which were a deep black, in contrast to the shrine maiden's typical outfit, which Azami was donning so she could act as an assistant. Uzume/Asuna's robes were complimented by a hairpiece that threaded through her ponytail at the base of it. On each side there were symbols. One of the sun, one of the moon, equally balanced. Around her neck was a necklace made of pearls and heisoku rope, with a mirror pendant at the end. In her hand was the Spear of Izanagi.

"What do you need that for?" Azami wondered. The blade was still dinged from Miko's use of it. It was still a holy relic, but why Asuna needed it now was an interesting question.

Asuna stood upright, looking powerful and nearly omnipotent. Her words seemed to carry more weight and dignity now. She sounded almost ethereal as she spoke. She was both sad and thoughtful, or so the manner of her speech would have indicated.

“Yuji’s power is not yet fully his to control. I need to look inside his mind, to see him at his most powerful and most vulnerable, to see what state of Heaven’s Temper/Ten no Kishootsu he is at. He will need bare all and trust me. Even though I know he will, there is always the chance of danger.’

Yuji returned now, carrying a ceremonial dagger, a pure white cloth that looked like a Furoshiki, and a set of wooden restraints.

“Good. Now, we need to make the symbol markings...Yuji, you need to take off your shirt and sit in the center. Azami, can you make the marks while I prepare the rest?”

Azami gave Yuji a playful once-over. “I don’t know if I can keep my mind...or my hands...off of Yuji there.”

Yuji shrugged, blushing a little, but responding with a solid “I don’t know if you could keep up with me anymore. Besides, you shouldn’t make sexual comments in a temple, right?”

Azami didn’t reply right away. She grinned instead, resisting the urge to hug her friend. Seeing such a hopeless case smile was very refreshing.

“Good to see you out of the dumps for a change.”

-
--

The moment between Naruto and Sakura had passed. For a few fleeting minutes, they were ready to go back to one of their apartments and get as close as physically possible. But, surprisingly enough, it was Naruto who raised the question that derailed that.

“Sakura...are we right about this? I mean...”

Sakura, who had her vest half off from their intense make-out session, really didn’t feel like getting into that right now. But it was clearly important to Naruto. If they were going to understand...no, even just tolerate each other, they needed to listen to each other. Still, she couldn’t help but feel a little forlorn as she shifted her pink bra back into place and zipped her vest up.

“About what?”

“Well...us. Why did we fall in love?”

Sakura raised her eyebrows. “Wow...you sure know how to kill a buzz. What the hell are you saying all of a sudden?”

“Why did we fall in love?” Naruto repeated, an urgency in his voice that Sakura had missed before. Clearly this wasn’t a new line of thought for him.

“Well,” came her exasperated reply, “You’re a boy and I’m a girl, and the natural order of things-”

But he shook his head, holding her at arms length. “That’s not what I meant. I mean...well...are we REALLY in love?”

Sakura couldn't believe how insensitive and stupid he was being. She did not just let him cop a feel so he could dump her. She'd rip his arms off, if he was lucky. She was about to say so when the words Naruto had been trying to speak spilled out of his mouth.

"What if we're only in love because of that prophecy?! What if we're just puppets?! What if this-"
Naruto waved an arm toward the village and all contained within.

"-What if all this is just happening because it was going to, no matter what? Would we have fallen in love, no matter what?"

Sakura had no simple answer. The thought had ticked at her brain for a little while, but she stuffed it back. She decided to give him the answer she had given herself.

"...No one makes you fall in love. The result of our actions becomes the future. Our decisions lead to the future. What happens now is the present, born for the sake of the future. But there is never 'not' a choice. There is always an option. I freely chose to fall in love with you."

She paused, her eyes searching his, her hand reaching for his, but stopping short.

"What about you?"

Naruto didn't hesitate as he squeezed her hand and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

"Good point."

Sakura giggled as Naruto's lips met her neck.

"Thank Yuji. The human fortune cookie gave me that line."

"We've gotta stop hanging around with him. I don't want to wind up afraid of you!" Naruto added, nibbling happily at Sakura's ear.

Their night went on without anxiety about their feelings.

--

--

The markings were finished, with Yuji at the center. Azami and Asuna knelt on either side of him, a hand on his shoulders.

"Go to your genjutsu world," Asuna instructed. "Once there, release your full power, and then allow it to blanket the entire world you created for yourself."

Yuji instinctively knew how to do all that, so he nodded and closed his eyes, making the focusing hand sign at his chest. The markings began to squirm like snakes, crawling all over him, leaving a cool trail as they moved.

Soon, he slipped into his genjutsu world.

-

He was standing in his big, empty field. In the distance there were the remains of the prison that had held his 'other' self.

Azami and Asuna were ready for him to release his power almost right away. Asuna drew a ward of

protection, while Azami cast a barrier jutsu. At their signal, Yuji pulled out the curse bindings at his ki point.

A mix of black and red wound around each other as it burst into the endless sky above, reaching it's zenith in seconds, then exploding outward in a haze of red and black fire. Small fireballs fell down to the ground, looking like hailstones of red, outlined with black.

"His 'Heaven's Temper' chakra and his regular chakra have successfully bonded," Asuna/Uzume noted, examining one of the small fireballs. "The black outline is his original chakra. The darker red layer in between the black and lighter red is his chakra color from birth. His emotional turmoil changed his chakra's color, but not it's nature. Finally, the lighter red...that is the 'Ten no Kishootsu' chakra. And it's almost fully developed."

Azami looked at that for a moment, but was distracted by Yuji. She was speechless, and could only get Asuna/Uzume's attention by slapping her shoulder.

Yuji was suspended a foot or so above the ground, floating with his arms at his sides and his body bent slightly back. But his appearance was changing. A red glow cascaded around him, enveloping him with power. His tattoo pulsed with the same power, glowing red within the black lines that made it up. His hair also cooled to a deep obsidian to match his newly re-colored eyes.

His feet gently touched the ground, though he still seemed to move smoothly as if floating across the ground.

"It's...odd. Different. But good," Yuji murmured, looking at his hands as if not believing his own power. "So much energy and power...But I can still feel my original chakra..."

Asuna held out the Spear of Izanagi in front of her, as if in a guard position. It seemed to resonate with Yuji's power, shaking in Asuna/Uzume's hand. She let the weapon go; it streaked toward Yuji, floating above his head. Asuna held her hands together in a handsign, but not one Yuji recognized. She seemed to be chanting something to herself. She stopped, then raised a single hand.

"Art of the Spiritual Compass!"

Above Yuji, the black markings from his 'real' body began to swirl and twist, until they formed a circle. The Spear of Izanagi reacted, rotating itself until it pointed North-East.

"Perfect north is your 'Tenshin'- 'True Heaven'...you're close, Yuji. Close to the perfect version of your power. Now we need to remove the final restraint..."

The compass disappeared, and the spear of Izanagi returned to Asuna's hand, as if drawn there magically.

"Azami, if you'll do what we discussed..."

Azami held out a long, beaded necklace. She began to shake the beads in a slow rhythm. Asuna reacted by radiating a chakra that was almost white. Her voice took on a beautiful, ethereal quality, and

sounded as though she spoke through a filter, with an echo effect added.

“For this to work, Yuji, you need to trust me completely. Can you do that?”

Yuji held out his arms. “No need to ask. What is it I need to do, Lady Uzume?”

She cocked her head, moving toward him, her chakra shrouding her. It seemed as if she was here, where she could see Yuji, but where he could not touch her. The sunny environment and the gleam off the ground didn't affect her.

“Yuji, I need to place you in the restraints.”

“But...they're in the 'real' world, aren't they?”

Asuna smiled peacefully; knowingly. “Lady Uzume. That is, the Third Lady Uzume, my predecessor, did not explain everything to you. With your abilities this close to 'Shin Ten', you may summon items and animals into genjutsu. That is an ability unique to you- the *second* 'Ten no Kishootsu'.”

Azami nearly broke the rhythm of the beads at that bit of surprising news.

'Second'?

Then...

Who was the first?

73 - Arc X: True Form- Chapter 7

Sakura and Naruto had a lot of fun together. This was the first time they'd been out together as an unabashed, real couple. They got a few stares, mostly from people cheering them on. Naruto had become quite popular in the past few years, as did the lady on his arm. Sakura had patched up just about everyone, and if not them, then their families. Either way, the two were well known and well received.

It warmed Sakura's heart to see that Naruto had finally, *finally* been accepted by the village. She knew how much it meant to him. Consequently, it had wound up meaning a lot to her as well.

This was a perfect relationship for her, though it wasn't with who she imagined. She allowed herself to think to the future. They had caught up with Sasuke; ending the threat of the Akatsuki; finished Orochimaru- and there she was, her and Naruto, standing at the top of it all.

It made her insides flutter with glee as she imagined how close the two of them would get.

--
--

Yuji had a million questions to ask. There had been another 'Heaven's Temper'? Who? And what had become of him?

"The original 'Heaven's Temper' was a samurai."

Asuna began to explain, as though she had read Yuji's mind. Which, admittedly, was probably not difficult at the moment. Yuji barely noticed her snapping the wooden restraints on him, binding him to a stone wall that she had created at some point. He honestly didn't remember summoning the stuff here, but apparently he had, as the restraints, the dagger, and the furoshiki were all lying in a neat pile near Asuna/Uzume.

"He was from the Land of Iron. He was a swordsman said to be undefeatable in combat. His power became so great that he eventually stopped using any weapons in his duels. In those days, challengers came to the different villages and lands, before they were united in part due to Madara Uchiha and Hashirama Senju. He stopped slaying his enemies, and instead began to teach. But he never took a wife, and had only an adopted 'son'. After the adoption, he spent his life searching for his successor. His brother and sister each had children, and the family line continues today, albeit under a different surname."

Asuna had finished restraining Yuji. She probed his shirtless body, watching dispassionately as her fingers burned from unrestrained chakra. Yuji's own 'laws' in this genjutsu world forbid pain and injury.

The rhythm of Azami's bead shaking now matched Asuna's tone of speech in speed. Asuna herself seemed to be in a trance, as she finished the story.

“On his deathbed, his quest for a successor failed, he sealed his abilities away in a scroll and flung it into the heavens. Thanks to his power, it flew for many years, until one ‘Hiruzen Sarutobi’- your Third Hokage- came upon it. Only one with such ability could even open the scroll, let alone read it’s contents.”

Asuna held out the white Furoshiki, wiping Yuji’s ki point with it. He could feel some invisible substance against his skin. He felt the same sensation inside of him, moving along his chakra network.

“The previous ‘Ten no Kishootsu’ had the abilities of wind and water. In direct contrast to your own earth and fire. He possessed taijutsu abilities that were unparalleled; you possess an underdeveloped prowess for genjutsu. What you have in common is the potential to use ‘void’ chakra.”

Asuna clenched the ceremonial dagger, and wiped it with the Furoshiki.

“Void chakra? What is that?”

“It is chakra that is absent of any form. You’ve already used it in it’s early stages. I believe you called it ‘neutral chakra’.”

Before Yuji could respond, Asuna reached for his chin, cupping her hand under it. She spoke with a grim seriousness that was vaguely unsettling, but almost assuredly warranted.

“I’ll ask you once more: do you trust me?”

Yuji could sense that he could ask no more questions now. Instead, he nodded, meeting Asuna/Uzume’s eyes. Her eyes gave him a smile her body could not, and she kissed him on the cheek.

“I’m thankful for the laws of your genjutsu world. Otherwise the pain would be...”

Asuna stabbed Yuji in the ki point, pushing the ceremonial dagger in up to it’s hilt. No blood came out, but Yuji’s flesh twisted in an awful way as the dagger buried itself in his abdomen. The hilt came to rest on his navel. His face was frozen in shock, although he felt no pain. All the same, the feeling was very awkward, for want of a better term.

“...unbearable.”

--

--

Sasuke scanned the village from a distance. He remained silent and unreadable as usual, even to his three followers. What he was planning was not known to them in depth. It was more of a vague outline. The only thing that was obvious was the conclusion: The Leaf must fall.

“Naruto will be a problem. And possibly Yuji. But no one else poses a threat,” Sasuke said out of the blue. “If things work like I expect, that little servant boy Yuji will show up first and try to deal with us.”

Suigetsu’s enormous sword was slung across his shoulders. Apparently, he was completely at ease. “So we can kill him?”

“Yes. Naruto is the only one who has to fall by my hand. Anyone else is fair game for whoever reaches

them first.”

Karin was sitting near Sasuke’s feet, focusing. She frowned, concentrating, and also feeling uneasy somehow. Like something was missing. A chakra that should have been present that was not. A void...

--
--

The dagger didn’t hurt, but that didn’t mean that this was at all calming to Yuji. Even as his genjutsu worked to calm him, he was panicking. He didn’t know what kind of damage this was doing!

“The final stage: the ability to access the full scope of your chakra without the aid of the curse bindings. At least, internally. The release mechanism must be removed.”

Asuna reached inside Yuji and felt the knotted end of the cord that was wound around his tenketsu. She gripped the cord and made a cut somewhere inside him with the dagger; Yuji winced. All at once, she pulled the cord free and Yuji felt one last burst of power. But this burst was unlike all his other releases. It was so powerful that it almost hurt. As if he needed to release it, or it would rip him apart.

“Exhale, Yuji. With neutral chakra. Except now, it should be ‘void’ chakra.”

Yuji didn’t waste a second. He drew in a breath and exhaled so quickly that his lungs protested. But the effects...

The sheer power of the transparent red wave rumbled the genjutsu world, shaking it as an earthquake might. The red continued to spread outward, touching the four corners of the genjutsu paradise. Then, starting from the center point (which was Yuji), the color began to double in on itself and disappear. But the shaking continued, until Yuji willed it to stop.

As the rumbling ceased, and Azami stopped shaking the beads, Asuna released Yuji from the wooden restraints. She seemed to be back in ‘this’ place, no longer seemingly untouchable.

“Congratulations, Yuji. You’ve reached it- TenShin, Ten no Kishootsu. The ‘True Heaven’s Temper’ state of ability.”

Yuji was floating just above the ground, his chakra keeping him from actually touching it. His skin pulsed red with power; his hair turned black as cooling steel, and his tattoo matched it.

This is real power. The apex of my abilities.

He bowed to the two girls, deeply and respectfully.

“I owe you both so much. I will never be able to pay off my debt. Thank you. Thank you so much.”

--
--

Sakura, by the end of the night, was ready to go farther with Naruto than she’d ever gone before. They had gone back to her apartment, as it had been closer than his. They had been kissing before they even got in the doorway.

To Sakura's surprise, Naruto seemed distant, even as she tugged off her yukata and began to work on his. When she brushed her hand against his groin and he didn't react, she finally had it and punched him on the arm.

"Where the hell is your head?!" she shouted at him, absolutely irate. He was her boyfriend; wasn't he supposed to be paying attention to her at a time like this?

Naruto hesitated; "It's about earlier. When I wondered if we were really in love because of that prophecy. I just...can't get it out of my mind."

"Why are you worried about that? I love you; that should be enough!"

Naruto stroked her hair, looking more mature than she had ever seen. His words matched that maturity. "I just don't want our lives to be dictated by that stupid scroll. I mean....well, even he takes it seriously. Yuji."

Naruto's eyes met Sakura's, worry etched in his blue orbs.

"You know that he wouldn't react to that prophecy if he didn't believe it."

"Or maybe he's desperate for the power he'll get if it's real!" Sakura protested, and immediately regretted it. She hadn't meant for it to be a shot at Yuji like that. "You know how he is. He wants to be stronger, and this is..."

But Naruto had stood up. "I need time to think," he announced. "Just give me a little more time, okay? I love you; but I want to be sure I'm right. Because your first time only comes once, right?"

Sakura blushed, and felt her anger drain. How did he make it sound so reasonable?

--
--

Yuji hit the floor, coughing up blood.

"shoot!" he hissed through gritted teeth. Both girls were instantly at his side, concern all over their faces. "It hurts worse than before..."

It always hurt at least a little to release his Ten no Kishootsu power. So this new degree was going to be painful outside of his genjutsu world, but it would pass. He hoped. This time, there was no turning the power on and off. He simply 'was' Heaven's Temper; 'Yuji' was only a part of a greater whole now.

"Back up; quick!" Yuji said suddenly, curling into a ball. He dove for the door, going through it rather than sliding it aside. He got outside, looked up to the moon, made a handsign, and used a fire jutsu.

The most powerful, crimson jet of flames any of them had ever seen rose up into the night. Yuji fell over, exhausted from the effort. His hair was still black, but beyond that he seemed to have regained control of his abilities.

He hit the ground again on all fours, panting, chest heaving in and out.

"shoot..." he said again, this time in a mutter. It took him a few moments, but he rose first to his knees,

then to his feet. He forced himself to stand erect so he could get air into his lungs.

“We need to return to the festival,” Asuna told Yuji gently. “Try to get used to your new appearance and power.”

“Yeah,” Azami chimed in, “If people start staring, just remember ya got two hotties with you and they’re just jealous!”

Azami had flung an arm around Yuji’s shoulder, and it made Yuji wish that they were more than just friends. Although it was an odd gesture- Azami was more the type to mash his face into her mammoth breasts than to use such a...well, straightforward gesture.

“Asuna?”

Asuna nodded and slipped back into the temple. Azami steered Yuji into the woods, eventually positioning him across from her. He waited expectantly, trying to be patient. After a while, Azami opened her mouth. She paused before speaking, and Yuji was tempted to lean forward and kiss her. Her moist lips were just sitting there, so inviting. They began to move again, however, and out of them came:

“[...”

74 - Arc XI: Companionship- Chapter 1

She shook her head. "I can't do it. I can't. I'm sorry, Yuji."

She looked at him pleadingly. She didn't see the usual understanding in his eyes. Usually she could practically finish his sentences and vice versa. But now, there was only a blank, surprised, expectant look on his face. Surprising herself *and* Yuji, she turned and started to walk away.

"Wait a minute!"

Azami stopped, surprised at the command in Yuji's voice. He had managed to bark it out, despite being out of breath from whatever mental exertion was bothering him. He looked at her as he caught his breath, his eyes alive for the first time in a long while.

"Azami...we can't leave it like this! Not again. ..."

There was a touch of pleading in his voice that made Azami's heart whimper. She tried to steel herself and just tease him, but this time she couldn't. She tried to think of a lie, but couldn't do that either. She loved him. But she didn't deserve him.

"Damn it. Azami, listen, whatever is going on in your head...just...is it selfish for me to ask for a straight answer? If it is, I'll drop this. But..."

Yuji looked away, blushing. "...but if you can tell me, either way...Just...honestly, either way. I'll accept it."

Azami knew she owed him that much. She couldn't try to save his feelings or hers anymore.

"I love you, Yuji. But I don't deserve you."

The words had the effect of two kunai clashing in absolute silence. The feeling was so powerful it reverberated through Yuji, as if his body had been struck with the flat of a sword.

To his credit, Yuji didn't question it. God knew he wanted to. He rubbed his temples, screwing his eyes shut, trying to make sense of all this. In the end, he just spoke with the most natural words he could.

"I don't see it that way. But I'm not you. And I would never hold your own words against you. Hearing you say you love me...that's enough. Whatever the context."

"Romantic," Azami admitted immediately. If she was being honest, she was going to be *completely* honest. "Since the hot springs. When you wouldn't just stare at me, no matter what I did. No...no, before that. When I picked your pocket, and then you helped me dodge my pursuers. I knew you were different. Physically, you're attractive. And you're deep. You're so deep that I can't see the bottom of your feelings...your soul. I could never read you as well as I could other people. When I realized I wasn't bothered by that..."

Again, Yuji was stunned and at a loss for anything productive. So he eked out a "So...then...why?"

"Why don't I deserve you, right? That's what you mean?"

Yuji nodded, which she took as a sign to continue.

“I was bad. I would bring you nothing but trouble. Even if you say you don’t care, then I realize that I’ve killed people. No matter why, that is undeniable fact. Compared to me, your soul is pure white. And even if I get past all that...I’m not the type to just settle down like that.”

“No one’s asking you to settle! I don’t care if we just dated like two normal people. Or whatever you want! *Anything*”

“It can’t work!” Azami protested, emotion creeping into her voice.

“Then you can own me!”

Azami gasped and blushed. Yuji’s usual joking comment didn’t come. Instead, he stared into her eyes, blushing himself, but not breaking eye contact.

He meant it... she realized in astonishment. When she made no sound save for the gasp, Yuji continued. His voice was thick with desperation and emotion, but he paid it no heed. They were past the point of no return now.

“Like when we first met. After our fight. If I lost, you were going to own me. Even if that’s the case, I don’t mind. I’d rather be your possession than be without you!”

Such a show of emotion for Yuji. Someone who loved his freedom so much was willing to give it up. His heart had never been so open and vulnerable. He was at Azami’s mercy voluntarily. Because he loved her.

“I...I just don’t want to be alone anymore!” he finally said, breaking down. “Every day, it’s lonely. But at night...”

His face dropped even more, if possible. His voice was a barely audible whisper.

“At night, it’s almost unbearable. I think about death, religion, and other things that scare the hell out of me. It’s not healthy, and it’s not normal. I just...”

Azami kissed his forehead, managing to keep him quiet.

“There’s someone else now, Yuji. When I couldn’t bring myself to feel like we could be together, I-”

“Don’t play that card, Azami.” His voice was quite; pleading.

“You know that it’s the one thing you could say-”

“-That would make you give up on me completely,” Azami finished, a sad smile on her face, happy she could once again finish his thoughts before he could. “But it’s true, Yuji. His name is Kojiro. He’s a fisherman I met back home, in the Land of Waves-”

A flare of chakra, instantly suppressed, lit the clearing briefly. Yuji had reigned his power in, breathing heavy to keep it back. He drew in one long breath, then exhaled, his fists unclenching. He spoke slowly, as if tasting his words.

“I...understand. For what it’s worth, I really do, and I...well, I wish you luck, okay? I promise not be a sore

loser.”

He seemed to think of hugging her, but thought better of it and withdrew his arms.

“It’s almost a relief,” he said in a voice laded with sorrowful laughter. “To just know for sure, you know?”

She knew exactly what he meant, and started to tell him, but he cut her off.

“I promise not to harm the guy if you ever bring him around for a visit,” Yuji said before she could finish her thought. “Just...take care of yourself, okay?”

With that, he strode out of the clearing, one hand extended up in goodbye wave. He did not look back.

Azami still had her mouth open to speak, but instead let out a breath. There was little relief for her right now. On the upside, because of what Asuna was planning, she didn’t have to wait around to bring her back home.

Raising one hand in a handsign, Azami used her Shadow Summoning technique and let herself fall backward into the shadow.

At least Kojiro would be waiting for her.

--

Yuji honestly didn’t know what to do now. He had just humiliated himself. He’d taken a risk and told Azami everything. All at once, too. He had mistaken her desire to speak to him alone as her feelings coming to a head. Instead, she was breaking up with him before ever going out with him.

Oh, the hell with it.

Yuji blew off the festival, stopping home to change into his stealth gear. He didn’t want to be bothered. He put a blackened straw hat on his head, along with a dark hakama and uwagi, and threaded a path through the happy festival goers. The festival would continue for another couple days.

It hurt to be alone. The humiliation was nearly as bad. How could he have not known?! Of COURSE there was someone else! Why else hadn’t she acted on her attraction to him? To ‘not deserve him’. Bullshoot.

Yuji lit a cigarette, walking through the woods by himself. This scene would have been better if a girl’s hand was in his hand, rather than the cigarette that was a poor substitute. But it was an appropriate gesture, or so it seemed. Being this upset and embarrassed...

He had to go back to the festival tomorrow, he knew. He couldn’t blow it off, or people would ask questions. Especially when he and Azami had disappeared together. That was a line of questioning he didn’t want to face.

--

--

The rest of the festival was rather unspectacular, save for Naruto’s major decision. He decided that he

was ready to go with Jiraiya to train. No harsh words were spoken, but there was a rift between him and Sakura right up until Naruto left two days later.

Asuna decided to stay for a while, keeping an eye on Shoki's rapidly developing eye. Whenever he wasn't training with Sakura, Shoki was with Asuna, learning how to use his eye from the scroll Yuji had brought back.

As for Yuji, it seemed that this sudden power had given him more confidence. He spent more time with friends. He even spent one afternoon sitting with Satoko, Kuroko, and Kuroko's *very* noticeable younger sister, Shiroko. He learned that those were only nicknames for the two girls, because they were close with each other yet different as night and day. While Satoko openly drooled over him, he listened to Kuroko say what a sweet, shy girl Shiroko was. Shiroko blushed almost as easily as Yuji, apparently. She proceeded to point out that Kuroko was outgoing and a little abrasive.

To Yuji, the difference was clear.

Kuroko was resplendent in black clothes, alternating between pants, skirts, and shorts, with black hair in a ponytail. Shiroko had light brown hair, either in pigtails or let long behind her, usually clothed in a white top and a light-colored skirt. Both girls were very pretty, and both seemed a little sweet on Yuji, despite the power that he had to work very hard to control.

Another time, Asuna, Sakura and Shoki were watching Yuji spar against two ANBU agents. He had started out unarmed. When they attacked from opposite sides, Yuji dodged them both, landing behind one of the agents and swiping his sword. He swung the sword in just the right way to cut the other agent's armor and sword strap. Yuji caught the sword before it hit the ground, then threw both away. Both agents tried to attack empty hand, but Yuji dodged, parried, and returned strikes at an amazing pace.

Sakura seemed fidgety next to Asuna. When Asuna gave her a questioning glance, Sakura hesitated for only a moment before telling her what was going on. With Yuji and the agents clattering in the background, she confided to Asuna about the uncomfortable questions Naruto had begun asking.

"And the worst part is, what if he's right? What if I'm not really in love with him?" she asked, almost pleading for an answer. "I kept dismissing what he said, but the whole time he was the one who was really thinking. I just don't know what to do."

"Break up with him," Asuna said flatly. "Really. You won't know until you're apart how you fell about each other. And no, him being on a trip doesn't count. Can you go on without him? Is he everything to you? If he's NOT everything, what is he?"

Shoki looked up to Sakura a great deal and hated to see her in pain. But at the same time, he was thinking about Yuji-senpai. Maybe he should...

No, Yuji-senpai would not. This was another man's woman. That meant she was off-limits.

--

--

Yuji was sitting up one night more than a week after the festival, resting on a window ledge. The moon

shone on him, illuminating the half of him that faced the window. One hand held a cup of tea, still emitting steam from being freshly made.

Yuji was shirtless, letting the cool night air brush against his skin. The air was getting more crisp, but Yuji made no move to cover up. Part of it was training; working on functioning through discomfort. The other part was that the cold was a welcome distraction. He hadn't been bluffing when he told Azami that night was not just lonely but horrifying for him. Even with the power to dispel any external threat at his command, it was internal threats that worried Yuji.

Tonight he was just about contemplating what he would do if his parents died when he was interrupted by a knocking at his door. He shrugged on a light black shirt and moved to answer the door.

Sakura was on the other side, dressed in a set of overly large jade green pajamas. With the sleeves hanging over her hands and her hair not tied back so that her bangs fell over her eyes, she looked really cute. He immediately stepped aside to invite her in.

"What brings you here so late?" Yuji asked casually, setting about making another cup of tea for his guest.

"I knew you'd be up," she replied with a knowing smile. "And I figured that you wouldn't mind some company."

Yuji raised his eyebrows and returned her smile. "Your company is always welcome." He set down a cup of tea in front of her, then settled himself in to listen.

Sakura could hardly hide her downcast look as she frowned into her tea cup, giving Yuji a beautiful picture of a pretty young woman with a melancholy expression. His heart flip-flopped in his chest briefly, even as his mind screamed at him about ogling Naruto-dono's girl.

"You know about Naruto and I?"

Sakura's sweet voice brought Yuji back to reality. He nodded somberly; Naruto had also sought his council before leaving. He had advised Naruto to patch things up with her- as friends, not as lovers or teammates. He had, apparently, chosen to not take Yuji's advice. That was understandable. It was a damned awkward situation.

Though this visit is awkward in and of itself, Yuji admitted, taking a sip of tea as he waited for Sakura to continue.

"This prophecy stuff...he thinks that it's what made us fall in love. And he doesn't want to be led around by a scroll. So he's not taking...well, 'us' seriously..."

She looked like she wanted to say more, but was holding back. Yuji decided not to press her. Instead, he took a long sip of tea while he thought over the issue. The two couldn't talk it out, so...

"If the prophecy was behind it...would you love him any less?"

Sakura shook her head. "No. No, I wouldn't. But he doesn't feel the same way."

"..."

Yuji stood up and walked to the window, hands clasped behind his back.

“Speaking out of my role as your servant...I would say that you two are simply spending too much time together. The time apart will do you good, and when Naruto gets back, you’ll be even closer. What’s the old saying- absence makes the heart grow fonder?’.”

Sakura had thought of that herself, but somehow hearing it from Yuji made her feel better. Even now she marveled at the power that was almost visibly coming from him. It seemed a validation that things would work out. Feeling better, she asked Yuji a question. She loved the fact that he talked to her now as an equal, rather than standing on ceremony.

75 - Arc XI: Companionship- Chapter 2

“How is Azami?”

Yuji flinched, and he knew that Sakura saw it. There was no point in hiding it, he supposed.

“She’s...well, she’s got some guy back home, I guess. So it wasn’t going to work out...”

He sounded overly casual, and that made his reply more awkward. He mentally cursed himself for telling the unabashed truth at a time like this. He should have just said ‘good’, for that was true- *She* was doing good. It was he, Yuji, that had the problem!

Sakura stood up and went over to Yuji. She stood in front of him and gently took his hands.

“I am so sorry, Yuji.”

Yuji nodded, renewed feelings of sadness hitting him. He deeply regretted ‘losing’ Azami. He didn’t know this Kojiro guy, but despite what he told Azami while pretending to be a good sport, he really did want to rip the bastard limb from limb and-

“Yuji?”

He looked up.

Sakura was holding him lovingly, his head in her chest. There was nothing sexual about it for either of them. Simply two people down on their luck licking each other’s wounds. Yuji was about to thank her when the situation changed.

Sakura pushed him backward off his feet, lowering him gently to the ground before straddling him. Before he could protest, she held his shoulders down and kissed him. With her chakra control, she could neutralize even his Ten no Kishootsu chakra. He was literally helpless to stop her as her lips met his aggressively. There was no saying no until she let up.

“To hell with him,” she snarled, unbuttoning her top and flinging it aside. She tore Yuji’s shirt off. She ran a hand down his bare chest, feeling the goosebumps that had risen from the cold air. She sighed happily- he was human after all, she thought. He seemed ‘real’, rather than a product of a scroll’s words. She leaned back in and kissed him more passionately. She was so confused and desperate over Naruto that she wanted nothing more than her erstwhile protector- a boy who had admitted loving her despite promising to give her up- to be with her.

“Sakura...” he said softly. But she shook her head violently. She began to kiss his neck, marking it with little bites, knowing that he would enjoy the roughness behind it. Even as she set about tasting his body, she answered his question.

“No! Don’t you understand? I was in love with him! And he has the nerve to tell me that it isn’t real?! It feels real! It is real!”

She tapped Yuji’s ki point three inches below his navel, and he felt like his wrists and ankles were

shackled down. Which they were, really- with the invisible bonds of chakra. The skill of Sakura as a medic was amazing to him, even now. Though it was less amazing as the feeling of her tongue on his right nipple. It made him blush, really for the first time. She was not single; therefore no threat, so there was no need to feel worried or embarrassed. But she was breaking the rules! He couldn't let her do this! And yet, he was powerless. What harm would it do?

Let me count the ways...

Sakura continued her rant. "You wanted me, didn't you?! Well, now I'm yours! Where in this prophecy does it say anything about you and I being together being wrong?!"

"It doesn't," Yuji admitted calmly. "But I promised Naruto I wouldn't pursue you..."

Sakura looked at him, tears in her eyes. She was silently begging him not to do this. But his unwavering stare, with eyes that shone with loyalty, finally led her to back up a little, though she did not redress or release him.

"He told me he loved me, and lied. Do you think he cares about me? You care, don't you?"

"Yes. I do. And believe me, I don't want to say no to you," Yuji told her, his gaze firmly locked on her, still not raising his voice. God knew he didn't want to say no; not now! "But a promise is a promise. And if you ask me to, I will make you a promise..."

"What kind of promise?"

Yuji drew in a breath, at least partly to show how serious this was to him. He knew the prophecy was an esoteric concept at best to Naruto and Sakura. That was the point of him existing, he supposed. "I promise to break the prophecy. I will find a loophole and I will use it to destroy this damning prophecy, whatever the cost."

They were staring each other down now. Yuji was doing his best not to stare at her breasts, which had so lovingly held his head in a shared moment of pain just a minute ago. Now they were teasing him. What he desired he could not have.

And why not? Because I promised? Why does that sound so pathetic? Why can't I just let her do this? Naruto broke her heart. That bastard doesn't deserve her! So why...

Why am I stepping aside like this? I don't want to. I want to hold her. Why is it so wrong? Why is it a sin? Why is everything always verboten to me?

Sakura kept him there for a while, studying him.

"Damn your integrity," she said finally, loosening up a bit. She released his chakra restraints, but did not get off him.

"Damn my integrity," he agreed, nodding sagely. If she only knew how bad this sucked for him...

"I could order you to do this, you know. And you'd have to obey, right?" she asked him, eyes still brimming with unshed tears that made his heart yearn for her. If only he could damn his duty and take

her in his arms...

He heard himself reply: "That's true."

"You're lucky that's not my style."

"I'm *lucky*? How do you figure?" he quipped. "This damned thing...it's given me power...but at what cost?"

He shook his head, deciding it was his turn to tell her something big.

"Even though I am simultaneously Yuji/Kimihiro and Ten no Kishootsu, I can feel the division.

'Kimihiro' desires power; Ten no Kishootsu grants it. But 'Yuji' wants love...I am still not whole."

Sakura kissed him again, this time much more innocently, on the forehead. She held him by his shoulders at arm's length to study him. She looked into his eyes, gave him a brave smile and told him a simple truth:

"You are loved, Yuji. Whether you're 'Heaven's Temper' or 'Kimihiro', there *are* people waiting for you to come home. Don't ever think you're really alone out there."

She released Yuji. But he didn't move. He just lay there for a moment before answering with a quiet sadness in his voice.

"...The loneliest place, Ojousama, can be a crowded room."

Sakura had heard him say that before. She understood it somewhat, but decided to ask him about it. What did either of them have to hide at this point? She'd just made a fool of herself, and come to within an inch of ripping his clothes off and having her way with him. She was now before her loyal friend and servant less than fully clothed. And it didn't get any more innocent with him half naked as well.

"...I have power that I know I've earned. I have a cause. A clear, personal cause. And yet, I'm empty inside. Like a part of me is missing. I don't know for sure it's love that would fill that gap within me, but just now...your attention...your desire on me..."

Blushing heavily, Yuji looked up at Sakura, met her gaze quickly, then turned away shyly.

"...It made me feel whole. And that's why I'll do anything for you. Because I love you."

Yuji got up on one knee, taking the time-honored servant's pose, with one fist planted on the ground, his head bowed in deference. His eyes were squeezed shut. He spoke with surprising intensity for someone who was just on the verge of depression.

"Even if nothing can ever come of that love, I will honor it, Ojousama!"

Sakura sank to her knees to be on his level, but he sunk his gaze even lower. She was not going to be denied.

"If you won't look, then listen!" she demanded fiercely. "If you love me, then find happiness! Being miserable is no answer!"

"There is no happiness, Ojousama! As long as I serve you and Naruto-dono, I will have, at least, a purpose for living. Without that..."

Sakura knew she was taking a gamble, but at this point, it didn't matter. She had inadvertently made things much worse with her selfish desires. She had to make things right.

"Yuji, if this is how it will be, then there's only one option: If you cannot obey me and at least *attempt* to find happiness, then I will do the one thing in my power that both you and I, and Naruto too...the one thing we'll all regret:

I will break this prophecy myself by dismissing you as my servant. That will end this prophecy that has caused so much misery!"

"Were you to do that, Ojousama," Yuji told her solemnly, his voice laden with worry and regret, "My death would only follow. I am bound by blood to this unholy covenant. For me, there is no escape except for death."

He smiled at her, meaning his next words.

"But...that's not to say I mind my position. I am content. At least, with work. (My personal life really sucks, 'tho)"

Whose death will it be that shatters this prophecy? Mine? Or yours, Sasuke? Make no mistake- if you even attempt to hurt anyone, I will have no reservations about ending you. No more wondering. Make your move if you're going to...

--
--

Shoki had become proficient in medical ninjutsu quickly. He knew first aid, and even a few life-saving techniques. His mind wasn't following what his body was doing, and somehow remembering independent of thought. He had finished dissecting mending the broken wing of a bird that had hit the window earlier. Normally, to see life given back to something or someone so bound by injury made him smile. But today, he was seeing three of that bird, and only in snapshots.

The scroll said this would happen. So that means it's almost over. Will I be blind after this? Or...

Before he could finish that thought, Sakura came in to check his progress. She also seemed distracted.

"You did good. A clean mend."

He barely heard the praise. His eye had jammed on the image of the bird, and he couldn't get it out. He was trying not to panic so as not to worry Sakura, but his courage was failing quickly.

"The eye again, huh?"

Shoki nodded, rubbing at his eye. "It's almost over. I'm so afraid of going blind..."

Sakura held his hand comfortingly, giving him a smile he couldn't see.

"It'll be alright. If something goes wrong, we can fix it. So no worrying about it, 'kay?"

Shoki could hear the smile in her voice. He felt his first crush developing right then and there. He could understand why Yuji-senpai liked this girl so much. She was so kind. Her hand was warm and comforting; a light in his darkest hour. Had Shoki not know for sure it was wrong to be with another

man's girlfriend, he would have kissed her. Or at least tried to. Really, their age difference wasn't so big.

"Thank you..."

"No problem. Anything I can do to help?" she inquired brightly.

Well, actually, there was. Something that wasn't too difficult. What could it hurt to ask?

"Lady Sakura, could you take me to see Asuna-chan? The scroll said something about pure water being helpful somehow."

Sakura bent down and picked Shoki up, carrying him piggyback.

Right, that scroll he hasn't shown to anyone yet. I suppose it's only natural to want to learn about your lineage first. He probably told Yuji by now.

"We'll pick up Yuji and Asuna on the way to the temple, okay?"

76 - Arc XI: Companionship- Chapter 3

At the temple, Asuna and Shoki stood in a knee-deep pool of water that was held in a stone basin inside the garden. There was a tall fence around the area, and beautiful flora all over, arranged by an artist. It was such a beautiful, tranquil place. Sakura would have loved to get married here, while Yuji felt at peace for the first time in a long while.

Yuji and Sakura were kneeling off to the side, watching intently as the ritual unfolded in front of them. It was a purification rite, similar to what Yuji had been through once before, as a favor to Asuna when she first took the Uzume title.

“Shoki, you have to take your clothes off for this part, okay?” Asuna told him gently. “If that’s uncomfortable for you...well, you have my word that my eyes won’t leave yours.”

Shoki was apparently more interested in fixing his eye than retaining his modesty, as he stripped quickly. Sakura looked away politely, a light pink hue on her cheeks (she’d seen her patients naked before, but this seemed different, somehow) while Yuji focused on Asuna. He was too far away to hear what she was saying, but he could see her making a mark on his chest with the water. She then lightly applied some of the water to his eye, rubbing it over his eyelid then circling below his eye.

Shoki muttered something unintelligible, then began to fall backward. Asuna caught him and eased him down, letting him lay in the water. Yuji and Sakura stayed where they were with some difficulty, until Asuna waved them off.

“It’s okay. He told me this might happen,” she told them all, staying calm. “He did well. I think he’ll be fine, Yuji. Whatever effect this had, it won’t be damaging. Unless he catches a cold from lying in this water. It’s freezing!”

Yuji shrugged off his coat and laid it on the ground. He took off his shirt and rolled up his pants before wading into the water. He and Sakura were already barefoot, so she joined him in the water, taking the boy’s pulse as Yuji carried him to the coat. He laid the boy down, wiping him off as best he could with the coat, then covering him with it as much as he could wrap it around his body.

Yuji let Sakura check Shoki out while he talked to Asuna. She was standing a little bit away, her arms crossed. The white top of her Miko uniform was wet, making it somewhat revealing, but Asuna wasn’t the type to freak out over that, hence the arms crossed.

“Thanks for taking care of this.”

Asuna gave Yuji a small smile, shrugging a bit. “You guys are family. If I don’t take care of you, who knows what would happen?”

Yuji smirked, partly in agreement. She’d done so much for them. But there was so little he could do in return. For now, anyway.

He handed his shirt to Asuna, telling her she could use it to wipe up if she wanted.

“I don’t need it back or anything, so don’t accuse me of being a pervert.”

She rolled her eyes, taking the shirt all the same. “Yeah, that’s why you stripped so readily. What are you teaching Shoki?”

“That it’s okay for women to walk all over you if they can do something for you,” he shot back.

He’s changed, Asuna noted, trying not to look at Yuji’s shirtless body. **He wouldn’t have taken his shirt off like this before. And he definitely wouldn’t have teased me! It seems that getting the Ten no Kishootsu ability was good for him. He seems happier. But I can still sense his loneliness. I would be able to even if Azami hadn’t stopped by to tell me what happened.**

“Asuna?” Yuji asked quietly, looking at Shoki’s peacefully resting form. He held his silence for a while, despite her immediate answer. He just kept looking at Shoki, shaking his head a little. Finally, he spoke up about what was on his mind.

“I wonder what he thinks about like that? I’m not his father, or even his brother. I happened to be engaged to his sister in the most informal of ways. And yet he trusts me. But all I’ve done is let him see his sister die. I don’t know how to be a good influence outside of telling him to work hard. And...”

Yuji hesitated, not sure how to put this in a good way.

“I...feel like I need to coddle him a bit. So I want to keep him off the front lines. And I want there to be a good female influence in his life. I’m no good with things like feelings...”

Asuna snaked her arm around his, resting her head on his shoulder. “Don’t sell yourself short. You feel things, no matter how much you pretend not to. And you’re a fine example for him. You know I would tell you if you weren’t.”

Yuji fingered the pendant around his neck. The ring Miko had worn for that short time was fixed around his neck almost permanently these days. It was similar to a worrying stone in that Yuji rubbed it when he became worried. A spot on the ring was worn; the color weathered where his thumb had rubbed its surface constantly.

“Thanks, Asuna. It’s just...lately, I wonder how it would have been if I’d been able to save her. Miko. If she was alive, and we were married. Even if it was just for Shoki...well, no, that’s not true.”

A small smile crept onto his face; his eyes a million miles away.

“It was for us, too. We were too young to comprehend marriage then, so we agreed to not be in love. But I don’t think either of us was capable of ever marrying without love involved. I at least love her enough to not be able to find another girl. It feels like cheating on her.”

Miko shrugged a little bit, cozying up more to him. Azami was such a fool to pass this up. Even if she couldn’t have him, at least they were good friends.

“Maybe you were in love with her. Maybe you still are. But she would want you to move on. I know her better than anyone- even you. And I know she wouldn’t want you to deny yourself companionship just for her memory.”

Asuna held Yuji’s cheeks and kissed his forehead sweetly, smiling at him. She gently memorized the surprised look on his face, thinking it was such an honest expression. It was refreshing to see the truth on his face for a change.

“Memories fade. Love does not,” she told him, putting her forehead against his. “I think there’s enough room in you to love again. Failing that...At least get laid.”

A real, spontaneous laugh burst from both their lips. It was so funny for a shrine maiden to say that. But it was a form of healing, after all. And Asuna knew best, didn’t she?

“You’re the boss,” he said.

“Don’t you forget it. Now go find a nice girl. Or two, if you can swing it.”

“Doesn’t your position forbid that kind of talk?”

“My position is the one that decides what’s forbidden.”

There were unspoken words of thanks said through looks and goodbye hugs. Asuna was a master of her craft. She knew just what Yuji needed to hear at that point, and she could say it and mean it, too.

I hope things don’t work out in a bad way. This fight hanging over his head is so damning, no matter what the outcome is. Is the only way out to shatter the prophecy? And at what cost?

--

--

When Shoki woke up he immediately slapped a hand to his eye. He was afraid, he decided. He didn’t want to know if he could see normally again. What if he couldn’t? The thought of being blinded completely horrified him. The mere thought of it was maddening. To be trapped in darkness forever, with no way out...

But he had to open his eye to find out if Asuna’s ritual had helped. His eye wasn’t hurting, so that was a plus right there. But what of his actual vision?

He moved his hand aside, then removed his fingers one at a time, reluctantly. Relief washed over him as he found he could see normally. Indeed, he could see better than before. His vision had been far better than 20/20 before. Now it had to be doubly good from what it was before. He had a wider range of vision, too, as he could see some of the floor while lying face up.

There’s the relation to the Byakugan, then. So this eye was descended from Rinnegan as well. I knew it had to be related because of the way it affected Pain. But what makes it different?

Rolling over, Shoki peered into the water nearby, pushing his bangs up and out of the way. His blinded

eye was a dull grey as usual. But his good eye had changed. There was one large, central diamond-shape where the pupil had been before. On the top, left, right, and bottom of it were four smaller diamonds that intersected with it.

For once, Shoki decided that his eye looked cool. Normally he wished to simply be normal, but this...wow. It brought a smile to his face for the first time since his sister had been killed before his eyes.

Miko...

Could I have saved her if I'd had this eye? he wondered. **Yuji-senpai did everything he could and more. And he's even sort of adopted me. I'm...lucky.**

He wished he could share some of his luck with senpai. It was awkward to be naturally skilled while Yuji was not.

All the same, it was time to see what his eye could do.

--
--

"You sure?"

Azami rolled her eyes. Geez, Kojiro was cute, but he could be so damned dense sometimes!

"Yes, I'm sure! For the last time! He won't kill you, I promise!"

Well, strictly speaking, that was a lie. Azami had never seen Yuji so disappointed before. She'd never seen him completely lose his dignity. He may have been cast into a servant's role, but he retained the honor of a jonin at all times. For him to beg the way he did.

It had only been a couple days, but it still made Azami feel sick. To turn down someone who so obviously loved her. She felt awful, playing the 'there's someone else' card; even if it was absolutely true. It really was the one way to make sure Yuji gave up on her completely.

Kojiro adjusted his vest for the fiftieth time this trip. Azami wondered if she should have had him wear a shirt under it. It wouldn't help her case if her new man was more physically appealing than Yuji. In that respect, the two were opposites. Kojiro was tall and tanned; Yuji was average height and pale. Kojiro was a fisherman; Yuji was a warrior. Kojiro had big muscles; Yuji was more lithe.

Azami found both attractive. But there was something about Kojiro. Aside from the fact that she decided she still didn't deserve Yuji, Kojiro's down-to-earth nature appealed to her. Yuji's life was going to be stained with combat; Kojiro could give her a measure of peace.

"Just take it easy, okay?" Azami warned him. "Relax. Yuji won't hurt you. He still likes me as a friend. So just be yourself, let me introduce you, and then he can have some closure."

"Sorry, sorry. Meeting your...ex? Or whatever he is. It's a little..."

Azami snuggled up on his arm, her head on his shoulder. "Remember, I'm here with you. I chose *you*. Yuji isn't a threat to you, or me, or 'us'. Okay?"

Kojiro nodded, running a hand through his shoulder-length black hair. Azami loved that- when she could look into his eyes. They were deep as the sea and matched it in color. And with that bronzed look to his skin.

She licked her lips, imaging what would come next.

All of a sudden, they were both hit with a blast of hot air. It knocked them both back, nearly off their feet.

"What the hell?" Azami murmured. She clapped a hand to her mouth. Yuji!

Kojiro gaped open-mouthed. "Tell me that's not the guy I'm supposed to meet..."

Azami wished she could tell him that it wasn't. But that was most certainly Yuji. But she'd never seen him like that before.

He was floating just above the ground, dark tongues of fire surrounding him. In his 'Ten no Kishootsu' state, his hair turned a shiny black like obsidian. But this was the first time she'd seen him in full bloom. His wings, normally hidden, were spread regally, extending out from his back. He was unarmed, but his hands and feet were coated in nearly black tongues of fire. He apparently hadn't noticed them, because he wound up and unleashed his most powerful jutsu at a dead tree almost 100 meters away through living trees.

"SHOUKYAKU JUTSU!" he bellowed, his voice deeper than Azami remembered. There was another huge back blast of heat. Azami used a wind jutsu to shield herself and Kojiro from the worst of it. They both watched as Yuji's jutsu took effect.

The tree exploded, then disintegrated in the matter of a millisecond.

Then, for one moment, Yuji turned, his mouth opened in surprise. For a second, an expression that could only be described as hopeful ecstasy crossed his features. His mouth opened in greeting. Then he saw him. Kojiro.

Instantly, Yuji let himself 'power down'. His wings disappeared by exploding outward with a small sound similar to breaking glass. The sparks of flame settled to the ground gently, fading out upon contact with the earth.

Yuji's hair settled down, and he also stopped floating. But in the instant all that happened, his expression had smoothed to something more neutral. Even in all that, Azami had seen his mouth gape for a just a second.

Did I do this too soon? No, no, it's better to do it quickly and end the pain. For his sake.

"Yuji, this is Kojiro. You said I could bring him for a visit, so I..."

As to be expected of Yuji, he was a perfect gentleman. He slapped on a slight smile, snapped his arms to his sides and bowed.

“It’s good to meet you. Azami told me a lot about you.”

Azami could feel how hard he was trying to conceal a very unstable, dangerous chakra. She thanked him silently, because there was no doubt in her mind that if he decided to be a jerk, he could have incinerated her new boyfriend. And quite possibly, her.

“I’m sorry; I was just in the middle of some training. I didn’t know you were coming or I wouldn’t have been doing something so dangerous...” he apologized, still bowing.

A patented lie. Yuji had felt them coming a mile away thanks to a new jutsu he was trying out. But no need to tell them that. He could tell that his little stunt had scared Azami’s new boyfriend, and that was all he needed. Now he could be nice; now that Kojiro knew pulling any crap on Yuj’s turf was not tolerated. Best to established boundaries early.

I did not win her, and I need to accept that. Perhaps it’s best. I’m going to be in for the fight of my life. For my life. I don’t need another person to worry about.

He knew it was a lie. He knew he was not over her. And seeing her on the arm of another man infuriated him beyond all belief. But the last truth anchored him. He had a purpose to continue living. He had a mission. Even if he had little else, he still had that.

“I would love to have you two over for dinner, if you’d care to join me,” Yuji heard himself say. He smirked inwardly at the worried look on Kojiro’s face. Did he think Yuji was going to eat him? ‘Good’ came the next vicious thought.

Azami clasped Kojiro’s hand almost deliberately. Her silent response to his show of power and boundary-setting.

“We’d love to. Is tonight okay?”

“Sure. Stop on by. Shoki will be around; is that alright?”

“Fine by me. See you then, Yu.”

Yuji nodded, gave another friendly grin, and turned to walk away. He heard Kojiro whisper something to Azami, then he heard the sound of sandals running behind him. He turned, careful in case of an attack. But Kojiro stopped well short. Good thing. Yuji’s fist was cocked out of reflex, ready to strike.

“Listen, Yuji, can we talk? Like, at a bar or something? I know this is your turf; I know she was your girl. I don’t want trouble, okay? I want to talk. Man to man.”

I don’t wanna talk to you! But damn it, this jerk approaches me honorably- what am I going to say?

-

They wound up in a bar not far from where Yuji had been. Yuji opted for green tea while Kojiro chose some sort of sake. Neither man was there for the drinks, and they both knew it. The ball was in Kojiro’s

court. It seemed to take him a while to formulate his thoughts into words, but finally he just spat out what he wanted to say:

“I’m going to ask her to marry me.”

Yuji wasn’t completely shocked, but he felt a flare of anger all the same. It was quickly suppressed. “Hey, congratulations!”

Kojiro looked nervous. “Thanks. I...guess I wanted you to know so it didn’t surprise you later. And, well-”

“You don’t need my permission,” Yuji said/snapped. He tried not to be so bitter. He tried to feel genuinely happy. But he hadn’t felt happy in so long he wasn’t sure he remembered what it even felt like.

Softening his voice, Yuji added “I’ll duck out; give you kids some privacy.”

Kojiro thanked him, deciding to stop talking there. After a minute, Yuji spoke up a bit, asking Kojiro about his work and the like. It only took a very uncomfortable ten minutes for them to agree to return to what they were doing.

--

As it turned out, Shoki would not be joining them. He had sent word via one of the Leaf’s birds that he wouldn’t be returning until late. Yuji privately cursed him for that; of all the ways to make this even more awkward! He couldn’t help but feel like he was without allies at this little dinner party. He felt like shoot, quite frankly. But when his company came, he put on a brave little smile.

Look at me, being a little fracking trooper.

“I’ll be right back; I need to bring Ojousama her dinner.” Yuji excused himself quickly, carrying a container to the home Sakura usually shared with Naruto.

He hadn’t made her dinner in a long time. She normally disdained that. But maybe tonight, he could persuade her to join him. He found her really didn’t want to be alone with the happy couple waiting for the food to be done.

Reaching the main house, Yuji knocked at the door.

“Come in!” came Sakura’s voice. Yuji obeyed and nearly swallowed his tongue.

Sakura was sitting on the floor wearing a pair of shorts and a baggy white sweater that hung off her shoulder. She was painting her toenails (Yuji managed to tear his eyes away, but not before noticing that her toenails were now the same color as her eyes). Seeing her relaxing like this was a major turn-on.

“Ojo- er, Sakura, I was hoping I could convince you to join me for dinner tonight. I’m...in a bit of a....that is...???”

Sakura looked so nice, and so sweet, that Yuji just opened up and told her everything.

“My God! I’m so sorry, Yuji! But don’t worry, it’ll be alright!”

She gave him a little wink and a nudge with her elbow.

“Let me go slip on a party dress and I’ll come down.”

77 - Arc XI: Companionship- Chapter 4

Dinner went off without a hitch. Well, granted, to each individual, it was the longest hour of their lives. Kojiro was waiting for Yuji to step out so he could pop the question; Azami was worried that Yuji might char her new boyfriend into an unrecognizable mess; Sakura was worried that this wasn't a good thing for Yuji after all. But most all, Yuji was worried about all of the above. He wished Azami well, so he really did want to stop imagining burning Kojiro to a crisp. And to lose it in front of Sakura would not be a good thing.

Finally, Yuji couldn't take it any longer. He stood up, shaking one leg as if it had cramped. It happened often enough when kneeling like that.

"I'm going to go for a little walk. I'll serve desert when I get back."

Sakura scrambled up after him, giving everyone at the table a smile. She looked back as she shut the sliding door. She could see Kojiro's silhouette start to kneel...

-

"So that's really it..." Yuji muttered. Sakura trotted at his side, giving him a worried look. For his part, Yuji looked up at the moon, trying and failing to maintain a neutral expression. His expression was distinctly sad.

"Would it help to talk?" Sakura asked, then immediately regretted speaking at all. That was the sort of thing a girlfriend did. And she was spoken for. Despite the little incident from the other night, she was committed to Naruto.

"I would, Sakura. But I can't think up a curse acerbic enough, and would not say it in front of you anyway. I just...damn. I kind of thought that...I guess it hasn't sunk in after all. I figured she'd, you know, work out her problems and then we'd wind up together at the end..."

He stopped, his hands in his sleeves.

"And I'm talking about it. I'm sorry, Ojo-...Sakura. This whole night has been one awkward mess. Let's just head back. Kojiro's got to be done by now..."

Sakura hesitated, but ultimately decided to reach out and take Yuji's hand. It was just a brief squeeze; no harm done. But she could feel him drawing some strength from it.

"Hey. Cheer up, okay. Things will work out. Alright?"

Yuji managed an odd mix of a smile and grimace. "Yeah. Things'll work out."

For everyone else.

Sakura didn't want this little walk to end yet. She knew that if her man had popped the question, she'd be showing at least a little affection. It might not be good for Yuji to see that.

“Yuji...I’ve been curious about something...”

Yuji looked over at her. God, he looked handsome in the moonlight, she thought. Something about his usual melancholy look went well with the pale moonlight. He was so hot sometimes!

“Well...” she continued, stammering a bit. “How about a ride? I mean, with your wings. Not everyone can fly, and I’m curious...”

Yuji hadn’t expected that. But he smiled in response. His tattoo flashed for just a moment, and then his wings appeared.

“If you could...um...well, grab me around the chest. Like, put your head sort of near my heart and hold on around my waist...That’s probably the safest...”

Awk-ward. And hot. I wish...we were together. Instead of just friends.

Sakura complied, happily grabbing on to Yuji. It felt less lonely to be with him. She was tempted to kiss him. Anything to cheer him up. She couldn’t imagine...

Well, actually, she could. She might be the only person in the world who could. After what Sasuke had put her through.

But I’m still powerless to help him. I wish I could. I wish that the suffering would stop. Naruto; Sasuke; Yuji...and now I’m suffering, even though I’ve got no right.

Yuji’s powerful wings carried them high into the air, and for a moment, Sakura forgot her troubles. All she could think of was how beautiful the Leaf village looked from up here, and how good Yuji’s strong arms felt around her waist. It was a truly romantic moment. And yet, both knew that they could not pretend it really was. Even if the longing was there, no matter what the reason, they couldn’t be closer than this.

--

“....So will you marry me?”

Azami answered by tackling Kojiro with flying hug and kiss. She didn’t stop there. She began to make out with him more or less right there. It was the happiest day of her life! From being an orphan to an outcast bounty hunter, now she belonged somewhere. With someone. It just made her so happy...

She had no plan of letting him go anytime soon. She had forgotten she was in Yuji’s house. She and Kojiro were soon lost to each other.

-

Yuji glared at the scene through the shoji door. It was only a silhouette, but all the same, he could see what was going. He was angry at first, and he ran for it. Ran far enough away from everyone so that they wouldn’t sense his chakra.

His wings formed free of his will and beat a few times, reacting to his sheer anger and mental agony. The dead, dried leaves on the ground burst into flame. A ring of fire surrounded Yuji. He basked in it, standing in the center, his face toward the ground. Sakura was a good distance away, watching, Yuji

knew. But he couldn't stop himself. What did he care, anyway? They couldn't be together either. He returned to his thoughts.

How could she.. how could she? In my house. In the house I would have shared with her! The life I would have given her! Why? ?????? WHY?!

Yuji knelt down in apparent agony, angry red blisters boiling up from under his skin. "DAMN IT!" he shouted, his voice straining as he punched the earth. The ground cracked in every direction, leaving Yuji at the epicenter of the mild earthquake he'd caused.

Sakura stay around for a while. Mostly to keep an eye on Yuji. He had managed to put on a brave face and convince everyone that he was fine. Sakura knew him, and therefore knew he was not fine. And he might not be for a while. There was just too much to think about.

Asuna was on her way over. She had sent word via summons to Sakura. She had felt Yuji's burst of chakra, and the anguish it carried. Besides, she said, she had some other business with Shoki, presumably to check on his progress with respect to his eye.

--
--

It had been two days since Yuji has seen Kojiro and Azami had seen-

Damn. He thought of it. Almost ten seconds since last time. A new record.

Yuji had already fitted a new tatami mat in to replace the one he had destroyed. He couldn't bear to even walk on the area where another man had-
His movements were slow by his usual standards. He appeared to be deep in thought the whole time. His eyes were certainly elsewhere.

Sakura decided to get Yuji talking. That might help.

"Yuji? I don't mean to pry, but what exactly happened between you and Azami?"

Yuji's movements slowed more, though they didn't stop altogether. He was busy putting the wooden frame around the new tatami mat. That meant working with a hammer and nails. Not his strong suit when he wasn't distracted, so doing it now was potentially disasterous.

"I...well, confessed to her. And she told me she loved me back, but still couldn't accept my feelings. I had a meltdown and told her she could own me. You remember, like when I first met her..."

Sakura did. It was her that saved Yuji from being owned the first time by defeating Azami. When Yuji defeated her a few months later, she thought that was the end of it. Apparently not.

"..Well, she said the one thing that would make me give up on her. That there was somebody else. I told her it was okay to bring him by; that I was totally happy for her."

Whack. One nail in.

“I’m so full of crap. But she’s my friend; I’m supposed to be happy for her.”

Whack Whack. Two more nails.

“And yet, I pull this stupid stunt. On the upside, she probably won’t ever talk to me again. Things can’t get more awkward. If she didn’t feel that burst of chakra…”

Whack whack whack wh- shoot!

Yuji’s thumb took a hammer shot, causing him to curse and drop the hammer. He threw the hammer out a window, breaking it. He tucked his thumb into his mouth, cursing under his breath.

Sakura couldn’t help it. She giggled. To see powerful Yuji sitting there, his thumb in his mouth. It was cute. A glimpse of the human she knew he could be when he stopped denying his nature.

“Come here,” she sighed, smiling as she took his thumb out of his mouth and healed it with a small burst of chakra. “There. Good as new. Now, come on, pull yourself together. Up we get!”

Sakura took Yuji’s hand and pulled him to a standing position.

“There! Okay, look, we’ve both got love troubles. So why don’t we do something about them? Naruto won’t be back for a while, but at I’ve got Shoki to deal with. We need to find you something to occupy your time. And as I recall, you’ve got a couple very sexy girls who are more than happy to pay attention to you!”

Yuji started to pull away a bit. “Come on, look at me. I’m falling apart. The last thing I need to do is try to-”

Sakura stopped him there. “No, you need to listen to your Ojousama. Now, go get yourself cleaned up. Bathe, change, the whole nine yards. You need to some cheering up. And unfortunately, I can’t do it myself, or I would. You need to start realizing that you’re a catch. So, say it.”

“Say what?”

“Say ‘I am a catch. Any girl would be lucky to have me’.”

“Ojou-”

“*Say it!*”

Yuji sort of dropped his head and mumbled: “I’m a catch. Any girl would be lucky to have me.”

“Good!” Sakura cheered. “Now, you go and get cleaned up. I’m going to pick some clothes for you. And yes, I’m going to go through your underwear, too. You will definitely need a girl’s touch there.”

And with my help, he just might get it! Hopefully, one of those two girls will get busy feeling

more than his underwear. But we'll start this off right. If I know Yuji, he'll get turned on by the very thought that a girl has been pawing his clothes. He takes that sexual energy, and brings that to the table, and maybe, just maybe...

--
--

Sakura knocked, then entered the bathroom, finding a naked Yuji toweling off, just barely covering up in time.

"Hot," she commented, smirking as he blushed. "Now then, let's get you dressed up."

"Ojousama, I-"

Sakura stretched her finger out to Yuji's nose, poking it gently.

"Look, you. I don't care if you get laid, but you are getting out of this house, and taking a night off. I'm a big girl; I'll deal with not having a servant for one night. Now, who are you going to go out with?"

"One of them has to say 'yes' first, right? I mean, I guess I would aim for Shiroko, since I already said no to Kuroko..."

Sakura shook her head. "No, no, wrong answer! That's not how you make that decision! First you have to think who you're attracted to. Until you decide that, you stay naked. And if you try to jerk me around, I'll take your towel away."

Sakura watched his reactions, noting his apparent pleasure. **Aha! I had my suspicions before, but Yuji most definitely likes to be controlled! Now, which one...Kuroko is more openly controlling, but I think Shiroko would actually be more dominating. She plays her little 'demure' act, but she keeps pace with her sister easily enough.**

I wonder if Yuji could score both of them. That'd be kind of hot, even from my point of view. No, no, he couldn't without a massive coronary, I think. Better to keep it down to one girl. Kuroko is more obvious, but she had some time with Yuji...

"Okay, enough thinking. I'm going to talk to them and one of them will show up here shortly," Sakura announced. She stuffed a bundle of clothes into Yuji's arms. His towel dropped, and he pressed the clothes in front of his groin quickly. Sakura giggled, putting a hand on his chest.

"Girls play rough, Yuji. Especially kunoichi. So you'd better get used to thinking on your feet. And fast. Now, get those clothes on...or not. I'll be back here with a girl or two, and you'd better be ready to show them a good time!"

--

Sure enough, Sakura showed up. But with two girls in tow. Yuji knew them both. Kuroko and Shiroko. He didn't know their real names, or even if they were really sisters. That didn't matter, what did was- oh crap- here were both of them! Girl-shy Yuji didn't know how to react. He'd hung out with them both before, yeah, but this time, the intent was clearly sexual, or at least something of that nature.

A brief fantasy skittered across his mind. Both of them, sharing him; overpowering him.

Somewhere, somehow, Yuji remembered that he should make tea. Right. Tea. Green tea. He was having company. And oh shoot, how was he going to explain the tatami mat that still wasn't fitted properly into place? Would they even ask about that?

Yuji watched as Kuroko grinned and waved, then separated. Huh? She was leaving? Where was she- His doors slid open, and here came Sakura and Shiroko.

"Sorry to intrude," came the standard polite introduction from both of them.

"Uh, yes, welcome!" Yuji stammered.

Sakura clicked her tongue at him. "Hey, hey, what's this crap? You're not supposed to button those shirts all the way up! I know you don't wear western clothes that often, but come on! It's basic sexiness!"

Sakura pulled apart the top two buttons on the black long-sleeve shirt she'd practically forced him to wear. It was tucked neatly into matching black pants. He'd shined his shoes, not knowing if that was cool or not, but it made him feel better, so why not?

By the time Sakura was done, she'd opened his collar button, plus one more, showing some of his chest off. He might as well have been naked. And yet... The sexual energy felt good. It was embarrassing and worrisome, but at the same time he enjoyed it. Was that normal?

"Okay, here's the deal- I'm going to leave you two kiddies alone," Sakura announced, an arm on each of their shoulders. "Go out; stay in- whatever you like. But you two had better be all over each other by the time I get back! I'll be really mad if you're both still clothed!"

Yuji gaped at her. What was Ojousama doing? He didn't know girls could talk like that! He always thought they were either shallow or demure. Being flirty without being slutty- what a novel concept!

"I understand, Sakura," came Shiroko's pleasing voice. "I know very well that Yuji-kun can be a bit shy. So I'll do everything in my power to make him feel comfortable."

For some reason, danger looked behind those words. Yuji looked at her, and drew in a breath. Wow!

She was gorgeous. Her light brown hair was draped across her back tonight, the sides pulled back into a sort of loose ponytail hidden beneath the body of her hair. She wore a white, short-sleeve blouse that could go from casual to dressy easily, and a short black pleated skirt that was dotted with silver studs across the top. Thigh-high stockings with a white ribbon tied in a neat bow led to black loafer-style shoes with just a small heel. Shiroko was naturally cute, but tonight, with light, expertly applied make-up, she veritably glowed. Suddenly, that 'dangerous' tone in her voice didn't seem so scary. It seemed, well, inviting.

Sakura giggled and raised one hand in a playful salute. "Okay, you kids have fun!"

She stepped out, but leaned back in the doorway.

“Oh, Yuji?”

“Yes, Ojousama?”

“I know you have a *****. If you don't put it to some good use soon, then I'll remove it.”

The color rose in Yuji's face. He knew full well that Sakura was capable of making good on that threat. He hadn't expected her to start talking like Sai all of a sudden. Behind him, Shiroko apparently found that funny and she clapped her hands together and said 'how scary!' in a voice that certainly didn't seem scared but rather amused.

With that, Sakura was gone, and Yuji was alone with Shiroko.

78 - Arc XI: Companionship- Chapter 5

So then...

Yuji kind of understood what he was supposed to do. But he'd really had no practice. He'd been engaged, but never dated. So how did-?

"Shiroko, what do you like to do?"

Step one. Okay, try to get her to take the lead.

Shiroko was kneeling like a perfect little lady, but the smile on her face was wicked.

"Why, Yuji-kun, don't tell me you're trying to get me to take the lead already! And before the bedroom! Shame on you!"

What the hell? How do you react to that? Okay, okay, time to think. Uh...

"Well, then, ???... How about we start with...tea?"

"Why phrase it like question? Doesn't tea sound good to you?" Shiroko asked innocently, that wicked little smile still on her face. She giggled a bit into the cup of tea Yuji had set before her when she had come in. He had such manners. He took a sip, eyes closed and head tilted back, giving him an opportunity to observe her.

"I'm sorry, Yuji. Sakura told me to make you really work on your technique. Don't take it personally."

Yuji loosened up a little bit after that. He stood up, offering Shiroko a hand up. She took it, smiling gently. Somehow, despite the 'I'm so feminine' act, Yuji could feel that Shiroko was strong. Very strong. And Yuji liked 'strong'.

And yet, the mini-skirted beauty on his arm radiated with a feminine glow. She was...well, cute. Really cute. Smiling calmly as if she had no idea how cute she was. No hint of arrogance or doginess. No apparent desire to be anywhere else but here. Contentment, that was the word.

How long has it been since I felt content? Yuji wondered even as he made conversation with Shiroko. I noticed my body behaving oddly, but I never thought. Do I actually crave a girl's attention? Is that what I'm feeling? This...lust? Is that it? It's making me stupid! I'm thinking things I shouldn't! She isn't an object; damnit! None of them are. No. I refuse to give in to-

Shiroko had stopped talking and was studying Yuji. She could see him blushing, as if thinking about-

Well, well, I guess Yuji-kun is still a guy. It's not like I hadn't noticed. But without Kuroko, I really have a shot. I know he's lonely. Sakura told me, and I can see it all over him.

Her hands fiddled with her skirt, playing with the pleats. She didn't really need to stall for time. She knew what she wanted to say. It was a little awkward, maybe. But all the same, no reason for hesitation. Except for the fact that Shiroko really liked Yuji.

“Um, Yuji-kun?”

Yuji stopped pretending there was a coherent thought in his head and faced her.

“Yes?”

????

???

“I, um...I wouldn't mind it- I mean, I know about Azami and Sakura, and I-Oh, hell!”

She grabbed his head and kissed him. Her lips sweetly met his. An innocent kiss between two children. It was just a quick kiss, over nearly as it started, but damned if both weren't breathless and blushing afterward!

She held his face, looking up into his eyes. His hazel eyes clashed with her pale green eyes, but an intense feeling of connection buzzed through them both. It electrified the gaze.

“We aren't strangers, and we aren't children,” Shiroko heard herself say. “If there's something on your mind- no, my mind as well- then why shouldn't we just be honest about it?”

Yuji managed to unfurl his tongue after a couple heartbeats' time. He slid his hands around her waist and pulled her closer.

“You're right. This is stupid. We're both...well, I know I'm...I feel comfortable with you. And I won't pretend I'm totally into you right now.”

Shiroko shook her head before laying it against his chest.

“No. You're not.”

She gave him that mischievous little smile from before, and it damn near stopped his heart.

“You aren't in me yet, anyway. But you will be.”

Abruptly, she pulled away, leaving him startled and...lonely. What the hell?

“But not tonight!” she called out, sticking her tongue out. She clasped her hands behind her back, leaning forward a bit. “Not on the first date! Now, come one, that kiss made me hungry!”

Yuji chased her, feeling like a teenager in love. But this time, someone was actually receiving that affection and giving it back. It felt *awesome*!

He heard her up ahead, her cute little laugh making him want to catch up in the worst way.

“Always leave 'em wanting more, Yuji-kun!”

-

-

As they drank their tea calmly, Yuji did find himself indeed wanting more. Shiroko was fun, friendly, and so sweet! But she had a wild side, too. If her sense of humor was any indication, she would be a riot if they ever slept together.

Oh, now that was a pretty image. He could almost picture it. Her head on his chest as she slept peacefully, tired out from a good, long, hard play with him. Her soft flesh up against his bruise and scar-ridden body, the two of them practically melting into one another.

Why does that seem weird? Shouldn't I be thinking of the sex part, rather than what happens after? That's not a normal thought for a guy my age.

Shiroko was talking about her and Kuroko, and how fun it could be to having a sibling who was a polar opposite. Yuji listened, head propped up on his hand. His thoughts drifted a bit. If he was honest with himself, he was trying to figure out what made Shiroko special.

She's been teasing me, but nothing like Azami. And she's strong, but not like Sakura. She's cute in spades, but while that would get my attention, I know I need more than that to be interested.

Ah, to hell with psychoanalyzing myself! I'm having fun for the first time in a long time. Whatever it is about her I like so much, she's making me feel special, and even at ease.

"...and since Kuroko and I really don't mind it, her and I could totally share you! She plays rough, though, so you and I would definitely be 'bottoms'."

Yuji shook himself out of his trance, blinking at what he had just heard. Or thought he heard. "Run that by me again?" he requested, feeling his face flush anew.

That earned him a light rap on the head from Shiroko.

"Dummy. You're supposed to pay attention to *me* when we're on a date! Brood on your own time!"

"Sorry, Sorry," Yuji apologized quickly. He glanced at her quickly, gauging her mood. He dropped his voice to a low whisper and put on a set of bedroom eyes he'd never thought he had.

"How 'bout I make it up to you?"

Shiroko felt herself blushing despite herself as she answered with "What did you have in mind."

Yuji grinned in an almost wolfish way. "Why, walk you home, of course! Walk you home and kiss you goodnight."

Pfft. Worried for nothing, Shiroko thought.

"That's it?" she responded, mockingly sarcastic.

"Always leave 'em wanting more. That's how it's done, right?"

Shiroko shoved him in the chest. "You bastard! Besides, that only works when *I* do it to *you!*"

Yuji couldn't help but notice that Shiroko's hand lingered on his chest longer than it needed to. When she withdrew it, it seemed like an abysmally short time, however. He didn't want to lose that contact. It grounded him; made him feel 'real'. His power made him more than human when it came to chakra, but the void left by the women in Yuji's life grew constantly. This little scrap of attention, probably tossed thoughtlessly...

No. Not thoughtlessly. Sakura had briefed Shiroko. She knew the score. And there was no way she was just toying with Yuji. She really did want to be there for him. He wasn't sure in what capacity. He'd begun to understand that sex was one thing while a real relationship was another. But at this juncture of his development, he couldn't tell which. And frankly, he was caring less and less about that distinction every day. Someone being with him- especially at night, when it was hardest- would be amazing to him. If only Miko, or Azami, or Sakura...

Yuji gave his full attention back to Shiroko. Whatever capacity she was interested in him in, they were friends now. Whether it stayed that way or progressed farther didn't matter to him. Not right now. Not when he knew the value of having an ally watching his back.

-

They returned to Yuji's home first. He invited her in, and she accepted. It was still early evening at this point, so they sat down for some talk and another cup of tea. Being alone all the time, Yuji had really learned to make good tea. Shiroko commented on it a couple times, one more time than politeness required.

They chatted about work. Yuji as a servant and Shiroko, who had come from the Land of Iron to live with her aunt and uncle here.

"...You see, Kuroko and I are actually fairly distant cousins. But we've always felt like sisters. That's why I came here."

Shiroko leaned on the table with her elbow, looking toward the door.

"My parents are okay, I guess. But they expected too much of me. I'm not ready to take on the family dojo yet."

Yuji was sitting formally, sipping his tea.

"Oh? What art?"

Shiroko sighed a little. "Well, Kyudo was always my forte. My sister- My *real* younger sister- was more proficient with Battoujutsu."

That piqued Yuji's interest. "I used to take Battoujutsu. The Yama Taida Koku version. And Kyudo- I've always wanted to learn!"

"What does a ninja need with Kyudo?" Shiroko asked, a little dryly. "I mean, with all your ridiculous powers. You don't need to humor me, you know?"

Yuji gave a genuine laugh. "Oh, please. Come on, Shiroko. I please everyone; that's why I have so many friends! You know me better than that. I'm not lying to you to get into your skirt or something! I mean it. Kyudo is cool!"

Shiroko lifted her head a bit, interested in and surprised by Yuji's reaction. Hard to believe Yuji was like a kid on Christmas all of a sudden. "Eh? You really think so?"

“Seriously! It’s awesome!”

-

In no time at all, Yuji and Shiroko were in their hakama. Yuji demonstrated some of his Battoujutsu. Shiroko borrowed a sword and showed off a bit. She was most certainly the dojo master’s daughter. She was amazing! And that was before he picked up the bow!

Exhaling calmly, Shiroko held the bow at arm’s length. She placed the arrow, again breathing evenly. She began to pull the drawstring back evenly, until the string was taut.

Yuji couldn’t help but notice a few things. She was adorable in a hakama, for one. For another, she was incredibly muscular. It was tight, feminine muscle, and it really suited her. The third thing was that her hair looked really beautiful in a ponytail. She was nothing short of majestic, holding the bow like that. It was almost a shame when she let the arrow fly.

Bulls eye. All three times.

“You’re amazing!” Yuji gushed, a genuine smile on his face. He was so excited over this that it seemed a bit over the top, though he was being perfectly genuine. “How do you do that?!”

Shiroko shrugged. “I just aim, pull, and release. The trick is to keep it simple. Don’t overcomplicate things.”

“Sounds like good advice for everyday life, too.”

Shiroko was getting into this herself. For her, Kyudo and Battoujutsu were just chores. Did you do your homework- yup. Did you brush your teeth- uh-huh. Did you practice deadly, ancient arts- sure did. Okay, dinner!

This is doubly odd when you consider that he’s surrounded by crazy-powerful people. That Azami is in a whole ‘nother category. And Sakura’s a top medic-nin.

Shiroko absently gave Yuji permission to hold her bow. He tugged on it experimentally, being cautious and respectful of the weapon. That was as second nature to him as it was to her, apparently.

So why’s he interested in this stuff? It’s not just me he’s into. He was telling the truth earlier, about really loving martial arts. It’s kinda cute. Puzzling, but cute.

“I would love to visit your parent’s dojo someday,” Yuji commented, handing her back her bow. “Maybe even really pick up Battoujutsu again.”

It was really late now. The moon was full tonight, so it wasn’t as dark as it normally would have been at this late hour. But still! They’d been together for nearly five hours, and at no point had either one been bored, or wanted to leave. If they were honest with each other, they didn’t want to part now. There wasn’t a really sexual longing, either. It was more like they were really close friends.

Friends with benefits, maybe? Yuji’s mind toyed with the idea briefly. He shrugged mentally. He

certainly wouldn't object if it came to that. For the time being, however, he should-
"It's pretty late. I don't want to make you uncomfortable, but if you want to stay the night..."

Shiroko hadn't planned on it, but why not? Her home wasn't far- something Yuji well knew. And the Leaf was patrolled at night by chunin and jonin, so there was little in the way of crime. His offer wasn't just 'being polite'. He'd made no reference to sex, either. So that left one thing.

He's really enjoying himself. Well, if that's the case, why not?

"I'd love to, if you don't mind having me."

Yuji swept his arm in a grand gesture, indicating the house.

"You're really great company. I daresay you make my dull little bachelor pad much more interesting."

Shiroko raised an eyebrow at 'bachelor pad', but let it pass. It was just a remark. No need to over analyze it. Yuji wouldn't try anything she wouldn't welcome.

So she bowed at the door.

"Then I'll impose on you for the time being."

Yuji grinned at the formality, and responded by bowing in kind.

"No imposition whatsoever."

79 - Arc XI: Companionship- Chapter 6

Come morning, Shiroko seemed a little disappointed. Yuji hadn't even attempted anything at all. What kind of half-wit gets a girl to spend the night and then doesn't even try anything?

The kind of half-wit who happens to like me, and not just for sex.

Yuji was making breakfast for them both when Shiroko came downstairs. Tea was already waiting on the table, and the rice and fish he was cooking certainly caught Shiroko's interest.

"morning, Yuji."

Yuji gave her a warm smile in the way of greeting. "Good morning. Sleep okay?"

She shrugged. "Yeah. A little lonely, you know?"

Yuji raised an eyebrow, and his grin grew wider, but he said nothing. Okay, so she would press a little more.

"You know, most of the time, when a girl and guy spend the night together, they share a futon..."

Yuji blinked, frowning at the comment. "Oh, for heat? If you were cold, I could have brought you a-"

Shiroko rolled her eyes and laid her head on her arms. "It's too early for you to be stupid."

"You look cute like this," Yuji commented, setting a plate down in front of her. "Asleep and all. You should be careful. I might get the wrong idea."

She started to retort, but she was more interested in the fish, so she mentally filed her insult and tucked in. She was surprised again; not half bad. Most bachelors couldn't cook. At least, her ex didn't. Then again, he was a useless dickhead, so whatever.

"I certainly wouldn't object to sex," Yuji commented, calmly sitting down across from Shiroko. "But at the same time, I don't want it to screw things up. We're just getting to be friends and all..."

"Spoken like a true virgin."

"Ouch. Right through the heart. You could be nicer about it..."

Shiroko stuffed a bite of fish from her chopsticks into his mouth.

"An indirect kiss. That should give a virgin like you a hard-on, right?"

Yuji blushed and looked away. Shiroko peered over the table, eyebrows up yet again. Yuji was so much fun!

“Looks like I was right...”

“Unless you plan to do something about it, don’t bring it up! Damn, bad choice of words.”

Shiroko laughed, but didn’t pounce on him. No, they were a couple of kids to be sure, but Yuji had a point about sex screwing things up. At least until later tonight.

No matter what he says or how he acts, he’s still male. I can’t forget that. He wants sex as much as I do. But he’s being adult about it. Too adult. Damn kid needs to loosen up. I mean, I’m no expert, but at least I know what I’m doing when it comes to that! I think he needs to be afforded the same opportunity as I to learn.

“Yuji, can I come over again tonight?”

“How could I refuse you?” he replied immediately.

Heh. True enough. She was going to come over anyway, regardless of what he said. It made her shiver a little- there was something really hot about knowing she was totally going to jump his bones later. It was too much of a temptation not to. It was usually the guys who got to brag about snagging a girl’s virginity; not the other way around. And truthfully, Shiroko’s social stock would rise if she bagged Yuji. Even if he wasn’t aware of it, he received a fair bit of curious female stares. He might have been a servant, but no one disputed that he was actually very powerful.

“Shiroko...”

She looked up, and looked right into a kiss from Yuji. He lightly brushed her lips with his, giving just a little increase in pressure at the end. He pulled back fairly quickly, definitely leaving her wanting more. It had come as a complete surprise.

He was kneeling across from her now, blushing and clearly forcing himself to meet her eyes. “It didn’t seem...fair, I guess. That you kissed me but I didn’t kiss you. So now we’re even.”

Shiroko’s blush matched Yuji’s, so taken by surprise was she by his sudden kiss. When had this evolved from friendship into a relationship, she wondered. Or was it just a fling? No, a ‘fling’ didn’t usually have innocent kisses on the lips, and certainly none of that ‘separate futons’ stuff.

Shiroko realized Yuji really don’t know what to do now. He had just kind of thrown that kiss out there, trying to get across his meaning. He was confused- that much was evident. Shiroko had been in a real relationship before- twice, actually, starting when she was sixteen. So it was really up to her to guide him in the right direction when it came to this sort of thing. If she didn’t have to go to work today...

She stood up, giving him a kiss on the forehead.

“You’re sweet. I’ll see you later, okay?”

“Oh, sure!” Yuji had brightened instantly. The tension let out of the room all at once, and he began to take their dishes. She saw him look at the chopsticks she had used this morning, and his little lingering gaze made her wonder if she had ever been this sweet and innocent.

With a smile at the thought, she set off. This damn day could not end soon enough for her. She was really looking forward to being with Yuji tonight. Knowing that they would be in the same futon this time. It was a good feeling.

--
--

That evening had been amazing. Yuji and Shiroko cuddled on her futon surrounding by their discarded clothing. They had been friends for so long that this never even felt awkward or unnatural. Which was good, because Yuji had plenty to worry about. Shiroko was so sweet and patient. And truthfully, the first time was never perfect. Although this had come damned close.

There was no need to talk afterward. Shiroko simply snuggled up into Yuji's chest and went to sleep, a peaceful smile on her face. For his part, Yuji held her tight to his body and just relived the wonderful night. He had never thought of himself as a sexual creature. He found certain things attractive, but he never thought about what happened after the teasing and sexual tension.

Paradise.

So much paradise, in fact, that for the first time in a long time, Yuji fell asleep with no reservations. No thoughts about Azami, or Miko, or Shoki, or his abilities. He was content with being in the moment.

--
--

In no time at all, the last two months of Naruto's training passed. He was due to come home any time now. With him would come the nearly unstoppable power of Sage Jutsu. That was best case scenario. Worst case, he had just trained for months with no distractions and would still be more powerful.

Sakura had really finished her training as a medic. Her focus was more on teaching Shoki, and then trying to learn genjutsu from Yuji during her spare time. Kakashi had been helpful, too. There hadn't been much in the way of team missions with Naruto gone, but Yuji had proven an able substitute when called upon. The only thing that bugged Sakura was Yuji's insistence on calling her 'Ojou-sama' in the presence of Kakashi. She had told him it wouldn't matter, but he insisted.

Shoki had probably been the busiest of them all. He was now almost 15 years old (A startling reminder to Yuji that he'd been serving Naruto and Sakura for almost two years). His eye had finished its evolution process. He was now the bearer, somewhat anticlimactically, of the Hihyougan (Critical Eye). This only aided his medical skills, as he could now all but see the cells moving throughout the body. Being that this eye was less documented than its cousins (The Sharingan and the Byakugan), there were new surprises, such as the ability to put a color to someone's chakra, allowing him to instantly identify their chakra nature or natures.

Perhaps the most significant change for Shoki was getting a girlfriend. This one had been hard for Yuji at first, if he was honest with himself. The thought of Shoki and Asuna. There was a four-year age difference...which seemed more reasonable when Yuji realized that was roughly how far apart he and Sakura were in age. And Asuna had gone to Yuji and told him she was serious about Shoki. He trusted both of them, so why not?

Besides, Yuji himself was spoken for these days.

Shiroko was a normal girl. She didn't have any hidden powers, or a secret past, or anything like that. She wasn't a dominatrix (all the time, anyway). She worked a regular desk job as a secretary. Probably the oddest thing to Yuji was that he wasn't yet completely in love with Shiroko. It wasn't an instantaneous process as it was with Sakura and Azami. He reasoned that that was most likely because he didn't want to get hurt again. If he was going to feel anything for her, he would when the time was right. For now, they enjoyed each other's company as a fairly normal couple. Their relationship was in the opening stages of getting serious. The next step was meeting Shiroko's parents. The two were planning to take a vacation in the Land of Iron, where Shiroko's family's dojo was located. Yuji was really excited about that. He definitely wished he could take the art up.

If I could do that shadow-teleport thing like Aza-shoot.

He hadn't thought about her that much these days. He hadn't yet gotten a wedding invitation- assuming he was invited. It still really, really bothered him. She was still so sexy and desirable. And, damn it, after all that had happened, how did they *not* wind up together?!

I need to happy that I have someone. What is wrong with me? I'm so happy. Happier than I've ever been. I guess I didn't expect it to stop hurting overnight, but still. Damn it.

His feeling of melancholy went away when he looked at Shiroko. They had a real relationship, and it really did give him a real purpose to live. They just clicked. Physically; mentally. She wasn't a shinobi, but she was strong in her own right, and had started to work on some techniques with him. She was probably at a chunin level already; she absorbed things quickly. She didn't care about rank, and had no real desire to take the chunin exams. But that was okay.

-

Shiroko really liked Yuji. All the same, she wondered if it was time to move on. She could see it sometimes- he still loved Azami. And of course, there was Sakura. These thoughts were natural. She knew Yuji was damaged goods before she slept with him. She knew he had considered himself married to that one girl, Miko. But he didn't seem to love Shiroko any less for it. However, she just wasn't positive that he was the right man for her. She didn't know where this doubt came from, but shrugged it aside. It was still a young relationship, after all. No one fell in love instantly. At least, not normally.

Yuji walked in at that point. Upon seeing Shiroko, a smile crossed his face. It made Shiroko's heart leap. How could he be so happy just seeing her? She immediately felt guilty for the thoughts she'd just had. She had intended for him to be a one-night stand; just a meaningless fling. But he'd been so damn charming...

They walked toward each other, arms open for an embrace.

The next second, Yuji was gone.

80 - Arc XII: Devastated- Chapter 1

Yuji landed on one knee. He stayed there for a moment, trying to get his bearings. He had no idea what the hell had just happened. He opened his eyes slowly, trying to make sure he wasn't dizzy or something. He swiveled his head, looking and listening for any threats.

A moment later, Sakura appeared next to him in a cloud of smoke. He immediately got up to help her, taking in his surroundings as he moved, staying in a low crouch.

"Ojousama! Are you okay?" he asked urgently but quietly.

Sakura coughed, looking up at Yuji. "I'm fine. Where are we?" She too was looking around, trying to get her bearings.

"Wish I knew."

All at once, several creatures came running. Two elderly toads, small in stature, were leading a group of much larger others. And with them was Naruto!

Sakura immediately ran to Naruto. She hugged him, but he held her at arms' length. He looked panicked. He held her hand and pulled her with him to Yuji, who was kneeling down to speak to the toad, whose name he learned was Elder Fukasaku. They were apparently arguing.

"Then you've got to send them away!" Yuji half-shouted.

"No can do, Yuji-boy. It'll take more 'n you got to take them down."

"That's not your problem or theirs! It's mine! I-"

Naruto quickly briefed Sakura. Both of them were in tears. The situation here was dire. Mount Myboku was under attack. And worse yet, it was Sasuke's Team Taka doing the attacking.

Everything was moving so fast. Yuji had been reverse-summoned before he knew what happened. Ditto with Sakura. Apparently, Sasuke's group had come out of nowhere as well. The toads had erected some barriers that kept them at bay, but the consistent barrages were wearing the toads casting the jutsu down. Yuji created a clone to go help them while he stayed to talk strategy.

"They need to get out of here! There is a prophecy back home-" Yuji began, but was cut off by the old toad.

"Like you say, boy, that's not my problem. My problem is Naruto-boy's safety. And there ain't no safer place th'n here, or I would've sent him away. I brought you here to help. Either help and accept my terms, or I'll send you back. We've got no time to argue this."

Yuji gritted his teeth, but accepted that he had no choice. He wasn't dressed in his combat gear, either. He was actually all set to be going out with Shiroko, hence the reason for the western-style jeans, shirt, and the cross around his neck. He tucked the cross into his shirt and stretched a little to try to get ready for battle.

The barrier broke, and the melee began. Yuji rushed to the fore, smacking Suigetsu in the head as hard as he could as he ran by. Everyone else was engaged in battle. Yuji's eyes were on Sasuke.

The prophecy says he and I are going to fight, and one of us is going to die in the process. It's not going to be me. I'm sorry, Naruto-Dono; Sakura-Ojousama. Forgive me.

Yuji let his full power forth. The wings emerged from his back splendidly. His hair turned the color of obsidian, and his tattoo lit brightly, pulsing with energy. His shirt melted away in an instant.

In the next instant, Jugo's second-state hand smashed Yuji hard into a statue, pinning him there. It happened so quickly and so violently that Yuji didn't have time to react, save for use a quick fire jutsu that was squelched quickly.

"Yuji!" Sakura cried, taking a hard swing at Karin, while dodging the grappling Naruto and Suigetsu. Sasuke had lopped the legs off one of the toads, but was prevented from going for the coup de grace by another toad striking at him with a huge sword.

Jugo was focused on the struggling Yuji so much that he didn't even notice Sakura running up, her fist cocked back and glowing with energy. As she reached him, she planted her feet and swung for the fences.

Jugo flew off Yuji, and didn't stop flying for nearly fifty meters. He lay still for the moment, but the look in his eyes was murderous. Sakura noticed from her chakra touching his that he was in extreme pain. Upon seeing Yuji, she saw why. Receding into his right hand was a sword of fire. He had stabbed it into Jugo's arm and was aiming for a kill strike right through his arm to his head.

"Thank you, Ojousama. I- Look out!"

Yuji pushed Sakura aside just as a bubble of water surrounded him, beginning as a puddle at his feet then expanding upward. He kicked and punched at it, but couldn't escape.

The battle gradually stopped as Sasuke walked toward Yuji. He bent down toward Yuji's face, seeing him trapped in a Water Prison Jutsu that had used Suigetsu's body!

"Naruto; Sakura- does this look familiar?" Sasuke asked, his voice flat and calm. "It's just like Kakashi when we were in the Land of Waves."

The blow was a good one, mentally. Sakura and Naruto did tend to dwell on the past, when Sasuke was just a troubled friend. Now, he was evil. Seeing it now, they knew it for themselves. He had never seemed so beyond redemption before as at this moment.

Sakura dropped to her knees.

“Sasuke, why...”

“Why the hell are you doing this, Sasuke?!” Naruto shouted, teeth bared. His nine-tails chakra was swirling, ready to escape. This rage...this sorrow...it fed the chakra. It made him feel good. Powerful. Naruto was ready...

Sasuke put his hand against the water, looking at the others.

“Yuji knows. He was going to kill me. Just like the prophecy says. Right, Yuji?”

Yuji didn't answer, but knelt formally, his hands in a handsign. But he looked ashen and shaken. Not at all like his usual self. His stoic mask was cracked in a big way.

“You know about the prophecy?” Sakura asked. “How did you-?”

Sasuke rolled his neck, as if he wasn't surrounded by enemies. He was relaxed. No sign of disturbance on his face at all.

“Orochimaru stole a lot of things before he left the Leaf. Anything having to do with me was taken. The Third Hokage had spoken about this prophecy to him, Jiraiya, and Tsunade. Orochimaru read the document himself, trying to find a way to take the power. And then he told me about it, once he learned who had inherited the Ten no Kishootsu abilities. He was certain that Yuji-

Sasuke's eye shifted to his prisoner.

“-would come to kill me. If he was smart, at any rate.”

Sasuke's hand touched Yuji's prison again, lingering on it.

“I needed to kill you, anyway.”

Electricity ran through the water. Yuji shouted, finally allowing water into his mouth. But drowning would beat this horrible agony! Death was fine at this point.

Then the pain stopped. Yuji slumped against the bottom of the bubble, conscious but clearly in horrible pain.

“That wasn't full power,” Sasuke informed everyone. “But I can kill him. Or I can make him suffer. It all depends on if you're willing to do what I say.”

Yuji was hardly conscious now, but he looked up and shook his head. He mouthed to the group, looking at Sakura and Naruto mostly.

Let me die.

Yuji's head was getting more fuzzy with each passing moment. He was struggling to feel anything now. He knew he needed to be worried, or scared, or angry. This feeling of contentment was wrong. It went with asphyxiation, he knew.

He had to dig deep. There was power there he hadn't used. If he could just force his chakra out in an explosion-

“AGGGHHHHHHH!”

Sasuke had cranked up the power, sending horrible power coursing through the water dome. Yuji heard himself scream. He began to panic, which was a good step in the wrong direction. If anything was worth than apathy, it was panic. This pain was useful. He had to make it useful. He had to...

"Come any closer and I'll kill him," Sasuke announced. "Naruto, only you can come forward. Everyone else, lay down your weapons and-

Yuji's chakra exploded outward. A blast of hot air shook the group.

But the dome didn't break. Yuji lay at the bottom on his back. His arms continued to move feebly for a moment, but then he stopped moving altogether.

--
--

Genjutsu

Yuji and Sasuke stood across from each other in a big, empty space. They stood on plains of nothingness; shadows within shadows. The space existed as pure darkness. It was scary, even though both boys knew it was genjutsu.

"What are your terms, Sasuke? For letting them go?"

Sasuke charged forward, attacking Yuji's image. Yuji caught his arm, straining with the effort to hold it. This was just a representation of Sasuke's attempt to shatter Yuji's genjutsu. Yuji held on against the more talented boy with all he had.

"Look, I don't care about this prophecy. If I need to die, fine. But those two don't. And neither do you." He shook his head as Sasuke jerked his hand back.

"That's fine. Let me say my last words to them, and then you can kill me. And then you'll feel big, right? For taking a hostage, instead of fighting me for real? I'm ready to face death. But you, Sasuke... You're afraid of me and what I could do. You couldn't beat me in real combat. But that's fine- take the coward's way out. Just like you did with your brother when you were a kid. You don't scare me. You're just a bully. And eventually-"

The space they were in changed. Now it was a barren wasteland, save for two giant double doors, padlocked and chained. The presence behind the door was unmistakably horrifying. Yet to Yuji, it was familiar as anything.

"Do you want to see what my life is like? Do you want to know what fear is? You're safe inside your own head, so maybe you can't understand just how terrifying it is to have no place that is safe for you."

The locks came off the door. The door which held Yuji's greatest fears. Even Sasuke was captivated by it. What did a fearless warrior fear?

--

Yuji broke free of Sasuke's water prison in a burst of strength. He had left Sasuke back in the genjutsu

world. Sasuke reacted almost instantly, stabbing his sword down. He caught Yuji's left shoulder. Yuji was too wounded to dodge with his body. Sasuke lightning style ran through the blade, paralyzing Yuji's body. However, Yuji's chakra soared, and his wings formed again. He let them take to the sky, moving only his chakra and not his body. He hung in the air, his body limp.

Jugo's arm shot up and tagged Yuji hard across the chest. He free-fell the twenty-five feet to the ground, his wings curled around him protectively. He landed hard in a fetal position and did not move again. His wings sank back into his body.

Sasuke rushed forward, aiming to deliver the final blow. He had Yuji dead to rights. They both knew it.

It was an epic moment. The wounded warrior on the ground, utterly defeated save for the look of defiance on his face. The triumphant victor ready to deliver the final blow, holding his weapon above his fallen enemy.

What was not in the epic moment normally were the wounded man's friends charging to rescue. Even Sasuke could not afford to ignore either Naruto or Sakura's powerful attacks. His focus on Yuji had been absolute, so he could only react in a last-second way.

He backed off, leaping away, back to his group. This time, when he spoke, he ignored Naruto and Sakura. He looked directly at Yuji. Or what was left of him, anyway.

"...No prophecy dictates my life. But you're too annoying to let live. Next time we meet, I will fulfill the prophecy and kill you."

Sasuke and the others disappeared. Naruto shouted at them to stay put, but he had to choose between chasing Sasuke and saving Yuji's life. The choice was an easy one, having spent two years with Yuji now.

"Come on; we've got to get him to safety!"

Sakura stabilized Yuji, but he wouldn't regain consciousness for quite some time. Naruto picked him up, scared at how limp and defenseless Yuji's body was. Where he wasn't supported by Naruto's hands, Yuji's body bent backwards in a painful looking way.

His defeat had been total.

81 - Arc XII: Devastated- Chapter 2

Yuji woke up, feeling strangely calm. He knew he had been in mortal danger, and had been saved. Maybe it was leftover feelings of light headedness from nearly drowning, but Yuji couldn't panic.

He sat up, and immediately clasped a hand to his head. He realized why things seemed so empty.

I failed.

The room was large and white, with sliding doors that opened onto a deck with a beautiful view of the water. And today was a gorgeous day, too. Yuji could hear the sound of the water licking the shore, and the sound of various birds making their chirping sounds. Fishermen shouted to each other, laughing and cursing here and there. It was such normalcy as to be disconcerting to someone so used to abnormal.

Yuji left his arm over his face, replaying the battle. He hadn't even done anything when he was overpowered. Where did all his training go? All his effort? All his sacrifice?

His hand gripped the bed sheet so tight his knuckles whitened. Hot, wet tears streamed down his face, falling forlornly onto his cheek. How could he be so weak? How could his failure have been so perfect?

It only got worse from there. Yuji realized that Azami was standing in the door, staying quiet. She had seen him break. What could have been worse than your semi-ex seeing you in the worst possible state?

His eyes still tearing, Yuji dove out the open window onto the deck. He leapt and took off, his wings unfurling as he flew. He could hear Azami call him, but he didn't answer. Instead, he flew higher and farther.

All the stress, all the anguish- it all hit him at once with the force of a tidal wave, that high in the air. There was only one place to go when sobbing wasn't enough; when your despair was so total that to look in any direction was to look into an endless darkness. When you had no escape except to leap into the darkness just to avoid the worst of what remained in the light.

Yuji tucked his arms tight to his body and then cut his chakra off. His wings disappeared in a brilliant flash, and he began to fall head-first toward the water. He fell faster and faster, his tears flying upward. He had been driven into a corner with no tangible enemy to lash out at. Well, except one- himself.

Yuji let himself plummet head-first, not knowing whether or not the water was deep enough to land safely in. And he didn't care. Rather, he hoped it was shallow. It would end quicker that way.

His last thought as his head hit the water was an apology to all the people he had let down. His parents, Azami, Sakura-Ojousama, Naruto-dono, and Shiroko.

Sayonara.

He closed his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest.

--

Azami dove into the water, heedless of her own safety. Kojiro joined her almost immediately, shouting for Sakura and Naruto. All of them swam like their lives depended on it. Every second counted with Yuji now.

To think he'd attempt suicide! Damn it, I didn't know how badly I'd hurt him!

Azami's tears fell unchecked. The amount of guilt she felt was beyond what she expected.

Naruto began to swim. He turned back to Sakura, calling for her to stay back. Yuji would need medical help, and there was little she could do while he was in the drink. Sakura fought the notion for a moment, but ultimately had to agree.

I'm always waiting! I can never be at the front! Maybe that's not my job, since I'm a medic! But still! Damn it!

Sakura clenched her fist and closed her eyes tight, trying to hold in the tears.

Why is it I can never do anything?

-

Kojiro reached Yuji first. He felt for a pulse, finding a very faint one. Yuji had impacted the water hard enough to knock himself out. He had some cracked vertebrae, but had not completely broken his neck.

He had gotten lucky.

Naruto hefted Yuji and ran back across the water. He set Yuji down at Sakura's feet. She immediately knelt down and began to work. The site of Yuji's inert body; the feel of his dead weight; the lack of life and vitality. It was death disguised as life. It made Sakura despair terribly.

No!

Sakura felt Yuji's neck, here eyes widening.

No!

She put her head to his heart. There was no sound. She began to pound on his chest. How could he crash so quickly?!

No!

She forced Yuji's mouth open and breathed into it. She had to get him breathing on his own! She had to make his heart beat!

No!

It had been nearly a minute now. Yuji was dead. But he still had some minimal amount of brain activity. If she could just keep that up, then...

It hit her. There WAS a way. But to do it...

"I need to get him into his genjutsu! But if I force myself into his mind...he might go into shock..."

There was no choice. If she didn't do it now, Yuji was dead anyway. She had to roll the dice.

--
--

Genjutsu

Yuji automatically tried to form his genjutsu as he hurtled toward the water. It would protect him from feeling the physical harm his body was about to endure. That set it apart from other genjutsu, making it both more comforting and more dangerous.

In here, he could reflect with a clear mind. Most of the time. However, this time, his world didn't form properly. Instead, he was staring at a wasteland of black. There were the gently rolling hills, but there was no green grass. It looked like his world had been paved over. The normally cool, pleasant breeze was replaced with blasts of hot air that tossed Yuji's hair. Occasionally, there would be a burst of fire in the distance, as if a bird had spontaneously combusted.

It looked like hell.

I must be feeling guilty over what I did. I never thought about suicide before. But Azami seeing me in that moment of weakness... Right after that humiliating defeat...It was too much.

Yuji wondered if he was dying, or if he was dead. Had he survived the fall, somehow? That would be the worst. Failing at dying...

"Well, look at you now!" came a sneering voice. Yuji didn't even turn around. He knew who it was. The only person who could join him in this genjutsu without him noticing- himself. Rather, the self he defeated to earn the Ten no Kishootsu abilities.

"Who would have thought you were in control. All that splendid power, and what did you do with it?"

Yuji felt a sword pierce his back. It didn't hurt in this world, but it was disconcerting. But what was there to worry about? His body was dying, so how far behind could his mind be?

The sword was withdrawn violently. There was no wound.

"You really have given up, haven't you?" came the sneering voice again.

"I suppose I have. What of it? You're dying, too," Yuji shot back, managing to add just a bit of acid to his voice. Really, though, that little bit of emotion was about all he could muster.

Click. A thick collar snapped around Yuji's neck. Similarly, chains appeared on his wrists and ankles. They began to pull until they were taut. Yuji's body was pulled into an 'X' shape, his wrists and ankles pulled outward in opposite directions. His other self appeared in front of him, smirking.

"You aren't dying. The girl saved your life. You're just denying your right to exist. Which is fine by me.

It just means that you are now in the position I was in."

His other self stripped off Yuji's clothes, leaving him naked. Completely exposed. Still no reaction.

"If I kill you, I get your power. Is that what you want?"

Yuji didn't move or protest. So his other self drew back his sword for a finishing blow.

WHACK!

Sakura's powerful fist knocked Yuji's other self flying. She stopped in front of Yuji, looking at him. He hardly reacted to her presence.

"Oh, Yuji. I knew how painful this was for you. But I never could figure out what I could do to help. And now that I can do something..."

Cuts began to appear on Yuji's body. His hellish world was attacking him with invisible strikes, drawing blood even as the cut healed behind it. There was no time even to die completely. It would have been maddening, had Yuji been thinking.

Cradling his head, Sakura forced him to face her. Her gaze bored into him, but for once there was no reaction. No blushing, no sign of deference, no attempt at communication. Nothing.

"It isn't over, Yuji. Don't give up. None of us have. None of us ever will. If you wanted to die, you could have picked an easier way."

Sakura reached out and hugged Yuji gently, concealing her tears from him.

"No...you wanted to give yourself a chance to survive. Or maybe even time to think. But no matter what, you aren't ready to die. I won't let you die. Not like this. Not here."

Yuji favored her with a gaze. He was already hollow and gaunt. More cuts appeared on his body, healing and then opening up again. It made Sakura wince, but she didn't look away.

I can't look away. That would belittle his suffering. If he could take this for two years, I can handle it for two minutes!

"I'll be back for you. So don't die. That's an order from Ojousama! You-are-not-allowed-to-die!"

Sakura exited the genjutsu, hoping she'd gotten through to him.

--

Yuji looked around, a faint glimmer of something in his chest keeping him alive. Death had never been this close, though it was a constant companion at the best of times. It was interesting how his subconscious was showing this disruption. Even being clinically dead, Yuji could appreciate his subconscious mind's flair for the dramatic.

If Yuji stretched out his hand, he could have touched a large obsidian cross.

His grave marker.

He tugged at his hands experimentally, finding that the chains were attached to a white cross farther back. He had a good amount of slack on the chains to move backward.

So at one end I'm born, and at the other I die. What if I go back toward the white cross? What if that was possible? To fix all this...

A smile crossed Yuji's battered face, looking so out of place as to be insane. With one eye swollen shut, and thick black rings around the other, the smile stood out even more. A ridiculously hopeful expression in the face of such despair.

Wouldn't that be wonderful? Even to dream about it...why not? It'll pass the time. If I could do it all again...

82 - Arc XIII: What If?- Chapter 1

Flashback series part 1 of 4
(refer to Arc II: Chapter 4 for further beginning)

In a flash, Azami had grabbed the newly-arrived Sakura and Naruto, and put up a barrier jutsu.

“Surrender or I kill them!” Azami shouted. “Attack this dome with those creatures, and all three of us perish! What will you do now?”

Yuji made eye contact with both Naruto and Sakura. He knew what he had to do. His chakra began to suppress itself, and he let himself sink to one knee. His dragons faded and disappeared.

“Good boy. Now, admit your defeat...”

Yuji hesitated. Naruto and Sakura were both shaking their heads vigorously at him, telling him not to quit. But what choice was there? He couldn't let them get hurt...

Yuji bowed his head and sank to one knee. His chakra withdrew back into his body. He tossed his headband at Azami's feet.

“You win. I surrender...just let them go.”

Azami smile widened. “Let them go...” she prompted.

Yuji winced, but he understood her prompt. He bowed even lower, his eyes on the ground.

“Let them go...master.”

Azami threw out a set of restraints to Yuji. They looked like rope, but had white slips of paper on them. Chakra seals.

“Put those on. No, wait...”

Her smile grew wicked.

“Take off all your clothes, spread your legs, and open your mouth. I need to be sure you aren't hiding any weapons. And if you even think of going for the smoke bomb in that fake tooth, I kill one of these two.”

Yuji stripped in silence, humiliated yet again. He was being forced to strip in front of his crush. It was so cruel; so embarrassing. But worse yet was that he appeared to enjoy it, well, physically.

“Very good so far. Take a good look, Sakura. This guy here- he's had a crush on you for four years! And instead, he winds up serving you! But even more fun- now he belongs to me! And there's nothing of you can do to stop me from taking him!”

Azami stepped out of the barrier once Yuji had restrained himself, leaving Naruto and Sakura trapped. They watched as Azami frisked Yuji in front of them.

“Don’t worry, Yuji. I won’t target them. You just bought their freedom. Or, rather, you made a payment on their freedom. The rest of it...you’ll earn that with your body.”

Azami kissed him, sloppily making out with him in front of Naruto and Sakura. She could just feel the psychological damage she was doing to Yuji. She knew that he was attracted to her from the first time he saw her. She felt similar about him. But he couldn’t just give up on a girl he’d kept his eye on for four years. Really, this was a kindness to him- he couldn’t man up and go after his crush, so Azami simply claimed him like a stray dog.

At the end of the kiss, Azami smiled at him.

“See? Was that so bad? Isn’t it nice to just give up? Isn’t it liberating to have your life controlled by someone else? And in your case, I’m both a woman and a criminal. You can’t sink much lower, can you? You know women are superior to men. We don’t have your glaring design flaw, for one...”

She tapped his testicles, causing Yuji to flinch with pain. The instant he did, she slapped him across the face- all in front of the girl he was in love with.

“Did I say you could do that? Huh? Does my touch repulse you? Or did you forget who you belong to now?”

Azami sighed and took Yuji’s head to her breast. She stroked his hair as if comforting a child.

“Is it that you don’t like me? Or that you aren’t a man of your word after all? You DID lose the fight. But there must be worst fates than belonging to a woman who like me! Maybe I’m not ‘cute’ like ‘Ojousama’ over there, but I can do things she can’t. A submissive little boy like you needs a girl who can have complete power over you. Dominate you.”

Yuji looked up at her, looking torn. He had been thinking about this a lot. How bad could it be? Belonging to a girl like Azami? And it wasn’t like Sakura was an option. Becoming the lover of the person whom you served only happened in fictitious romance novels. So what was wrong with this? He was protecting Naruto and Sakura from Azami, so he wasn’t breaking the prophecy. Besides, maybe he could escape later.

“I understand, master,” he answered finally, kissing Azami’s hand. “I belong to you now. Do with me as you will. But please, let me say something to Ojousama and Naruto-dono...”

Azami kissed his forehead. “Of course. I’m not cruel...not in that way.”

Yuji bowed to her again. Then he turned to Naruto and Sakura.

“I’m sorry to have failed you. And then you see me like this. Please understand...I’m okay with this. I have faith in my master. She will take care of me. If my body can be used for her pleasure, and it will buy your safety...”

Azami grabbed a handful of Yuji's hair and tugged, roughly pulling his face toward her leg.

"Did you know? Kissing a woman's thigh is a pledge to belong to her forever. Do it now, in front of your precious Ojousama! Let her watch as her little servant with his big crush gives up his freedom for her! Selling himself like a common whore to protect her. Isn't that sweet?"

This time, Yuji could clearly hear Sakura's enraged shout.

"You rotten dog! You disgusting, perverted, filthy slut! The only whore here is you! Yuji, don't do it!"

Yuji broke his master's orders for the first time as his lips met Azami's thigh. He bowed low to Sakura as an apology. Azami moved to pull Yuji into her Shadow Transportation Jutsu, and that allowed Yuji time for one last bit of shouting.

"Naruto-dono! Take care of Ojousama!"

--

For the first couple weeks, Yuji had to be trained. He was spanked or whipped when he misbehaved. Azami never forced him into sex, however. Not since she had more or less fingered him in front of Naruto and Sakura. The memory still made his blood flow, both to his face and more south as well. Being humiliated; being treated like his life was worth nothing...why was it so stimulating to him?

Today she had forced him to cross-dress. Wearing a mesh top with a bra underneath, a miniskirt, panties, black stockings, and a wig that gave him red hair with long pigtails, coupled with the make-up Azami applied to him expertly, Yuji was...cute?

"You would've made a really cute girl!" Azami informed him, swatting him on the butt. It felt really weird having a breeze between his legs. Yuji briefly wondered if skirts made sense for men. After all, he was pretty sure his 'equipment' hung down farther than Azami's. Maybe that was why Hakama were made the way they were? And why was he thinking this way, damn it! He'd spent too much time with Azami!

"Thank you?" Yuji answered, his reply phrased like a question.

Azami just laughed a little. "You know, if you'd just give up and admit you like me, this wouldn't be so embarrassing."

"How do you figure?"

Azami, for once, did nothing to tease him. She just answered honestly.

"Well, right now I'm doing this to torture you. But imagine if you were my boyfriend instead, and we could...you know...go out. Sleep together. Imagine if your reward for being humiliated was sex...would it be so bad, then? Would it be 'torture' or 'fun'? I mean, yeah, I tortured you for fun, but it isn't like you aren't a masochist..."

Given that it was already a little bit fun, Yuji had to admit that she made a good point. What was there to gain in opposing her? He really did like her, after all. Even after more or less raping him. It felt good to be completely helpless for a change, rather than always worried and tense. And if he was honest, even

though he hadn't verbally said 'yes', his mind and body were very accepting of that treatment. It was just so wrong! So taboo! And that made it hot. Really hot.

"I think I'd like that. But...well, being 'just an object' of yours would be hot, but..."

Azami smiled. She felt under his skirt, smirking. "Mmm...you don't want to be discarded. I understand. But wouldn't that be better for you? The more hopeless the situation, the hotter it is for you, right?"

Yuji looked at her pleadingly. "You don't understand- it can't get more hopeless. I'm so in love with you it doesn't matter what you do to me or how you treat me. I already belong to you. And I..."
He blushed, which in retrospect he imagined looked cute when he was dressed like a girl.
"I just...don't want to be without you. I'm yours. Do whatever you want. But even if you discard me, I'm still yours..."

Azami put a hand on his cheek, stroking it slowly. Lovingly.

"I've never raped anyone. If I didn't know you liked me, I would never have done that. But why you fell for someone evil; someone whom you would have fought tooth and nail any other time..."

She kissed him, holding him tight to her. If he was only a possession of hers, then he was her favorite possession. Her favorite toy. She loved him, and she would tell him as much once they were done playing this little BDSM game. Azami hadn't felt that alive in a long time. If she was honest, she was as attracted to Yuji as he was to her upon their first meeting. She wouldn't have gotten naked(well, at least she wouldn't have enjoyed being naked) in front of him if she wasn't attracted to him. She had read his file- loyal, caring, brave, and definitely fearful of kunoichi. And yet, that very fear would make him desire a kunoichi for himself.

Azami was that kunoichi now. She was happy being the dominant one. It suited her, true, but more importantly, she knew that she and Yuji wouldn't have gotten anywhere if he had been the one in charge.

-

There were benefits to being Azami's plaything, certainly. She only treated Yuji roughly sometimes. Other times, she was sweet and loving. It was nice to not be alone all the time. Yuji didn't feel like a prisoner at all. Rather, he felt more liberated than ever. Having someone care about you was a great feeling. And Azami really did care.

Her bad girl act was hot and all, but getting to know her as a person was an adventure. She was refined, cultured, worldly, and incredibly sexy. But she was also 'real'. She had hopes, dreams, desires- she seemed to be more attainable now than ever before. She was still a goddess, but she didn't seem so untouchable now.

Azami had opened up one night and talked about her family a little. Her mother had passed away right after giving birth, and her father had left her when she was thirteen. It had been hard, becoming a teenager with no parents. More than once, she admitted, she had considered just giving up.

"And then God gave me these tits, and suddenly everyone seemed interested," she quipped sardonically. "I had to learn how to fight off my attackers."

Yuji grew more and more angry as the tale went on. From the first man she killed- one of her would-be rapists- to the life of bounty hunting she was forced into because no where was safe, Yuji was becoming more and more enraptured with her. She was so strong despite all her hardships. She never once complained about them, either. She told the story as if it hadn't happened to her at all. It was like she was reading a book about someone else's life. By the end, Yuji was all but shaking with anger. He held her hand when the story got tough, but found that he needed it more than she did.

"I'm so sorry...about all of it. It's all so damned unfair..."

Azami shrugged a little. "It is what it is. Palatable or not, that was how I was raised, and that's why I'm the way I am now. But at least I met you," she added cheerfully, giving his hand a squeeze. "That's been a bright spot."

Yuji blushed, feeling a surge of affection for his captor. This was not one of her lies. Even if she was bad, there was a reason. And that's all he needed to hear.

"Azami, if I'm a bright spot now, let me be brighter. Rather than being 'just a toy'..."

He met her eyes, putting all his feeling into what he was about to say. Words he'd only ever thought. Words he never thought he'd utter.

"...let me be a lover. I know I can never erase the pain in your past, but I can give you a better future."

Yuji and Azami had been sitting side by side near a small fire she had made. They were in the woods, completely alone. Their combined chakra was so large and powerful that even the strongest animal stayed away.

"But I need to kill you," Azami said sadly. "I don't want to. I never did. But this group is too big even for me to take on alone. If I don't kill you, they will. And then they'll kill me"

Yuji nuzzled her hand, holding it to his cheek. His face was decorated with five o'clock shadow from being on the run for three days. It made him look rougher, and he certainly needed that impression now. "You aren't alone anymore. Never again. I'll do whatever it takes."

Azami looked away, sadness plain in her tone.

"It will take their deaths. All thirteen of them."

"Then that's what will happen. They will all die," said Yuji. "Criminals like that don't deserve to live. Especially not after threatening you your whole life," he added, slyly attempting to confirm a hunch he had.

Azami jolted in surprise. "How did you-"

"Figure out that the same people have been bullying you all along?" Yuji filled in. "I know enough about you to know that you do not take kindly to being bullied. For you to talk so matter-of-factly about something like this meant that you were used to it. It's not had to imagine a group like this taking in a thirteen year old, protecting her from her rapists, then demanding a lifetime of compensation."

"I suppose it isn't."

"Then maybe you can imagine someone caring enough about you to turn his back on the 'light'...someone who is so moored by justice that maybe he's just twisted enough to know that exploiters like that are scum who need to be removed..."

"I don't want your hands bloody in this, Yuji!" Azami told him. "You're a good boy. I'm a bad girl-"

"Isn't that how it always works?" Yuji interrupted, passion flaring in his voice. "The good boy, the bad girl. The good girl, the bad boy. Who cares? If these people aren't stopped, then they'll just hunt you the rest of your life. Do you want that?"

Azami shook her head, tears in there eyes. She buried her face in Yuji's chest. She didn't want it. Not anymore. But she didn't want Yuji to turn bad either!

"Trust me, Azami. I will destroy them with you. But I'll be the same guy after. I promise."

83 - Arc XIII: What if?- Chapter 2

There were screams heard, of course. No one could have silenced them. Not given what was happening.

Thirteen men, all of them rapists, murders, extortionists- the worst of the worst- were attacked suddenly and mercilessly. There were only two attackers, according to those who were still able to see after the attack. One man and one woman, roughly the same height. The man had short hair and was wearing two swords and a straw hat. The woman had her face masked, with her long hair in a ponytail behind her.

They came suddenly and silently, running across treetops. The guards were silenced, though there were no fatalities. The small stronghold was breached as the thirteen sat in a meeting.

Apparently, the men were tortured into revealing all their crimes and turning over incriminating evidence. Most lost their minds and were incoherent idiots for their remaining days. None left with all their limbs in tact. The man who attacked never revealed his face, though they all said that even once their other senses were extinguished one by one through a genjutsu, they could still feel the cold, merciless eyes.

And then the swords came.

The female collected all the evidence that the group had turned over, and somehow delivered it all to the nearby Leaf Village within ten minutes. The Leaf was over three hours away at top running speed.

When the Leaf came, they found the thirteen all sitting in their spots in the meeting. Each man had a stack of evidence in front of him, incriminating him for crimes dating back seven years. Curiously, one girl popped up constantly in their documents. Apparently, she had been threatened repeatedly with rape and death to herself and anyone who would harbor her.

Also interestingly was that each man only had three fingers. It seemed one had been chopped off for each year of this girl's imprisonment. However, it was carefully noted that the unidentified male had done all the cutting. He had left deliberate evidence. The knife that had done all the damage was resting on a black cloth on the center of the table the thirteen sat around. The Leaf refused to release the identity of the male. The only information they would provide stated that the attack had been provoked, and that no charges were being pressed by either the Leaf courts or by the thirteen.

The girl in the pictures was identified only by her first name. Leaf ANBU had been looking for her, wanted for murder. However, the new evidence that came to light cleared her of all charges, as it was clear she was a victim here. ANBU has been ordered to suspend it's search for her.

The locals who heard the screams did not hurry to raise any kind of alarm. Mostly elderly people or families who could not leave the area were left. They named the tenth of August that year a holiday. Festivals would be held later, once the headquarters of the thirteen men had been razed and a temple erected over it.

--
-

Azami held a kunai at Yuji's neck.

"Drop them," she snarled. "The swords."

Yuji did. He felt a hand clamp over his mouth.

"Now listen," the girl hissed into his ear, the fabric from her mouth covering tickling him. "You are my prisoner. Do as I say, and you won't be harmed. I want information. Tell me everything you know, and your rewards-"

Yuji felt the kunoichi's breasts move against his back. He gulped as her hand held his crotch and her body moved even closer to his. A small drop of blood rolled down his throat.

"...will be great," she finished. Her hand reached into his top and undid the strings holding it closed. It fanned open and his chest was exposed. Her hand caressed it as she finally lifted up her face covering so she could lap at the blood coming from his neck.

"Did you ever think about the forbidden love between a kunoichi and a samurai?"

Yuji had. Often. Despite the scenario where his life was 'in danger', Yuji smiled. This game, he liked.

It was worth it, he decided. Being bad for her. It made her become good. Well, as 'good' as she'll get, anyway. It's not such a bad fate. Not bad at all.

"Tell me who you belong to," Azami demanded, her tongue just flicking Yuji's earlobe teasingly. She made another small cut with the kunai on Yuji's shoulder, biting and licking at the wound.

"You, Azami. Always." --

Even a year later, more stories were heard. Naruto and Sakura had developed into strong, able shinobi. Yet their lives had been strangely free and unchallenged of serious enemies. Their path to adulthood- and love- had been cleared, it seemed. There were rumors only. There always are, anytime someone seems to lead a charmed life.

A man and woman, clothed in all black, said the rumors. The woman slightly taller than the man, recognizable by her exposed midriff and ample breasts. Her dark eyes gleamed like jewels, alluring the simplest of the male horde. However, her eyes only truly sparkled for her companion.

A silent male, who spoke only when necessary. He defended the woman fiercely, as though it were his sole reason for existence. He was muscular and apparently handsome under his layers of black clothing. If you met his eyes, you had either earned his favor or his wrath. You were judged quickly and without mercy. The silent warrior cast no shadow of pity on those who were guilty.

They were impossible to track down unless they wished to be found. Rumors, of course. Always rumors. Though those that would oppose Naruto and Sakura did have a nasty habit of changing their tunes, or

disappearing altogether.

-

In five years, Naruto and Sakura had become the leaders of the village, in name and ability. They were the first to share the Hokage title. Their rule went undisputed, though through reverence and respect, not fear.

Their chief opposition had been Danzou, and he had proved to be brutal. There were many small wars. Each time, Danzou managed to escape, or Naruto and Sakura were defended by their village. Danzou had no wish to destroy the village he lusted after.

Finally, the day came. A cold October evening. Halloween, those who saw the battle remembered. Naruto and Sakura were present, ready to fight. But instead, a black-clad male made his appearance. His female companion cast a barrier, leaving Danzou and his supporters trapped.

“Hurry up; they’re strong!” she exclaimed, though she showed no strain of effort.

Pulling off his mask, the male knelt in deference to Naruto and Sakura. On one knee, his head bowed, he addressed them for the first time in years.

“Ojousama; Naruto-dono...no, no, now it is Lord and Lady Hokage, yes?”

The male looked up.

Yuji hadn’t aged much. His eyes had seemed to have a glow that was absent in his youth. The cold hazel of his eyes had an odd warmth to them now.

“I am...so honored. So proud. To think you two had done all this on your own...”

Sakura smiled knowingly. She knelt down near Yuji, beautiful as ever, yet regal as her master had been as Hokage.

“I had no doubt of your loyalty, Yuji. And your help. You made this possible. You played no small part in this. I...we owe you our thanks.”

Yuji bowed lower, but Naruto seized his arm and pulled him up and into a hug.

“And is that Azami?” Naruto asked. “Didn’t recognize her with the ponytail. She looks great.”

Yuji grinned. “Well, I daresay we have...well...yes, indeed, keeping each other in top form. I’ve always loved ponytails and all...”

“You’re in good health for a ‘possession’,” Sakura observed.

“Thank you, Lady Hokage. May I ask when you are-”

Sakura patted her stomach. “Not for another five months. But I needed to be here tonight...”

Yuji looked tired and powerful and old and young, all at once. He put a closed fist to his chest; a sign of loyalty.

“Allow me to fight this last battle, Lord and Lady Hokage. Danzou and I...”

“Toldja old man Yuji wouldn’t let us fight!” Naruto exclaimed, his hand still on Yuji’s shoulder. “Well, we’d better listen, huh? It sounds like we’ll have more to do after this. Not to mention cleaning up the mess that Yuji here usually leaves after a fight.”

Yuji laughed, nodding in agreement. “Yes, I do get a bit on the exuberant side, don’t I?”

Sakura took Yuji’s hand and put it on her slightly swollen belly; Yuji could feel the life stir within, however slightly. It strengthened, seeming to strain to touch the warmth of his hand.

“We want to name him ‘Kimihiro’, if it’s okay,” Sakura told Yuji softly.

She was glowing as she spoke, and Yuji could feel his old crush on her well up. She was so beautiful now. Her hair was a little longer, making her look more mature while doing nothing to diminish her girlish cute qualities. She had a pleasant figure, and of course her face was beautiful.

Yuji knew that beauty was for Naruto and the child she was carrying. Yuji was an older brother; a mentor. One who was to come before and clear the path, unseen by those who didn’t know where to look.

Not such a bad fate.

“I would be honored,” Yuji heard himself say. He stood up swiftly and turned his back to them. It was time to fight his last battle against Danzou. All the time spent with Azami; all the happiness he’d felt being hers. All the training he’d done. All of it for this moment.

Azami lowered her barrier. She immediately met Danzou’s right-hand men, fighting them both off.

In a flash of black, Yuji was past her and grappling with Danzou. Their weapons clanged loudly, echoing into the night. Their respective jutsus clashed in mid air, rebounding all over. The rooftop on which they had met was ripped apart immediately. The fight took to the streets. All over the village they ran, exchanging attacks. Villagers lucky enough to peer out the window saw what seemed to be a shadow battling their oppressor, and apparently pushing him. Truthfully, the battle was a see-saw affair, with both men taking and giving. Their companions, the black-clad female and the two men with extraordinary abilities, were battling mostly as a formality. The woman was handling them both with apparent ease, her only strain coming when her male counterpart was out of sight. She didn’t want to miss the fight any more than anyone else, apparently, because several times she could have finished her enemies, but instead moved to follow the main battle.

After an hour, they met at last, on top of the Hokage mansion. Both men were at the end of their strength. The next clash would be the last.

Yuji summoned all the chakra he had remaining. Danzou likewise did the same.

“FIRE STYLE.” was their shared cry.

“DRAGON’S FINAL FURY!” yelled Yuji!

“UNSTOPPABLE FIRE JUGGERNAUT!” came Danzou’s shout!

The two fire attacks were massive. To think this was the end of their strength, and not the zenith!

The attacks roared toward each other. Both men had abandoned defense for this meeting, and it showed.

Danzou’s attack was larger, but Yuji’s was more dense. It pushed through Danzou’s attack, solidifying then lengthening into a spear that pierced Danzou’s heart. As it did, it exploded in an almighty shower of fire. Danzou’s remains were only charred ashes.

Danzou’s attack also hit Yuji. It burned him severely and critically. It was not an instant kill, however. Yuji stayed on his feet just a second longer than Danzou’s ashes lasted. He was the clear winner. No one would dispute that.

It seemed to take him an eternity to fall. When he finally met the ground, the small thud might as well have been a resounding crash.

Sakura and Naruto arrived first. Azami dispatched her attackers with vicious strikes and leapt to Yuji’s side. She looked to Sakura. Their eyes met, and Sakura gave a small shake.

“For all my power...there is nothing...”

Her tears landed on Yuji’s chest as he lay dying. His horribly crisped right hand reached up and touched her face. Then his head fell to the side and his arm fell. His pain had ended.

All at once, Yuji’s body burst into black flames. They consumed his corpse. Sakura and Naruto leapt back, as did Azami. But oddly enough, the black flames died almost immediately, and they found Yuji’s corpse. It looked as though he had just been born, albeit as an adult. His skin was pale and unmarred. He was naked and seemingly peaceful.

Both Hokages looked to Azami, who wordlessly shook her head. She had no words. She had no idea what had happened.

Then Yuji sat up.

“Close. Very close. Another inch to the left and my jutsu wouldn’t have worked.”

He spoke placidly, as though discussing the weather. He looked up to Azami, who had fallen to her knees, limp with shock and relief.

“Mistress, may I have my coat, please?”

Azami immediately produced a long, black coat for Yuji out of a shadow. He stood up and shrugged it on, sealing it in front.

“What-” the three said in unison.

Yuji made sure the coat was closed before he answered, shivering slightly.

“I cast a second jutsu during the fight. As the ‘Heaven’s Temper’, I have certain regenerative abilities. ‘Fire cleanses all of it’s sins’, being the principle. My fire- that is, my chakra- countered Danzou’s and healed my body. It’s a jutsu only I can use, and only once, but it seems to have-”

Azami was on top of him before he got out another word, kissing him passionately. Then she punched him in the stomach.

“Don’t you EVER- HOW DARE- YOU COULD HAVE WARNED ME!”

Naruto and Sakura restrained Azami, with some difficulty. But soon she collapsed, crying.

“I wasn’t sure it would work. It was possible I might still have died, and you’d just have a fairly decent-looking corpse. I didn’t want to get your hopes up. Besides...”

Yuji regarded Naruto and Sakura, a small and slightly sad smile on his face. He truly seemed like an elder now.

“The prophecy has been fulfilled, and twice over, I see. You two were to either fall in love OR become the strongest shinobi ever. You’ve succeeded in both.”

Yuji calmly took Azami from Sakura’s arms, holding her to his chest. He looked up once more.

“I hope that...your lives have been your own. I never interfered unless a clear opportunity presented itself. Pain dropped his guard just before your fight, allowing me to weaken him just slightly. Kisame and Azami met in battle...Orochimaru has been contained once more...Sasuke, I’m sad to say, is a task I must leave to you. Pity...I owe him...”

Yuji showed them all a mark on his shoulder. A curse mark.

“The only permanent mark on me that my mistress did not make,” he said with an air of sadness. “But there can only be one to defeat him, and that is you, Naruto. And on that note, I should leave. I’m feeling a bit weak...”

Sakura and Naruto looked at each other, nodded once, then faced Yuji again. They bowed low, their eyes to the ground. The ultimate show of respect and trust.

“Thank you, sensei,” they said as one. The only title that Yuji ever truly treasured had been bestowed on him by those he called ‘master’.

84 - Arc XIII: What If?- Chapter 1

-Miko

Miko, Yuji, and Shoki had lived the first four months of their six-month exile peacefully. It was such an odd thing, to not be fighting all the time. They were truly alone out here in the wilderness. And yet...

And yet it was great. They had really spruced up their cottage. For the first time in his life, Shoki had his own bedroom, decorated however he liked. He had the toys of a boy his age, and he learned from his sister and Yuji. Miko taught him things like math and calligraphy; Yuji taught him shinobi arts and history. The only thing he missed out on were friends, but Yuji and Miko were close enough in age to be both elders and contemporaries, so that was a small loss.

Yuji's arms raised the axe, took aim, and then fell down. The log he was aiming for split in half perfectly. Yuji took the two pieces and threw them on to a sizeable pile.

Looking up to the sky, his hand held to shield his eyes from the sun, Yuji smiled into the perfection of the day. If this was punishment...

Pulling off his undershirt, Yuji used it to wipe his sweaty brow, arms and chest. His arms and chest had developed further from this manual labor, and any trace of fat he'd had on his body was long obliterated. Miko was a good cook, but Yuji was predisposed to not eating very much. That was good. More for Shoki.

Leaning on his axe, catching his breath, Yuji looked at his hand. Yup, it was still there. His ring.

Miko wore it's mate, and Yuji had been amazed. He couldn't believe he was engaged at this point of his life! He was only twenty-one; Miko was seventeen. No, he corrected himself. She was eighteen. Today, in fact. It was her birthday.

-

Miko was a picture of beauty. Her long hair was pulled into a loose ponytail as she worked. She wore light make-up, though her features did not need it so to speak. It was fun getting to be a 'girl' for a change. Normally, she was still stuck in priestess mode, where she didn't have to worry so much about cosmetic attractiveness. It was nice to let her hair down, so to speak. It was fun dressing up for...

For Yuji, she reminded herself, smiling. She had finally agreed to be his wife. After finding out how well they complimented each other, it had seemed only natural. They were comfortable with each other, and Shoki had certainly hinted that he would enjoy having Yuji as an uncle. A matchmaker at his age...

Yuji re-entered the house, his shirt still off, and his body still sweating. Miko looked at him, letting herself feel the longing that was natural. No longer being Uzume, she was free to act as a girl. And that meant to allow herself to be attracted to men sexually. And right now, that longing was strong.

Yuji had been great. He'd admitted loving her, at first as a friend, but more recently regarded his feelings as romantic. He hadn't attempted to touch her sexually, instead holding her at arm's length, letting her decide when she felt comfortable with getting closer.

At 3:10 this afternoon, she would allow herself to be with him. Finally. She's longed for him, if she was honest with herself. Being a priestess didn't mean she was exempt from the normal biological stirrings that went with your development years (and did not necessarily lessen into adulthood).

Lost in thought, Miko jumped when Yuji's arms wrapped around her midsection from behind. He kissed her cheek gently.

"Happy Birthday, beautiful."

She turned to face him. He protested, saying he was sweaty, but she pulled herself into him anyway. They were nearly the same height, so it was a simple matter to lean up just a bit to plant a kiss on his lips. It was a sweet, innocent kiss.

"Yuji...it's time we got closer. Shoki is going to be gone. To town, to run some errands for me. So I was wondering if you'd like to... take a bath...with me?"

She had been worried he'd refuse. They'd built a great little stone bath outside, and occasionally bathed as a group (semi-clothed or towel-clad). The water was warm and pleasant, and the thought of being held in that water by someone who she associated with warmth and safety appealed to her. Sex was a matter of intimacy, after all. She was prepared to trust this man with all she was.

I never foresaw this. That I would be his 'chosen'. My own future was obscured whenever I tried to read it. I should have guessed. But then, it wouldn't be so much fun to have all the answers.

Yuji grinned, blushing. God knew he was looking forward to this.

"As cute as you look in those clothes," he told her, noting her penchant for dressing incredibly cutely. Today she was wearing a black dress that fell to past her knees with a white blouse fringed with lace. With a big, red bow in her hair holding her ponytail in place, she could have been an adorable schoolgirl. "I think I'm curious about how those clothes would look on the floor."

It seemed a little odd, thinking of Miko as a sexual creature. She was so pure and innocent. But at the same time, he'd stopped thinking of sex as dirty. He had decided that making love to the woman he loved was neither dirty nor indecent.

-

Both wearing yukata, they met in the bath. They carried their towels, meaning they were naked under their robes.

"I think...me first," Miko spoke in a what was just a little above a whisper. She untied her yukata, then reached up to untie the bow in her hair.

Yuji drew in a breath of anticipation and surprise. She was amazing! Her hair fluttered out just as her

robe pooled around her feet. She was naked now, her skin smooth and white. She had medium-sized, perky breasts, a tight, flat little stomach, and a beautifully shaped little butt. With her arms over her head, smoothing her hair, nothing was hidden, and Yuji couldn't pull his eyes away.

Miko came to him, opening his yukata with her hand just enough to slip it inside, rubbing his chest. She kissed him gently; lovingly.

"Now you, then..."

It was so cute that she was nervous. And thank God, because Yuji knew he was nervous as hell himself! He looked down to see Miko on her knees, untying the knot on the obi that held his Yukata closed. Once that was done, she stood back up, holding his shoulders. She slid her hands back, and his yukata fell from his body, leaving him naked as well.

Neither one covered up in shame. They behaved like kids at first, openly staring in curiosity at each other's bodies. Then Miko slid forward into him, her arms wrapping around his neck. His hands moved automatically, reaching around her waist and upper back. The touch of her creamy skin was both sensual and innocent.

She murmured words into his chest; his hand stroked her hair. Their eyes met, locked in a passionate embrace. Then they kissed, lightly at first. Their kiss grew deeper quickly.

Miko broke the embrace, holding Yuji's hands. She tugged him toward the water.

"Come..sit..."

He sat down on a stone step he had put in for just that purpose. Miko sat on his lap. Their chests locked together. Miko spread her legs as she sat on his lap, putting her knees on either side of his body.

"I love you, Yuji. I love you."

She slid closer, until it was up to Yuji to complete their connection. He kissed her once more, this time on the forehead, acknowledging that things would now be different. But they were ready for that step.

"I love you, too, Miko. Thank you for being with me. I can't wait to marry you."

With that, he made the final connection, eliciting a gasp from Miko. She moved even closer, though it seemed to be causing her discomfort at first. But she moved regardless, until she could kiss him again.

They were connected now, body and soul.

--

Shoki didn't find it odd that his sister and his mentor were now sharing a bed. He took it in stride, murmuring that it was 'about time' that they hooked up. Miko looked more beautiful and more at peace than before. She seemed to take pleasure in simply being able to kiss Yuji goodbye when he went off on an errand, or to be there to help Yuji if his anxiety became too much to bear.

Shoki made sure to leave them alone at least once a week, understanding that they needed their time together. They were adjusting to this new life. This life was to last at least two more months, and by all indications, even longer.

When Shoki came home, carrying food for dinner, he found Yuji and Miko sitting together in front of the fire, their hands intertwined. Both were holding a book with the other hand, smiling in a relaxed way. It made Shoki feel happy that he had a family, even if it's wasn't a conventional one. His mother figure was his half-sister; his father-figure/big brother was his mentor. But even this little bit of a normal life appealed to him.

"Shoki?" Miko's voice drifted through the air melodiously. She let Yuji's hand go to stand up. "We've decided to buy the house and stay here. Yuji will still be working for the Leaf. He's been working on a teleportation jutsu that will allow him to commute. But this means there are more options for you..."

Shoki looked confused, his gaze moving back and forth between Miko and Yuji. Yuji finally took the initiative and told him what was going on.

"We live in dangerous times, Shoki. Very dangerous times. And as such, there are things that we all need to do- however distasteful- to survive."

Yuji paused to clear his throat, making Shoki more uneasy. Yuji was not one to hesitate when it came to important things.

"I think it's best if you attend the Leaf's Ninja Academy."

Shoki didn't like the idea of that, but he had lived long enough to know that he should ask why before losing his cool. He did so.

Yuji ran his hand through his hair, looking away for a moment.

"I...I'm worried about Pain. He has his sites set on you. Were he to mobilize all at his command, there's a good chance he might defeat us. And you aren't helpless, but all the same, you'd be much safer in the Leaf Village, surrounded by shinobi and protected by a Legend."

"It isn't as if we're kicking you out! You will always have a home here. And if you want to commute to school, that's fine. But please...really think about it, okay?" Miko pleaded, resting her hand on Yuji's shoulder.

Yuji continued, saying, "There are some things I can't teach you. Others are more suited toward certain styles of combat that you may love. Plus, you should make friends. Training alone gets old very quickly. Finding a rival can help you learn..."

Shoki couldn't believe what he was hearing. In his mind, these were not his parents. They were not ones to make decisions like this. He'd been alone for so long. And now, he'd finally found two people whom he could love, and the first thing they do is try to get rid of him?

"I get it," Shoki said slowly. He stood up from his seat, looking back and forth between Yuji and Miko. "I get it," he repeated. "You two want me gone so you can have sex more often!"

Yuji and Miko exchanged glances. They had expected this reaction, despite doing all they could to avoid it.

“Your feelings about this are natural, and understandable...” Yuji began, realizing too late that his voice was placating; rather like a father scolding a child.

SMACK!

Shoki’s fist connected with Yuji’s face in tandem with Shoki’s shout that Yuji could ‘Go to hell’. Yuji didn’t block it. He managed to turn his head just in time to avoid getting his nose broken, but other than that the punch connected full-power.

Shoki stormed out, ignoring Miko’s plea to return. When that didn’t work, Miko focused on helping Yuji up.

“Did he hit you that hard?” she asked.

“Hard enough,” Yuji replied to what would have otherwise been a stupid question, except for the unstated ‘normally you would have dodged that’. “I’m sort of proud, in a backward way. But I hoped he’d take that a little better. Not that I don’t get it,” he added at the end, massaging his jaw. Dislocated for sure. “I owed him that.”

Miko felt Yuji’s face, then quickly snapped his jaw back into place, pretending not to hear the barely audible curse he uttered. He made it a point not to swear in front of her, though in this case she wouldn’t have held it against him.

“It’s not your fault. Or mine. Or his, really. He’s just found out about having me as a half-sister, and you’re his mentor. It’s all happening so quickly. I’m pretty overwhelmed myself,” Miko admitted, sitting down.

Yuji set down next to her, putting an arm around her shoulder. He gazed at her, trying to speak carefully, so as not to offend the other person in his life at the moment.

“If you want to take things slower between us...I mean, I’ll understand. You’re just eighteen; there’s no reason to rush.”

Miko settled her head against his shoulder, sliding closer. “I can’t imagine being with anyone else. I love you so much, Yuji.”

Yuji laid his head on hers, reaching for her hand. Their fingers intertwined as their bodies strained to get closer.

“I love you, Miko. And in two months, when this exile is done, I can’t wait to be married to you. I can’t wait to start...well, continue this life with you. I just hope Shoki will forgive us. I want him to be part of it, too.”

Miko exhaled, snuggling her head into him more. “He had a point about the sex, though.”

Yuji was shocked. He didn’t know Miko thought like that. He looked at her in surprise, to find her

blushing back, but grinning big time.

"I couldn't resist. I think there's something about you that women enjoy teasing. It just slipped out."

Yuji gave her a half-smile and pulled her closer, until she was all but on his lap.

"You know, that was mean. I think you should make it up to me..."

Suggestion was all over his voice. Miko teased him by running her hand under his shirt. Her fingers navigated up and down his chest.

"Any suggestions?"

85 - ArcXIII:What If?- Chapter 2

It would take a week before Shoki would even speak to Yuji again. He was closer to Miko now, who had apparently, by not speaking, shown sufficient reluctance to the idea of Shoki living in the Leaf that she was given more trust.

This hurt Yuji, though he wouldn't admit as much. He understood Shoki's feelings, and had their positions been reversed, his reaction would likely have been the same. But one way or another, he needed Shoki to get out of here. It was too dangerous for him. He had such ability, but it was still undisciplined. He would be a hazard rather than a help in battle, if it came to that.

So Yuji prepared himself to appeal to Shoki. This time, he hadn't told Miko of the plan. And he had a good reason for that; she probably wouldn't speak to him ever again after hearing it.

Clearing his throat, Yuji tried to speak to them. But he couldn't. His voice caught in his throat. He tried again, but nothing came out. Instead, he turned abruptly and left, walking straight out the door and into the woods.

He thought he had controlled this. He knew this was best. But all the same, one glaring truth stopped Yuji from saying what he knew needed to be said.

He'd been lonely for so long before Miko. The thought of alienating her and Shoki sickened him. He didn't want to be alone anymore. Not again. He'd had a taste of a blissful life. A loving bride-to-be, and a combination little brother/student/son that grew to despise him.

That brought a smile to Yuji's lips, if only for a moment.

A parent? I had no idea I was so looked forward to the contempt that came with parenthood.

Yuji's wandering brought him to the edge of the forest, where he finally stopped and let his head rest against a tree. How on earth could he do this? He had planned to have Miko go with Shoki. He planned to set a trap for Pain, should he come. No; when. WHEN he came, Yuji would have been ready. He would have been alone, with no one and nothing to worry about protecting. He could have unleashed his full power, absolutely unbridled, without looking over his shoulder.

His fingers dug into the bark, ripping off little chunks unconsciously as he grappled with himself. Which was worse, he wondered. Being alone by driving everyone else away, or being alone because you let those you love die?

The answer came to him, but did not surprise him. This was always the answer he came to. More strength. More power. Enough to protect everyone. But this time, that 'everyone' included himself. For once, he was going to have his cake and eat it, too.

A renewed sense of purpose energized Yuji. He ran back to the cabin at full speed, stopping just shy of

the door to compose himself. After a few breaths, he walked in.

Miko and Shoki were still sitting quietly where he had left them. Of course, it had only been a few minutes. It had seemed longer to Yuji, but apparently his big revelation only took five minutes to come to.

“In my old dojo, there was a saying,” said Yuji, closing the door behind him as he stepped in. “It was ‘The family that fights together, stays together’. And that’s what we are now. Maybe not a conventional family, but a family nonetheless. And I was wrong to even consider breaking it up.

“Shoki, I don’t expect you to forgive me. The only thing I will expect of you is to continue training with me, because it is you, not I, who is in danger. And Miko, I want you to come, too. You’ve got so much strength. Holding it in is a crime now. There are people to be saved, and you have the power to do it. Religious salvation is only part of the equation. Physical, earth-bound salvation is important, or why were we born with bodies that could move? That could run, jump, love?”

Yuji was on a roll now, and Miko and Shoki seemed to be getting caught up in his fervor, despite his corny rambling. They stood up, clearly unsure of how to react, but wanting to react all the same.

“We need to train. We have two months. After that, the Leaf will provide an even better training ground. But for now, we need to become as strong as possible. That’s the only way for us to stay together and be happy. And that’s what I want.”

-

Two months passed quickly. But in that time, the three of them formed an abnormally strong defense against almost anything.

Yuji used both his usual fire style and his new ‘void’ chakra. As it turned out, Miko’s ‘light’ chakra was the only thing that could both pierce and enhance ‘void’ chakra. If Yuji cast a net of darkness, Miko could fortify it with a barrier of light. It looked like someone brought down the night sky, laced it with threads of trailing gold fireworks, and used it as a shield.

Shoki’s jutsus were fast improving. His specialty seemed to be trap jutsus, in which the user was halted in all movement. That, coupled with Miko’s pinpoint accuracy, was a deadly combination. Yuji’s job, then, would be to see that they only had one enemy to concentrate on at a time. That was just as well. His accuracy was fine, but given that the sheer power of his jutsus sometimes threw his aim off, it was just as well that he could focus on quantity over quality.

Finally the day came to leave. Their exile was ended, and it was time to make a new home in the Leaf. That was Yuji’s change to his original plan of owning the house they were in. He loved it, and he would retain ownership, but they would live in the Leaf. It was healthier for everyone to have some human contact. Shoki was at the age where girls would soon be a priority, not to mention friends and hopefully schoolwork.

Miko was going to work at the local temple part-time. As it turned out, she had quite a few talents outside of that, though, and had decided on being a seamstress. Yuji had been proudly wearing her creations for months, and swore up and down that they were the most comfortable and useful clothes he owned. And he was not exaggerating.

For their trip back, all of them were clothed in their normal 'uniforms'. Shoki was sporting an overly large white top, plain but very comfortable, with similar pants at the bottom, plus a new pair of straw sandals, also made by Miko.

Miko had decided to wear a black skirt that fell to her knees, and a white blouse. Her hair, done up in a ponytail, was held in place by a red ribbon. Yuji recognized the look, and he and Miko shared a smile. The first time they had been intimate, this was what she had worn when telling him she was ready for them to be closer.

Yuji had outgrown most of his clothes, having become more muscular and even a little taller. Adorned in black pants, a black shirt with a silver collar, and a new long, black coat that Miko had made from his old one plus some new material, Yuji looked, well, powerful. Their whole group did, really. Shoki had learned to radiate confidence when he wanted to, or ferocity, or anger. Plus his overlong hair and one blind eye automatically made him stand out. Miko had a quite strength about her that somehow complimented her beauty and purity. Yuji couldn't quite contain his power yet, so it was pretty obvious that he had some degree of strength.

"Everyone ready?" Yuji asked, glancing around. It was hard for him to contain his happiness and pride, so he stopped trying. "Like we practiced; here we go!"

--

Naruto and Sakura were waiting, rather impatiently. Yuji had become such a big part of their lives in the short time he'd been with them. Being without him felt lonely and even just plain wrong. Their lives dictated his, after all. They felt they should be there to observe the results.

After what seemed like forever, they felt a distinct ripple in the energy around them. They bunched together, unsure of what it was. The feeling was familiar, but very powerful. Friend or foe could not be determined from just that. They tensed for attack.

Each one appeared in a unique way.

Shoki appeared in mid-air, taking the place of a leaf that had been falling from a nearby tree. He landed upright, orienting himself immediately. He grinned to Naruto and Sakura and gave a friendly wave.

Miko just appeared in a radiant glow of white light. The light framed her regally, and for a moment she was a beauty beyond that which could be comprehended with only sight. She smiled kindly, bowing in greeting to Naruto and Sakura.

Yuji was last, and his appearance was- there was no other word- cool. What looked like a floating shadow seemed to expand at about head height of Naruto. The shadow tilted until it was only a line that you had to squint to see. In a crackle of black lightning, Yuji appeared, already kneeling in deference to his masters.

"THAT is how you make an entrance. Learn anything?"

That was Yuji's first comment. Then came the grins, tears, and hugs that go with welcoming a friend

back into your life. It was nothing like before Yuji had left. This time, he came back confident, and really glowing. He seemed mature as he introduced Miko as his bride-to-be. Miko, for her part, seemed like the perfect girlfriend. Sweet, beautiful, and so obviously in love with Yuji. Shoki seemed a bit reserved, but that was normal so it wasn't questioned.

They all went out to celebrate, although Yuji and Miko abstained from alcohol. Everyone else was technically a minor, but such things were lax at that time. You used to come of age at fifteen, so what was so bad about drinking at that age? If you could fight and get married, you could drink.

It was quite a party, and for once, there was no misery to dampen the evening.

Yuji never thought he'd be here. With Shoki at his side, and Asuna at Miko's, they were standing at the front of a temple. The priest gave his solemn blessing, and then said, in English (per Yuji's request): "You may kiss the bride!"

Miko had been dressed traditionally and formally at first, though as tradition dictated both she and Yuji changed into western clothing partway through the ceremony. Miko was so gorgeous in her western wedding gown that Yuji, handsome as he was in his tuxedo, briefly showed his old self off to the small congregation when he turned red at the very sight of her.

Miko smiled indulgently and spoke with a voice that said 'I'm everyone's big sister. You can trust me!'. That was one of the things Yuji loved most about her.

Her hands, covered with white gloves that reached almost to her shoulder, patted Yuji's head reassuringly as he stumbled his way through words of thanks to the group for being here today.

It was a scene that was captured perfectly by a photographer, and later a painter. The small group circled around the happy bride and groom. It was a happy memory that could have warmed even the coldest heart. A happy, young couple was rare enough in this war-torn world; to find two people with such power joining together...

At the back of the ceremony, Tsunade privately wondered about the children these two would have. Were they to inherit the power of their parents while avoiding the rather dark fates the two seemed to have...

Formidable indeed. Strong and pure...! This feels...different. This isn't just a thought! This is...a prophecy! It's like Sarutobi-sensei said! The feeling...

"Shizune!" Tsunade whispered urgently. Her assistant perked up immediately, answering with a quick 'My Lady?'. Tsunade beckoned for Shizune to follow her.

--

Tsunade dictated it all to Shizune, who took detailed notes. Tsunade would need to rewrite the whole thing herself, but she didn't want to disrupt the vision. The feeling...a prophecy that might very well have no dark side.

Who knew? A prophecy, at least spoken by mortals, is nothing divine. It's a feeling with a high likelihood of being a truism. I feel like I'm right on this one, though. Yuji and Miko...there's not an ounce of evil between them.

Shizune stopped writing; Lady Tsunade had stopped speaking. The new prophecy had been finished. In silence, the two women sealed it into a scroll and stored it with the original Ten no Kishootsu prophecy. It's time would come.

86 - ArcXliii: What If?- Chapter 3

After seven years of marriage, Miko was a very happy twenty-five year old with everything she could want. Her husband was handsome and powerful; her half-brother had overcome the awkwardness he'd suffered through as a child and had begun to date a beautiful girl; yes, her life was good. Except, well, she was interested in children.

Twenty-five is young for a mother, but all the same the timing felt right. Yuji was stable mentally and physically with no battles on the immediate horizon. There was a large battle looming in the future. Miko could see that much. It made her want children all the more.

With the outcome uncertain despite my abilities...I want a reminder of him. Of Yuji. I love him so much. Children...with Yuji. One of each gender, maybe? I should talk to him. Yuji might have other ideas.

Speak of the devil. Yuji had just come home. Even after seven years of marriage, he never failed to give Miko a big kiss when he came home. They were still so in love, even after all this time. To think this had once been planned as a marriage of convenience!

Miko let Yuji unwind a bit first. She watched him go outside to meet Shoki for training. At twenty-three years of age, Shoki had grown into a muscular young man with a mane of hair that no comb could tame. He was, these days, accompanied by a young lady he had introduced as 'Rima'. Yuji knew her by her nickname, 'Shiroko'.

Now the two boys were outside wrestling. It was fall, and the leaves were appropriately falling. She could hear the crunch as the two rolled around, laughing as each tried to gain the advantage.

Miko's smile grew wider and brighter. Before she knew it, she was running outside. She tackled Yuji from behind.

"I have to protect my brother! Get him, Shoki!" she shouted, restraining Yuji, who only pretended to struggle against her grip. Shoki ran up and playfully punched Yuji in the arm a few times. All three collapsed laughing after a short time had passed, all winded from the exertion and laughter. Looking up at the sky, Miko snaked her hand into Yuji's after a time. He turned his head to her, and she whispered 'I need to talk to you' into his ear sweetly.

--

--

Another ten years had passed. Yuji, now age forty, solemnly surveyed the small dojo he oversaw. As a shihan, he had to contain his pride at seeing one girl in particular quickly master the basic kata he had just demonstrated.

God knew the father in him wanted to loudly boast at how amazingly talented and beautiful his daughter was!

Shana, named for one of Yuji's favorite manga characters, was much like her namesake. Yuji could see the *tsundere* growing in her. She could deliver a stinging comeback that left even adult men shrinking away. Her hair was dark brown, usually left to flow freely down her back (though tied into a ponytail in the dojo) and it was clear that she had inherited her mother's figure coupled with her father's martial prowess. Her one 'flaw', which was actually quite charming, was that she had heterochromia. One of her eyes was light blue; the other a dark hazel. But it did nothing to detract from her perfection in Yuji's eyes. Nor from a few of his younger male students. He felt no need to discipline them; he was fairly certain his daughter would handle them with ease when the time came.

Yuji's other child, a boy of eight, was in the back, quietly trying to escape his father's eye. Yuji tried not to be disappointed by the fact that the boy wasn't acclimated to martial arts like his sister. He was a sweet child, and unnaturally strong when it came to actual physical work. He couldn't manipulate chakra very well, or indeed even control his movements. He moved like a clumsy, awkward teenager. He was small, but of an average build otherwise. He had his father's hair, thick and dark brown, but his mother's eyes and the tenderness they held. His biggest hero, though, was Shoki. He wore clothes like Shoki did; his hair was the same unruly mop that Shoki's was. But he didn't have Shoki's level of skill, which served only to frustrate him more.

The boy was named 'Takeshi', for one of the sword masters that Yuji had learned from. It was a good name and fitting of the boy, despite the awkward way he handled a sword.

As he watched his class spar, Yuji was sparring with himself. He had a choice to make. To which child did he bequeath the Ten no Kishootsu ability? Shana was more suited for it, but rightfully talented on her own. Takeshi was not suited to it at all, but it would have boosted his abilities to a level that was more comparable to his sister. Shana wanted it more, Yuji knew. She constantly struggled to be worthy of the ability. She might have had some natural ability, but she cultivated it constantly, spending hours outside of class practicing.

Yuji frowned. He had approved of her dedication, but at that moment it struck him that she was being an awful lot like a younger Yuji. She needed to make friends...didn't she? It wasn't like Yuji could completely understand, and worse yet, neither did Miko. Both of them were solitary people by design and occupation.

Should I let nature take it's course? Or do I help the river shape the riverbed? Yuji wondered.

On the other side, Takeshi could make friends with no problem.

Clearly, being a parent was more difficult than fighting for your life.

==

Five year later, Shana had come of age. Takeshi was thirteen to her fifteen, but still old enough if necessary.

The great war had happened. It had taken most of five years, really. The Leaf village had been devastated with successive attacks by Pain, the true Akatsuki leader Madara Uchiha, and then another internal attack by Danzou. Naruto had thwarted both Pain and Madara. Danzou...

Yuji smiled a little. That was his doing, and the only reason the public ever found out about it was because his dojo students couldn't leave well enough alone. Several young men and women in hakamas, charging through the streets carrying swords and screaming battle cries tends to get attention.

He had been so proud of them. They had fought incredibly well, holding off the majority of ROOT until ANBU mobilized. They had no deaths and few injuries. As a result, Yuji's class size had nearly quadrupled.

However, against Danzou, Yuji had been injured. Even between Miko and Sakura, there was no way to heal his leg. He would limp the rest of his life. It weighed on his mind now that perhaps he was too old for this business. Miko was still so beautiful at forty, so it wasn't as if there was nothing for him. And having been injured, he saw his two children take over the dojo, seamlessly running classes. Takeshi had discovered his talent and had become an excellent instructor. He deferred to his sister, privately telling Yuji and Miko to give the dojo to her, and he would support her.

Both of them had become Jonin, in addition to their martial prowess.

Miko still designed and made clothes, and she was recognized as a master in that art. She'd also mastered Ikebana (the art of flower arranging), the Nodate (tea ceremony), and remained the head priestess at a nearby temple. She'd never suggested to Yuji that he slow down, and he never thought of it himself. Not yet.

The question of who would inherit his abilities still haunted him.

--

At age fifty, Yuji finally decided who to pass the Ten no Kishootsu ability on to.

Lady Tsunade had told Yuji about the prophecy she had made about Shana and Takeshi. They had indeed reached incredible potential, and were a force to be reckoned with. When the Leaf was attacked yet again, this time by a loose coalition of disgruntled jonin from within the Leaf, it was Takeshi and Shana who had battled the dissenters. They had fought the twenty all by themselves and won handily.

Shana was...well, a babe, to use popular vernacular. At twenty years of age, she had matured into a gorgeous young woman. She was fighting the boys off with a stick- sometimes literally. She had little patience for the stupidity of some of her would-be suitors. Yuji couldn't blame them. She had a shapely figure, with all her curves in the right places, with feminine muscle accenting them. But he understood the nature of the kunoichi, finally, after all these years. In her case, given the assignments she worked for ANBU, her assets were just that- assets.

Takeshi, eighteen now, had grown physically stronger. He had a steady girlfriend- a rival Jonin named Rika. Their teams were close friends, and as a result they had bonded as well. Takeshi had asked Yuji's opinion on marrying her, and Yuji had given his blessing, though that was purely for Takeshi's peace of mind. Yuji trusted his son and his choices.

So, as to the heir...

Yuji, on his fiftieth birthday, took up brush and ink and wrote his own 'prophecy', though it was really

more a set of instructions and requirements. Using his own chakra, not the Ten no Kishootsu chakra, he sealed the scroll with his most powerful sealing jutsu. Inside lay ninety percent of the Ten no Kishootsu chakra.

With some of the ten percent, Yuji threw the scroll in the air. As it fell, he kicked it skyward, hard enough for it to stay up there for ten years.

Miko supportively held his shoulder. He watched the abilities that had kept him alive all this time fly away. He knew that he had made the right decision, but it was hard to grapple with the sudden absence of the chakra. Thankfully, he didn't have to handle it alone. He had his students, he had his friends, he had his children, and he had Miko.

I wonder who the next 'Heaven's Temper' will be? Whoever the ability chooses, I hope they will use it with grace and wisdom. This time is full of turmoil and strife, so to the next generation I bequeath these abilities.

Miko's warm embrace made Yuji happy, filling the void inside him instantly. He held her, returning the warmth.

Shana would go on to inherit the dojo, eventually marrying one of her students. Yuji could only shake his head in disbelief- she'd chosen a man just like her father. Hayao was clueless around girls. As a father, Yuji was thankful for that. He didn't know what to do with his hands, which meant they stayed off his daughter. After nearly ten years of marriage, they would have children.

Takeshi supported his sister, but he was also a highly visible advisor to Naruto, who had been named Hokage. Takeshi's quiet wisdom and good looks lent themselves well to his new role. Within a few years, he and Rika would have two children- twins, one boy and one girl- and could expect another. Takeshi was quite the family man, and Rika was a good mother.

Peace finally settled on the Leaf village. Children grew up to be much better shinobi without the pressure of war forcing them to grow. Yuji's children were shining examples of the best of both worlds. They had seen war but came to know peace.

Perhaps, Yuji wondered, holding his wife to him. Perhaps I, too, have come to understand peace. May it last forever...in all of us.

87 - Arc Xliiii: What If?- Chapter 1

"Yuji?"

He looked up.

Sakura was holding him lovingly, his head in her chest. There was nothing sexual about it for either of them at that moment. Simply two people down on their luck licking each other's wounds. Yuji was about to thank her when the situation changed.

Sakura pushed him backward off his feet, lowering him gently to the ground before straddling him. Before he could protest, she held his shoulders down and kissed him. With her chakra control, she could neutralize even his Ten no Kishootsu chakra. He was literally helpless to stop her as her lips met his aggressively. There was no saying no until she let up.

"To hell with him," she snarled, unbuttoning her top and flinging it aside. She tore Yuji's shirt off. She ran a hand down his bare chest, feeling the goosebumps that had risen from the cold air. She sighed happily- he was human after all, she thought. He seemed 'real', rather than a product of a scroll's words. She leaned back in and kissed him more passionately. She was so confused and desperate over Naruto that she wanted nothing more than her erstwhile protector- a boy who had admitted loving her despite promising to give her up- to be with her.

"Sakura..." he said softly. But she shook her head violently. She began to kiss his neck, marking it with little bites, knowing that he would enjoy the roughness behind it. Even as she set about tasting his body, she answered his question.

"No! Don't you understand? I was in love with him! And he has the nerve to tell me that it isn't real?! It feels real! It is real!"

She tapped Yuji's ki point three inches below his navel, and he felt like his wrists and ankles were shackled down. Which they were, really- with the invisible bonds of chakra. The skill of Sakura as a medic was amazing to him, even now. Though it was less amazing as the feeling of her tongue on his right nipple. It made him blush, really for the first time. She was not single; therefore no threat, so there was no need to feel worried or embarrassed. But she was breaking the rules! He couldn't let her do this! And yet, he was powerless. What harm would it do?

Let me count the ways...

Sakura continued her rant. "You wanted me, didn't you?! Well, now I'm yours! Where in this prophecy does it say anything about you and I being together being wrong?!"

"It doesn't," Yuji admitted calmly. "But I promised Naruto I wouldn't pursue you..."

Sakura looked at him, tears in her eyes. She was silently begging him not to do this. But his unwavering

stare, with eyes that shone with loyalty, finally led her to back up a little, though she did not redress or release him.

“He told me he loved me, and lied. Do you think he cares about me? You care, don’t you?”

Yuji couldn’t stand it any longer. Something inside him cracked. He allowed Sakura’s chakra to run over him- a sign of submission that she could feel, since he was already in a compromising position.

“If you’re really done with him...” Yuji murmured, hoping against hope at this point.

“I am,” Sakura said, tone of finality in her voice. “Absolutely done. He had his chance, and he rejected me.”

She descended on Yuji again, and this time he let her. She let up her hold on his chakra, and he returned her embrace whole-heartedly. They kissed passionately, their tongues meeting and then dueling, attempting to reach the opposite mouth. Sakura’s hand was already guiding Yuji’s hands to the proper destinations. Her other hand was lovingly stroking his crotch.

Leaning close, Sakura began to whisper in Yuji’s ear. She still pinned him down, not allowing him to get gun shy now. Not at this stage of the game.

“You’ve suffered enough because of that prophecy. Now you need to learn about pleasure. I’ll be teaching you, starting now.”

Yuji was tempted. Beyond tempted. But something held him back. Whether it was the prophecy or his own feelings as a human being, he couldn’t do it. This was wrong. Even if Sakura said she was ‘done’, it meant nothing until she and Naruto had spoken about it.

Sakura sensed Yuji’s hesitation. This time, she reacted with genuine annoyance. She sat up, arms crossed beneath her bosom, allowing him up.

“If you don’t accept this now, then we’re done. Forever. Even as master and servant.”

The words pierced Yuji like a sword. They were final words spoken from one who could command him. To follow one set of orders would mean disobeying one master; the other would be dishonoring another as well as himself.

Ultimately, honor was the final decision. Yuji would not dishonor himself. Not like this. And he would not betray Naruto. He’d promised to give up on Sakura, and give up he would. He looked at her with a sadness etched deep into his face. He didn’t say anything, and he didn’t need to. Sakura said it all.

“Then go.”

It didn’t matter that this place was assigned to Yuji as the servant of Sakura and Naruto. He would go, following his master’s sharp command.

-

The second he stepped outside, Yuji felt his innards ripping apart. His body was protesting the prophecy.

The link was breaking. Blood bubbled up from Yuji's throat. He covered his mouth, but the red, viscous fluid flowed through his fingers.

Clutching his stomach, he wobbled toward Tsunade's office. Along the way, a returning Ino, Choji, Shikamaru, and Kakashi ran into Yuji. His pain was evident enough that all of them pitched in. They tried to direct him to the hospital, but Yuji insisted on going to the Hokage's office. He was on one knee on the ground but still pulling himself toward the Hokage's office. Even though his eyes were narrowed in a wince the hazel in them was clear and focused. He knew where he needed to be and he was going to get there.

Kakashi saw that determination and took charge of the situation. "Choji, you'll debrief to Shizune while I escort Lady Hokage here. Shikamaru, you and Ino get him to the Hokage's office."

Everyone obeyed the order instantly. Yuji was now doubled over in pain, nearly on all fours, but doggedly trying to get to the Hokage's office.

Ino activated a Healing Palm Jutsu and tried to help Yuji, but he shook his head.

"It won't help. This isn't...normal pain."

Ino bit her lip, tears in her eyes forming in frustration. "Damn it! I can never help!"

Yuji thought for a moment that the tears were for him. But that didn't seem right. Ino had never shown even the vaguest interest in him romantically. So he looked to Shikamaru for confirmation.

"Ino, go let the guards know that Yuji has to get to the office without any delay. I'll escort him from here."

Ino wiped her tears on her arm, nodding silently. Apparently, whatever was bothering her was too troubling to argue. She took off ahead. Once she was out of earshot, Shikamaru got under Yuji's arm and got him upright. That seemed to ease the pain a bit. He was breathing a bit easier and moving a bit faster.

"What happened?" asked Yuji. That was all he needed to ask.

Shikamaru didn't meet Yuji's eyes, but kept moving forward. "Asuma-sensei was killed. She was right there and tried to use medical ninjutsu, but there was nothing she could do."

Yuji was shocked. He stopped dead and turned to Shikamaru. "My God. Man, Shikamaru, I'm so sorry! And- Oh God..."

Shikamaru recoiled a bit, thinking that Yuji was going to be sick. But that was not the case. Instead, Yuji dropped his head even farther into his chest.

"I'm a colossal @\$\$\$. What I just said to her..."

Shikamaru got the gist immediately. "It wasn't your fault. You didn't know. And besides, you didn't say

anything wrong.”

But Yuji was silent the rest of the way to the Hokage Mansion. Beyond the horrid semi-physical pain he was feeling he now shouldered a terrible guilt. He tried to push that aside for the moment- he had to focus- but Ino’s tear-stained face still bothered him.

-

Ten minutes later, everyone of importance was gathered in the Hokage’s office. Sakura, Naruto, and Kakashi were on one side of the room. On the other was Yuji, all by himself. He was still clearly in pain but he remained upright. He had bitten back his pain with something else. Something he never thought he’d feel toward Sakura.

Tsunade’s eyes slid to Yuji. She spoke as quietly as she could, allowing herself to be more meek than usual. This was just about the worst kind of situation. How did you tell someone that they failed through no real fault of their own?

This isn’t justice. Damn it! But there’s no choice.

“Yuji.”

Yuji looked to Tsunade, and for a moment a hot, red flash of chakra stung the air in the room. Yuji’s fists were balled; his knuckles were audibly cracking from the stress put on them. Yuji’s teeth were grinding together, shredding his enamel and lips. He didn’t speak or move beyond those slight anger-filled actions.

Better say it quickly, then Tsunade decided.

“The prophecy has been dissolved. Upon your dismissal by one of your masters, your duties to them are, as of this moment, finished. Your abilities as ‘Heaven’s Temper’ will be re-sealed into this scroll.”

If but a glance could kill, Sakura would have been dead. She could feel Yuji’s rage, and she knew it was directed at her. Yuji had once told her among the lowest things you could do was to mess with someone’s mate or mess with someone’s living. And now she’d done just that. Actually, she realized quickly, she’d done both. She’d messed with her own mate and ruined Yuji’s living.

By the time Sakura finished that train of thought, Yuji was pressing his personal seal to the scroll that had housed his special abilities. The red chakra receded into the scroll, and the power level in the room suddenly dropped.

Yuji stayed silent, his fists and teeth still the only visible signs of his anger. But his chakra had no bite now. He was but a pup yapping at bigger dogs with no ability to back up his threats. Only courtesy kept him rooted to his spot as his face reddened in shame.

Tsunade seated herself once more. She opened her mouth, said “Yuji...”, and then stopped. There was nothing she could do to console the boy now. His chakra had just shrunk by more than half, but his pure fury was still very evident to her. So she bit off any response and instead excused him.

Yuji bowed very slowly and deliberately, illustrating that he was still aware of social graces, no matter

how furious he was. Then he left.

-

Outside, Sakura meant to confront Yuji alone, but after seeing his body language and facial expressions, she could only object half-heartedly to her team's insistence they come along.

"Yuji!" she called out. "Wait up!"

Yuji ignored her, continuing his walk. He lit a cigarette; his first in a long time. None of the healthy chakra stuff tonight. Smoking made him feel both tough and disgusted with himself and the world. That resonated well with his mood.

The night was cold and clear. It needed rain, Yuji decided. He looked up to the sky, expecting it to somehow agree with him. The sky stayed its same dark blue with not even a hint of gray. Though he knew it wasn't true, Yuji couldn't help but feel as though the heavens had deserted him completely.

Finally, his match took and his cigarette lit successfully. Yuji took a long drag, ignoring the footsteps and voice getting closer and closer to him.

Sakura wasn't going to be deterred that easily. She jogged to catch up with him. Her hand grabbed his arm...

He spun around, his hand moving for her neck. Naruto caught his arm while Kakashi took his back, his hand poised just on the back of Yuji's neck. Yuji's hand stopped just before Sakura's neck, his outstretched fingertips just touching the smooth skin of her throat.

Sakura didn't move backward, though that was her first instinct. She stumbled over her words, eventually managing to say "I'm-" before Yuji cut her off.

"Don't. You've damned me. Now you just stay the hell away from me. I've got no chance against you or the rest of your team, but don't make the mistake of thinking that I won't fight just because I'm beaten. Because I will. And I promise you, I'm more dangerous now than I was before. Because now, I've got nothing to lose. So you just go ahead and put your hands on me again. Just try it."

Sakura was in tears now, but still tried to get her apology out. "I'm-"

"Save it," Yuji spat with an acid in his tone that shook everyone around. "I'm not interested in your apology. I'm not interested in seeing your face ever again."

Yuji nodded toward Naruto and Kakashi.

"These two might get me. They might kill me. But you know, I'd be fine with that. If they don't, someone else will. I just hope it happens sooner rather than later."

Kakashi had seen this sort of behavior once before. With Sasuke, for that matter. While he knew Yuji wouldn't pull anything like that, he still needed to settle down for his own sake.

"Alright," Kakashi drawled in his easy-going way, "Let's calm down and-"

Yuji jerked his neck forward, away from Kakashi's hand. "Calm down by yourself. And you-" he snapped, glaring at Naruto. "If you don't let go of me right now, you can precede me to hell."

Naruto was so stunned that he actually let go. It took a lot to surprise Naruto, but Yuji had just managed it.

"Now either clear out or take a swing at me. Any of you."

As one, Kakashi, Naruto and Sakura all took a step back. Yuji pushed his way through the three of them and continued onward. He stalked across a bridge, and halfway through lost his temper and stomped hard. Half the bridge was destroyed, but that only served to make Yuji more furious. Less than fifteen minutes ago, a stomp like that would have knocked a hole two hundred feet deep.

88 - Arc Xliiii: What If?- Chapter 2

Yuji didn't sulk. Not in the traditional sense of the word. But he was certainly mad enough to chew nails. People cut him a wide berth on the street. At the same time, they gave him looks of pity. They could feel the decrease in his power. He was now feared and pitied rather than respected and relied upon.

The one thing Yuji did do was actively find Ino. Once he did, he apologized to her. He was legitimately sorry for her loss of a sensei and friend, and he was even more sorry for how his words must have stung, spoken in unknowing ignorance.

Ino put on a brave face while Yuji apologized. She took what he said in context and thanked him sincerely for coming forward as he did. At the end, when each one was wondering how to end the awkward conversation, Ino told Yuji simply:

"If you need something, you know, you can always come to me. And Choji and Shikamaru, too. It isn't healthy to be alone all the time, you know?"

Yuji thanked her for the offer and left quickly and quietly, still looking for all the world like he would gladly paint the village with the blood of the next person who got in his way.

-

The second Yuji left, Ino walked out from behind the counter of the Yamanaka flower shop, folded her apron and placed it gently on the counter. She headed for Tsunade's office, hoping to find Sakura.

She was in luck, as Sakura was dealing with an arm full of files. She blinked in surprise at Ino's entry.

"Ino? Can I help you?" Shizune asked kindly. But she received no reply. Ino strode right past her toward Sakura.

"Ino?" Sakura asked, setting down the files on the Hokage's desk. "What's going on?"

SLAP!

Ino slapped Sakura in the face. Hard. Hard enough to drop her former rival to the ground. As Sakura stood up, staring in shock, Ino explained herself just the tiniest bit.

"I don't know what you did to cause that sweet boy to change into a demon, but it's unforgivable, Sakura. Unforgiveable. Shikamaru, Choji, and I were waiting to walk Yuji home last night. We gave you some space once we saw you approach Yuji. For him to brush you off...even threaten you..." Ino shook her head sadly. "No. Even in you apologized, we all can feel it. His chakra is practically gone from where it was. And it's your fault. Just stay away from Yuji. You've done enough damage."

Sakura tried to gather her bearings, calling out to Ino. Ino didn't turn her head, but she stopped long enough to say one more thing:

“Stay away from me, too. If you’d ruin a guy who would’ve done anything for you, who knows what you’ll do to a rival like me.”

--
--

Yuji wasn’t sure of what to do. For all his anger, he really had no direction for it. He’d made it clear that he wanted nothing to do with Team Kakashi. But what happened after that? And honestly, Naruto and Kakashi were just collateral damage. Yuji had no quarrel with them; he wanted to be sure one wasn’t created. They would have to defend Sakura, and then Yuji would have to defend himself if it came to that. No, it was best this way. He’d barked out his warning and they had agreed to back off.

So what happened next?

Without that chakra...What do I do with myself? I gave up any plans I had because my future was predetermined to such a large degree. I’m a jonin, so there should be work out there. But how strong am I, anyway? Did I rely on that other chakra too much? Did my own atrophy? I don’t think that’s possible, but still. What to do about all this just isn’t clear.

Ino’s words echoed in Yuji’s head. He hadn’t seriously considered taking her up on her offer, but he found that he really didn’t want to be alone. He was scared, he realized. Scared of himself. Afraid of what he’d do without his power. His confidence had been shaken and he had no idea how to rebuild it. Ino might, though; she always had plenty of confidence.

Yuji figured he could do worse than spend some time in the company of a pretty young lady. She was still grieving, and now he was, too. Yuji’s role had always been to be the supporter to Naruto and Sakura. Maybe he could still be support; just to a different group. Kakashi had assumed command of Asuma’s team. But he already had another team. Maybe Yuji could...

--

Shikamaru, Choji, and Ino were all fine with Yuji being in charge of their team. Lady Tsunade had whole-heartedly approved it, telling Yuji what a healthy step it was that he was putting himself out there so quickly.

From the start, Yuji made it clear that he was a placeholder. Shikamaru was the rightful heir to Asuma, and Yuji would do nothing to interfere with that. Until Shikamaru became a jonin, Yuji would handle at least the administrative end of the team.

The newly formed team met up in the Hokage’s office to hear their new mission. Fresh off a big victory over the Akatsuki, they were raring to go. Yuji was especially excited- he had to show people that he was the same Yuji; that he wasn’t shrinking away because he’d lost some power. What he couldn’t have from that prophecy he would earn himself through hard work. He knew that, at first, people would still pity him. They might even think that this was a charade on his part to act as if nothing happened. Not true. Life simply went on, even when you weren’t sure you wanted it to. You had to keep on going, and to Yuji, that was all this was.

Shizune delivered the mission, reading it aloud and summarizing it.

“...So essentially, there is supposed to be an uprising of Orochimaru followers. Criminals who weren't Akatsuki material that joined Orochimaru as the next best alternative. They're loyal only to doing whatever damage they can. They've recently attacked our allies in the Sand. Since the chunin exams need planning, we're killing two birds with one stone. Shikamaru will meet up with the Sand's representative while the rest of you will break up this group and arrest who you can.”

That was as good a mission as any for Yuji to get his feet wet as team leader. He'd really always worked more or less alone, so this was new for him. He'd certainly never had a team to command before. He was quietly thankful that Shikamaru would be otherwise occupied. He was sure Shikamaru would respect his decisions, but he didn't want to have to worry about handling a genius level intellect his first time out. Although if he was completely honest with himself, Yuji had another reason for wanting Shikamaru out of the picture.

More and more, Ino's kindness had weighed on Yuji's mind. Maybe there was something there. Friendship at least. He'd spent lots of time in the company of his new team and he had found them all to be great people. Yuji and Shikamaru had talked about strategy and history; Choji was always ready to go get a bite; Ino had been supportive and surprisingly sweet.

But could there be more? Ino had never been an interest of his before. She was fantasy fodder at most. She was hot rather than cute. Brash at times, always had the loudest voice. The exact opposite of Sakura. Maybe that helped Yuji's mindset, but beyond that he had learned how kind she could be. And with that, some of that outer layer of what Yuji had privately termed 'doginess' peeled off and revealed a person who might just be as beautiful on the inside as she was on the outside.

For a minute, Yuji considered that, as team leader, he shouldn't fraternize that way with one of his teammates. But then he considered that they were both adults, and she wasn't his student. They were co-workers. And dating a co-worker wasn't a sin or anything. And really, what good had come of just waiting around? He'd been knocked down again and again. And to hell with that at this point! He was thinking about her non-stop. He'd even quit smoking again so as not to make her think about Asuma. He always said he'd never alter his lifestyle for a girl, and now here he was. That had to mean something.

Sometime on this trip, I will ask Ino out. Yuji pledged to himself. I will do it for my happiness. That's it.

--

--

The mission itself was fairly easy. Orochimaru's experiments weren't all that impressive, and there wasn't all that many of them. Ino and Shikamaru teamed up, with Shikamaru performing a Shadow Possession Jutsu to trap an opponent, and Ino using the Yamanaka clan's Mind Destruction Jutsu to force on of Orochimaru's abominations against another. This trick was repeated several times while Choji and Yuji caused distractions by physically fighting with everyone else. The fight lasted maybe ten minutes this way.

The only injury was a shallow but very long cut Yuji had taken across his chest. He had shed his shirt partway through the battle and turned it into a bandage. Now that the dust had settled, he had time to get it treated properly. He was determined to tell Ino that she had been invaluable to this mission, too.

More than even Shikamaru, she blamed herself for Asuma's death. Shikamaru had responded by shouldering most of Asuma's responsibilities and becoming a highly respected shinobi. Choji was content to support his team, as he always had. Ino was the only one who hadn't really found a way to cope.

So, sitting in the tent the team had shared on the way to and from their mission's location, Yuji approached Ino. But to just congratulate her felt so...empty. He needed some sort of preamble. The answer was the increasingly bothersome wound on his chest.

"Ino, could I bother you to heal this? For all I know there could have been poison on that blade."

Ino had been distracted, or at least lost in thought, because her reply was a hollow 'Sure' that carried no emotion behind it.

Shikamaru and Choji had stepped out to keep watch for any enemies that might be approaching. Now was as good a time as any. So as Ino got to work on healing Yuji's chest, Yuji spoke up.

"You know, you really were the backbone of that mission. That jutsu of yours... You and Shikamaru make quite a combo on the battlefield."

Ino sort of grunted in reply, focusing on healing Yuji. So Yuji gulped a bit and continued.

"I really wouldn't have fit in without your help. And I'd like to thank you for that, not to mention healing me now. How about dinner sometime?"

It took a moment to sink in, but when it did Ino looked up quickly. She uncharacteristically fumbled for a reply, eventually coming up with "Yeah, sure. I'd like that."

Yuji gave her a grin and thanked her again. He got up as quickly as politeness would allow. He had to relieve Shikamaru and Choji, but even more so he wanted to get out there so he could congratulate himself. This was a major victory for him no matter what came of the date.

--

Ino had been taken aback by Yuji's rather sudden interest in her. She knew he valued strong, capable women. At this moment, she felt like none of those things. Her looks were fine- that much she knew, with no hint of modesty. But she seemed woefully inadequate in every other aspect.

Then it occurred to her- the slap. She had slapped Sakura in defense of Yuji. She had stepped up without really thinking about why. Sitting there in the comfortable semi-darkness of the tent, free for the moment from any company, she settled down on the ground to relax and think.

He's attractive enough. Young looking, but that's not bad. He's also older than I am by, what, six or so years? Is that a lot? Or maybe I'm misunderstanding his intentions. He could just be asking me out to thank me. That's something he would do, for that matter.

Shaking her head, Ino decided that she would go into this date assuming nothing. She would read Yuji's actions and react accordingly. She just didn't know where she wanted things to go.

He's hot and single. I'm hot and single. So maybe we'll just click.

89 - Arc Xliiii: What If?- Chapter 3

Yuji and Ino met at the appointed time outside of the Yamanaka flower shop. Ino had gone upstairs to get ready, though there wasn't that much to do from working the counter to getting ready. Ino liked to look her best at any given time. So it took her maybe fifteen minutes to get cleaned up to her satisfaction.

When she came down, she found her father, Inoichi, and Yuji chatting amiably. They knew each other from work. Yuji had spent time learning from Ibiki Morino when he was younger, and also from Inoichi. He had learned to interrogate prisoners physically and mentally, through genjutsu and the power of suggestion. It was an odd way to form a friendship, but it had. Inoichi wasn't very difficult to get along with. He never made excuses for his daughter, either. When she committed a transgression, he heard both sides of the story before passing any judgment.

Regardless of the history between her father and Yuji, she was grateful for the fact that they were on good terms. Yuji was somewhat older than she was. Not ridiculously so- five, six years- but it was still the sort of thing a father would likely appreciate being consulted about. Ino had talked to him already, and now Yuji was. Ino hadn't even suggested that Yuji speak with Inoichi, but apparently he realized that it was a valid idea.

"So I'll have her back by ten, sir?" Yuji joked around a thin smile. He was nervous; that much was evident. Ino hadn't had a curfew since she eighteen.

"As long as she doesn't come back pregnant. If she does, there'd better be a ring on her finger."

That didn't exactly help calm Yuji down, but Inoichi didn't realize just how deficient Yuji could be when it came to girls. He was plenty nervous and had been trying desperately not to think about sex.

Ino mercifully stepped in, smirking to Yuji and asking "Is he harassing you, Yuji? I swear, he just doesn't trust me!"

Inoichi rolled his eyes in response, nodding toward Ino's clothes. "Put on a longer skirt and I'll worry less."

That comment inadvertently drew Yuji's eyes to Ino's shapely (and largely bare) legs. He was failing miserably in his attempt to not think about sex. He had to force himself back into the moment. Mentally slapping himself, he asked:

"Ready to go?"

Ino moved to stand next to him. "Sure am."

Yuji lifted the flap covering the door, holding it open for Ino, and off they went.

--

It was no surprise that Yuji was a perfect gentleman. Holding doors, letting Ino go through doorways first, offering an arm when going up or down stairs, etc. Ino found that she liked the treatment. At first, maybe it was a bit off-putting. But once she realized that Yuji was doing this because she was special and not because she was female, she settled in and enjoyed his chivalry.

They had chosen a small, relatively quiet teahouse. The food was good, the tea better, and the company the real reason anyone came here. It was the best place to get to know your date.

Yuji and Ino exchanged some cursory conversation over a pot of green tea. Their conversation continued pleasantly during the meal. When it came time to desert, a conflict arose. Neither one wanted desert, but if they declined desert then the date was effectively over and they would part ways. Neither one liked that option very much. They weren't in love, but they were very much good friends with romantic possibilities.

Reluctantly, they both agreed on desert. They took as much time as possible while eating it, not wanting this date to end just yet.

--
--

Yuji and Ino got together several more times. The second date had been much like the first. On the third date, Yuji took the plunge and kissed Ino goodnight- on the cheek. The fourth date, Ino made it clear that Yuji's aim needed work. On date five, six, and seven, they practiced their kissing techniques with increasing regularity and intensity.

By date ten, it was clear that the attraction wasn't going away. At the end of the date, Ino stopped Yuji on a dark street corner not far from her house.

"I don't want to go home tonight. Maybe your place is better?"

As she spoke, Ino's left hand wound around Yuji's waist. Her right hand ran up and down his chest, and her mouth nibbled busily at Yuji's ear. Yuji put an arm around her shoulders, the other holding the hand that was running up and down his chest.

"My place it is."

Ino kissed him then, smiling all the while. She was proud of how these dates had gone. As her tongue slipped into his mouth and he made a small sound of surprise and consent, she thought about how wonderful it was going to be to really be with him. Dating was one thing- this was quite another. Once they stumbled through the door of his apartment and they began to disrobe themselves and each other with passion rather than lust, Ino knew this had been the right move.

And the right person, too.

--
--

Ino woke up first, feeling a pair of arms around her. She had been using Yuji's arm as a pillow when she woke up while she had thrown both her arms around Yuji's neck. The last thing she remembered doing

last night was cradling Yuji's face in her breasts, then sliding her head onto his chest while he held her close. There had been a spark, and it had nothing to do with the skill with which each shared movement was performed. Yuji had some learning to do. But the way he acted; the way he treated her; the courtesy which he showed her even during sex...there was something so appealing about that to Ino. Some dismissed her as a tramp and treated her as such. There was none of that with Yuji.

When Yuji woke up a few minutes later, he immediately pulled Ino tight to him. Her skin was so warm and inviting that he couldn't help but bury his head in her shoulder. Ino turned her head so that her long blonde hair fell like a curtain around both their faces. She gently kissed and nibbled at the back of his neck, her fingers tracing his spine.

"I need to thank you," Yuji mumbled into her shoulder. He wanted to speak more freely but was reluctant to leave the warmth of her neck and shoulder. He kissed her neck gently; she arched her neck in pleasure, making a small sound of contentment.

"Thank me? For what? Last night? 'Cause if that's it, sex is a two way street, so..."

Yuji shifted so he could talk to her a little better. He took her hand, but that didn't satisfy her. She pushed him down onto his back and pushed herself close to him, using his chest as a pillow.

"I need to thank you...for not ever looking at me with pity."

His voice was labored with emotion; so much had been conveyed to Ino before his words even settled. The peak of sadness in his voice; the subtle quiver that she had known him just long enough to pick up on- that had all spoken volumes.

"Pity? Why would I pity you?" she asked, crossing one of her legs over his.

"My chakra is all but gone compared to where it was. I'll never see that level of power again. And my position with the village is unstable. They don't know what to do with me. I'm like a ticking time bomb to them now. Lady Tsunade wants to trust me, but she can't bring herself to endanger the village on me."

At this, Ino got up and sat on Yuji's chest, straddling him, and affording him a peek at paradise. She leaned close and held his chin in both hands. She could see his eyes had recently moistened.

"Listen to me. Your chakra does not define you. If all it took to measure a man was chakra, then Orochimaru, or Itachi Uchiha, or someone like that would be the best who ever lived. Lord Hokage- The Third Hokage; your master- was chosen because he was kind, compassionate, and an effective leader. Not because his chakra was enormous.'

Ino stood up, still straddling Yuji. She went about locating her panties and a shirt (she eventually settled on Yuji's). One she had covered up a bit and let him think about that, she gave him one more bit of wisdom.

"You aren't bound by that prophecy anymore. You lost some chakra, yes, but it wasn't yours to begin with. Now you can define yourself. You're a servant to no one but you."

Ino paused, a smirk playing on her lips. She knew Yuji all too well, so she couldn't resist adding,

“And to me, of course.”

Finally his stoic face cracked a grin. “Of course.”

Satisfied, Ino held out her hand to help Yuji out of the futon they had shared that last. She loved seeing his toned, naked body- especially when it was sweat covered. Sweat that she could be proud of having caused, she thought with a wry grin.

“How about letting me scrub your back?” Yuji asked, seemingly out of nowhere. “A shower is the best way to wake up, after all. Especially after a good workout, right?”

Ino immediately stripped again, flinging her panties and the shirt she had borrowed aside carelessly. It was his turn to gaze in wonder. At times like these, Ino knew her compulsive diets were worth it. His gaze was fixed on her. Slender legs, tight little tummy, femininely muscled arms, and finally on her beautiful face.

Well, okay, that comes naturally.

Later that day, when she returned to Yamanaka Flowers after a solo mission, Ino would find a box of assorted sweets. The attached card simply read “Smart and beautiful? I’m one lucky guy, and it’s all thanks to you”.

--

“You know it’s unfair, right?” Yuji muttered, glancing at the flower shop. He and Ino had just met after some team training. He had walked her home after their practice.

“Huh? What’s unfair?”

“You work in a flower shop. What do I get you for a gift? On the off-chance I ever manage to work my way into your doghouse, not to mention birthdays, anniversaries...”

Ino had to laugh. She had never considered that before. It was sooo like Yuji to think of something like that.

“Well,” she said thoughtfully, “You should get stuff we both enjoy. You know... ‘enjoy’...”

Yuji’s eyebrow went up- he wasn’t so stupid that he didn’t get the innuendo. And he had gotten good enough to throw one back now and again.

“How about you enlighten me some more on things we could enjoy together? Specifically, I mean.”

Ino kissed him on the cheek, not daring to go farther in case her father was home. “Use your imagination. At least, until I get cleaned up. Then we’ll try it in real time.”

“Sounds good to me.”

--

--

Yuji and Ino's relationship wasn't merely physical. They each tried interests the other had, with some mixed results. Yuji's horrific skill while attempting Ikebana matched Ino's attempts at archery. But Ino cooking Yuji's favorite foods went well as Yuji sought to master the art of the tea ceremony. They both excelled at calligraphy, which they had taken up together.

Yuji's team didn't suffer at all for the relationship he was having with Ino. He never favored her and she never expected favoritism. The team worked well together. Yuji, however, was still keeping himself distant. He was unsure of his role. Being a placeholder, he didn't want to get too involved. His job was basically to supervise Shikamaru as he learned the nuances of being a team leader from an administrative standpoint. But what did he do after that?

Ino made him happy. But that was where his happiness ended. His self-worth was tied to his job, and therefore was suffering. He couldn't ask Lady Tsunade to trust him further yet. And the looks of pity he still got...

It was while leaving the Hokage's office after a mission report that would remind him just how far things were from how he expected them.

He'd ignored Sakura as usual. This time, Naruto was there. He followed Yuji out and requested to talk.

Naruto looked uncomfortable as he tried to speak his mind to Yuji. "Look, can't you forgive Sakura? She hasn't been herself. It's starting to affect her during missions and stuff...so can you please just-"

"No."

Naruto had never heard a word spoken so sharply by Yuji. He snapped his gaze up. He could feel Yuji's chakra becoming agitated. It felt so faint and distant compared to before...and angry. No. Beyond angry. Furious. Just shy of destruction.

"Anything further?"

Naruto's response was automatic, and he instantly regretted it. "Why are you being such a jerk about this? She made a mistake. Anyone could have-"

In an instant, Yuji was in front of Naruto. He grabbed the younger boy by the neck and held him up, rage etched on his face.

"NOT 'ANYONE' DID! SHE DID! THE ONE WITH COMMAND OVER MY FATE DESTROYED MY LIFE!"

Yuji and Naruto had garnered plenty of attention, but no one dared interfere. Naruto snapped his hand down across Yuji's wrist to escape the death grip Yuji had on his neck.

"Look, I get it, okay?" Naruto said calmly, massaging his neck. "I understand. The demon fox-"

Yuji's voice came out in a low snarl. "You still have it's power. You know the wonderful, damning effect power has. Everyone wants it. But your power...it can't be taken away with mere words, can it? Your

power is not so flimsy, dependent on someone else.”

Naruto couldn't think of what to say. Yuji turned and left, with the people that had gathered cutting him a path. Their stares and whispered words...The tenderness and warmth of Ino seemed so distant now.

Naruto put a hand on Yuji's shoulder.

“Let go.”

“You have to forgive her! For the good of the village!”

“Let go.”

“You know how important it is! Prophecy or not, she's a healer!”

“Let go. Now.”

“Damn it, do it for the village! So you lost some power! So did the whole village! When the Third Hokage died! But we rebuilt! Look at what's happened! You can rebuild, too!”

Yuji turned his head to face Naruto. His stare was icy and completely hostile.

“Some things can't be rebuilt. That chakra will never return. The power; the abilities...they're gone and cannot be regained. And as for Yuji...well, he's dead, too. Shattered into ten thousand pieces. Now, let go or we're going to fight.”

Naruto didn't let go. He needed Yuji to apologize to Sakura. It was eating her up.

Yuji's fist swung toward Naruto. But to Naruto, it looked like it came in slow motion. He dodged backward easily. That made matters worse, as Yuji realized what had happened. They were now so uneven...Naruto was so far out of reach...

“I will not apologize!” Yuji shouted at the top of his lungs. His throat stung with the force of the scream. The frustration, the anger- it all came bubbling up. “I will die before I apologize!”

“Others might die! Dammit, don't you see?! If she's off, she can't heal anyone!”

“What do the others have to do with me? If she were any sort of medic, she could handle this. Instead, she clings to Sasuke's afterimage. If you were any sort of man, you'd be offended by that!”

Now it was Naruto's turn to get angry. He tried to control it, remembering who he was dealing with.

“Look, you know better than anyone what she means to me. If you're going to insult her, then it'll be over my dead body!”

“I'd rather not, but if you don't back off now, you'll get the best of what I've got. The prophecy means nothing to me anymore.”

There was no avoiding the fight now.

90 - Arc XlIiii: What If?- Chapter 4

Yuji charged again. Naruto responded with a hard punch. Yuji's fighting instincts were such that even in rage he could fight to a good capacity. He parried the punch and returned with one of his own. They were in close, so Yuji threw his head forward into Naruto's. The hit stunned Naruto, and Yuji's fist cracked him in the side of the jaw. Naruto went down, but now he'd lost his patience. This wasn't going to stay a fistfight much longer.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Yuji didn't even wait for Naruto to finish the jutsu. Instead, he charged right in, pushing Naruto's crossed hands across his chest with one hand, then punched him in the stomach with the other. The clones still formed, but Naruto himself was sent sailing. He rolled to his feet quickly while Yuji dealt with the other clones.

"RASENGAN!"

One Rasengan came from every direction as the clones joined in. Yuji leapt high into the air, over the attacks. He caught just the end of the attack, so he spun a bit before hitting the ground hard on his stomach. He immediately grabbed a Naruto- clone or real body, he didn't know- and pulled him down to the ground with him. He held Naruto's leg's apart with his hands, then vaulted between them, planted both feet on his nemesis' stomach and getting out of the center of the Narutos. The clone he'd stomped on disappeared. He pivoted to face the group, guard up.

Naruto ran at Yuji full-tilt, his clones following him. Yuji threw punches at whoever came closest. Naruto managed to hit him hard in the stomach. Yuji kicked Naruto's leg viciously in retaliation even while throwing an elbow into the face of a clone coming from behind.

After a struggle, the clone managed to trap Yuji's arms behind his back. Naruto stood in front of him, nose and mouth bloodied and one eye blackened. Both boys were panting with the effort of the fight.

"Will you apologize to her? I don't want to hurt you!"

Yuji opened his mouth to say something. But he snapped it closed and shook his head. "I won't discuss this any more. I wish her loyalty ran as deep to me as mine does to her."

Something about that sentence didn't sound right. Naruto replayed what Yuji had just said in his mind. After a moment, it became clear what was off.

"Does"? You sound like you're still doing something...still being loyal to her."

"Read into what you want," Yuji spat. But his tone gave him away. He had given Naruto a clue, and now he wished he could take it back. All his contempt for Sakura; all his hatred at this moment- it was all suddenly not worth it. He had never explained to anyone why the prophecy had dissolved the way it had. Oh, that it had been broken, sure. And that Sakura had been the one to break it, yes. But never the

events that led up to it. He had decided that telling Naruto wouldn't be right, but that decision never sat well with him. It just seemed like Sakura's responsibility.

Until now.

He, Yuji, had responded to Sakura. In a moment of weakness, he had welcomed her kisses. He immediately rejected anything further, but that moment had weighed on him. Ino didn't need to know (though Yuji was going to tell her regardless) as they weren't a couple at that point; their relationship was legitimate and unaffected by what had happened. But Naruto deserved to know. This wasn't fair to him.

"...It's not for me to tell. Talk to Sakura and ask her why this happened," Yuji told Naruto finally. "Now let's continue our fight."

Yuji dropped to his knees suddenly, swimming out of the clone's grasp. He turned on his knees and punched the clone in the stomach. He pushed off, sailing in low and hard and tackling Naruto. Tangled up they fell backward into the wall of a building. The boys began to trade punches. It was more a fistfight than a battle between two shinobi. But gradually, Yuji noticed that he was getting the better of Naruto without really hurting him.

Pity again?!

"That's it, damn it! Naruto, if you don't hit me for real-"

But whatever Yuji was going to say was stopped as a hand was placed firmly on his shoulder from behind. He turned, ready to strike, only to find Lady Tsunade standing there. She grip and face both were firm, but not angry. There was understanding in her eyes.

"Come with me," she ordered calmly. "Both of you."

--

Sakura was standing in the corner, waiting for Lady Tsunade to return. Shizune waited with her, an protective arm around her.

"It will all work out, Sakura. You'll see. Those two can't stay angry forever. Really, I think there's a lot of respe- oh my!"

Tsunade was escorting Naruto and Yuji in. Both boys were beat up from their brawl. Sakura moved toward them instinctively. Yuji backed up, his body language serving as a warning to her outstretched hand. She pulled back her hand, not surprised but still hurt. Instead, she went to Naruto and healed his scrapes, watching Yuji out of the corner of his eye.

Yuji didn't look at all like usual. He looked like a stray dog. He barred his fangs and cringed away, all but audibly growling in warning. He was bruised and scraped, his clothing torn and hair mussed, unlike his usual self.

Yuji backed into a corner and just watched silently. He kept his eyes on everyone warily, glancing back

and forth. Shizune came near him slowly and calmly. He let her approach but declined being healed. Even as he lit a cigarette his eyes stayed up.

Once the boys had settled in, Tsunade looked at everyone present. Shizune was her most faithful servant and friend; Sakura was a budding apprentice. Naruto was in line to be Hokage someday at the rate he was learning. That left Yuji.

Tsunade bit her thumb while deep in thought. She had no idea what to do with her troubled jonin. Working with Asuma's former team had done a world of good for him, but it was clear that it was a temporary spot. For someone as alienated as Yuji that was hardly helpful. But where to put him? What to do with him?

Not to mention that she could hardly have her top people fighting like this. So she decided to establish her position on all this now.

"I don't know what led to this hostility. It isn't up to me to find out," Tsunade told them all in a low, firm voice. She made eye contact with everyone. A measure of her chakra floated out, touching each one of them. She 'felt' each one of them and their chakra. All except Yuji. She found that sensing him was difficult. That was likely due to his diminished chakra capacity.

"However, this cannot continue. I will not have my eventual successor brawling in the street-."

Too late. He noticed that. I shouldn't have said that.

"Successor?!" exclaimed Naruto. "You mean it, Grandma?!"

Sakura chimed in, "That's great, Naruto! Congratulations!"

There was a silence where there should have been a comment. It was noticed unconsciously at first, but then became more clear. Involuntarily, everyone in the room turned to Yuji. He looked back at each person and it was plain that he didn't feel welcome here. He wouldn't leave until dismissed- he wasn't impolite- but he made no comment either.

Tsunade cleared her throat to speak, but there were no words. She had no idea what to say.

When the silence didn't remedy itself, Yuji spoke up. His voice was flat, though his words were polite. "May I be excused?"

Tsunade nodded solemnly. She had made a bad situation worse, and worse yet had no idea as yet how to remedy it.

"Yuji, wait-" Sakura said, forgetting that she no longer had any means of making him obey.

"I don't answer to you anymore. You'd do well not to forget that." He made eye contact with her for only a moment, then bowed to Tsunade and Shizune in turn. To Naruto, he gave a slightly abbreviated bow.

"Congratulations, Hokage-elect."

The chill didn't leave the room until well after Yuji was gone.

--

Ino bounded toward Yuji, arms spread wide for a hug. He opened his arms, but she pulled up short. She had seen the look on his face before he could hide it.

"What's wrong? I've never seen you look like that before!"

Yuji closed his eyes, exhaling heavily. "It's nothing. Nothing to worry about. Or rather, nothing that I can talk about yet. I'm not sure myself what's bothering me."

For a minute, a genuine smile glowed on Yuji's face. He picked Ino up around the waist and pulled her tight to his chest. She spread her legs and wrapped them around his torso, pulling her pelvis into him further. She shimmied up him a bit until his hands cradled her buttocks. Her head was now even with his shoulder and she leaned forward to whisper in his ear.

"I wish there was more I could do for you, Yuji. I really wish..."

"No, you do plenty. When I'm with you, I'm happy. More than happy. I just can't come to terms with what's happened, that's all. But I will. I promise I will."

The lust left their embrace for the moment, replaced by genuine affection. Ino wanted to make Yuji's pain go away. His pain was her pain. No matter how he tried to hide it, she could feel it.

"Ino?"

"Mmm?" she mumbled into his neck.

"I love you."

--

Ino lay on her bed, upstairs from the flower shop. It was late, but she couldn't sleep. She thought over and over about Yuji's words. He had said that he loved her, and she hadn't ever been so happy. But the pain that caused him to say those words bothered her. She had no doubt he was being genuine. But the thought of someone she loved being hurt really bothered her. For once, there were others to consider. Taking care of herself wasn't good enough anymore; now there was someone else. And no matter what- no matter how many hugs or kisses, or even how much sex she threw at the problem there was no solution.

Ino clutched a stuffed toy to her chest, rubbing her face in the soft material. It was a stuffed dog Yuji had given her, and it was by far her favorite. As she hugged and squeezed the plush toy she realized just how much Yuji meant to her. To say 'love' was one thing; to mean it another. Love meant sacrifice and dedication. But Yuji had asked nothing of Ino nor she of him.

Love meant two lives becoming one. They'd connected, but how deep?

Ino put the toy down, threw on a coat over her bra and panties and tossed on her sandals. This couldn't

wait until morning. She thought she knew what to do for Yuji. After all the thought she'd put in, she hoped the solution would work.

--

Yuji opened his door and Ino bustled in.

"Are you alone?" she asked as soon as she walked in the door.

Yuji seemed a little alarmed by her tone. Worried, "Yes. What's going on?"

Ino threw her coat off and leapt at Yuji. He caught her awkwardly and they both went sprawling to the floor. Ino's hands immediately sought out Yuji's clothes and ripped them away, leaving him in just a pair of black trunks. Once she had him sufficiently stripped, she simply sat on top of him and began to speak in an authoritative tone.

"We're going on a trip. Together. We have no missions scheduled, so you and I are going on vacation."

She left no room for argument. Reaching back, she unhooked her bra and tossed it over his face. She did it for the sole purpose of keeping his attention. And she did- big time.

"Pack clothes. For both of us. I know I left some things here. Pack your favorites. You leave the travel arrangements up to me. Got it?"

Before Yuji could even nod in reply, Ino left, pausing only to put on her coat and button it up.

Yuji's body was always truthful with him- his girlfriend going outside almost naked was a huge turn on. Amused, he set about packing.

--

--

Ino couldn't have chosen a more beautiful spot. It was only a few hours away from Konoha, but it could have been a few lifetimes away and still been worth it. Konoha itself was scenic, but this place was something more.

A large, enclosed pond greeted the couple. It was fed by an enormous waterfall on the opposite side from where the two currently stood. All around the outside of the pond was lush greenery and thick forest. The place was pristine; completely unspoiled by anything. The splendor of nature was at their fingertips.

"Ino...my God, it's beautiful!" exclaimed Yuji. He didn't know where to look first. He had insisted on carrying both his duffel bag and Ino's for the majority of the trip. He set them down and began to wander around.

Ino watched him with satisfaction. Just a few minutes here and her boyfriend was already much more relaxed. She hadn't told him much about this trip and what she had planned. Really, though, her plan was simple. She knew of two things that made Yuji happy for sure.

“Yuji, I’m going to set up camp, okay? Will you get some wood for a fire?”

The two set about their chores. Ino, having been here before, knew just the place to camp. There was a cave cut into the side of the huge stone base of the waterfall. It was large enough to be roomy but small enough to be cozy. And it got a little chilly at night.

Nothing to do about that but to cuddle by the fire. Oh, and body heat. Plenty of that, too.

Yuji returned shortly with enough wood for a week or so. He set the wood down in a neat pile. Ino had finished setting up their sleeping area. She moved to Yuji and held him around the waist. He reciprocated, gazing at her eyes. That had always felt silly to him, but he suddenly found Ino’s blue eyes fascinating.

“Want me to tell you why we’re here?” Ino asked playfully.

“I am a bit curious, yes.”

Ino smiled. She reached down and unbuttoned her top. In one motion, she pulled it off and tossed it aside. Then she took Yuji’s shirt and pulled it over his head.

“We’re here for two things, Yuji,” she informed him, unhooking her bra and dropping it near her shirt. She thrust her chest forward until her skin was flush against his. She loved how he blushed every time she did this sort of thing. She could no longer call him an ‘innocent boy’- she was secretly proud of that fact, as she’d been the one to corrupt him, so to speak- but there was still an underlying sweetness to him.

“Those two things are simple, and neither one requires a shirt. We’re here for training and sex. In whatever order you please.”

Yuji had no idea what to say. So Ino smiled and dropped the rest of her clothing, including her sandals, into the little pile at the edge of her sleeping bag. She stood before Yuji completely naked and unashamed.

“Well? You aren’t going to make your girlfriend be naked all by herself, are you? ‘Cause going for a swim will bet pretty lonely without you...”

Managing a small smirk, Yuji protested that he ‘didn’t have a swimsuit’. Ino solved that problem by helping him realize that his birthday suit doubled as a swimsuit.

“Is THAT what the kids are wearing these days?”

Ino grinned happily. “Only the cool kids. Now, come on. First a swim, and then we’re going to try something.”

91 - Arc Xliiii: What If?- Chapter 5

Ino had done her research. Sex and training was indeed on the menu, but there was a greater purpose.

She had tracked down every superstition, every herb, every bit of information she could on chakra expansion since Yuji had become her boyfriend. This place was untouched by man, lending nature energy. Chakra was natural, so the place was right, as was the drinking water. The native fruits in this area were imported from a foreign country, and they stimulated that country's version of chakra. Finally, there was sex itself. That wasn't just for Yuji, but it did help. Sex was more natural than most parents would lead their children to believe. Sex could lower fevers and cure colds; soothe anxiety and even boost chakra. As far as Ino was concerned, that was all side effects to an already pleasant past time.

Yuji wasn't a great swimmer, but Ino had to get him in the water. Ultimately, she wanted to get him under the waterfall. For some reason, it was hot to see her wet, naked boyfriend meditating under a waterfall. For another, meditation aided troubled minds and could even raise chakra when done properly. So after a twenty minute swim, Ino suggested they start training by 'clearing their minds through meditation'.

They knelt next to each other, so close their knees and sides touched. The water was cold but also bracing as a result. Meditation came naturally in such a beautiful, peaceful place.

After a half hour of that, the couple decided by tacit agreement to train until they were dry. Yuji taught Ino some obsolete exercises he did to keep in shape and to learn history. They worked these exercises until their bodies were wet with sweat rather than water. That led them back into the water, but this time only up to their ankles so they could wash. Wash each other, more accurately.

Once that was done and they had toweled off, Yuji had Ino lay down on her stomach. She raised an eyebrow, immediately turned on (was he finally going to take charge?). Then she felt his hands kneading her shoulders, neck, and back. He was by no means a pro, but the contact felt great. While Yuji worked his way down to Ino's lower back, he began to talk.

"I owe so much to you, Ino. I don't know how I would have dealt with all this without you. You really saved me. I was so far into despair I didn't know if I'd ever get out. But to have someone care about me this much...to go this far to make me happy. It just means so much..."

Yuji's hands were soon replaced by his lips. Her neck, back, shoulders, buttocks- everything was fair game. Ino didn't move nor did she desire to move. Not until the kisses stopped. Then she rolled over to make sure they continued. Yuji had paused while straddling Ino. Her arms reached up and around his head, pulling him down for a passionate kiss. She spread her legs, using one to snake around Yuji's legs to guide him into a better position.

"I love you, Ino. I love you so much."

As Yuji's mouth went to her breast, she gasped. It took a moment for her to speak.

"If you love me, don't you stop there!"

"I won't. I don't think I could."

They connected, and Ino felt a surge of love for Yuji. "I love you, too!"

They eventually made their way to their cave where they fell asleep in each other's arms in the light of a small fire.

--

--

After a two weeks of training, meditation, chakra treatments, and sex, Ino could tell that she'd managed to make a happy man of Yuji. She could feel his chakra and she could tell that it was growing. It was still growing, as though a work in progress. Mission accomplished, she decided. She would have to continue to nurture his chakra. Even if it took a lifetime, it would be worth it. And they could have plenty of fun along the way. So far, there'd be plenty of fun. She wondered what Yuji's favorite bit of fun was.

I wonder if it was the Mind Destruction Jutsu? I bet my dad never thought to use it quite like that! And good ol' submissive Yuji loved it, too.

For all her planning regarding Yuji, she'd gotten stronger, too. He was a good teacher and had a lot of knowledge to pass on. That was important to her; she wanted to be a woman he could respect. But even more than that, they'd connected so deeply that Ino couldn't imagine life without him.

With renewed vigor, Yuji returned to Konoha. It was nearly time for him to turn control of the team over to Shikamaru. His own future was a bit uncertain now, but Ino had cured him of the worst of his self flagellation. With his chakra growing and his mental strain lightened, he could think clearly again.

Yuji formally wrote up his recommendation that Shikamaru be placed in command of the 'Asuma Cell', named so in memory of it's first commander. It took Tsunade all of two seconds to stamp the paper with her seal of approval. After she did, she looked up at Yuji. She saw less tension in his eyes. She had to admit, she'd been skeptical of Ino's plan when Ino had proposed it, but she could feel his chakra growing.

That doesn't typically happen. The amount you're born with doesn't grow except in proportion to your body. But maybe Ino's treatment combined with the unnatural 'hole' left in him from losing the Heaven's Temper chakra really worked.

"Very well," she said aloud. "I've approved it, along with Shikamaru's promotion to Jonin. That just leaves me to wonder what to do with you now."

Yuji shrugged a little bit. "I'm really not sure myself what I'd like to do. I'd thought about an extended assignment in Sunagakure, but that was before Ino. At the same time, I have nothing to add to the teamwork of Shikamaru's cell, and they already have a Jonin commander."

They sat in silence for a few moments, each of them debating their own thoughts quietly. Yuji broke the silence:

"I apologize for that disruption a couple weeks ago. With Naruto. It was unprofessional, and if there are any consequences for me, or for him as well, I freely accept them."

Tsunade waved the apology and suggestion both away. "No, no, the outside circumstances led to that. As for Naruto, he's been punished enough. Sakura told him the truth about what caused you to lose your chakra."

Yuji's jaw dropped. "She told him? But I swore I would keep that secret! Why would she tell him?"

"She felt guilty, Yuji. She'd done an awful thing to you. When you couldn't accept her apology, she decided that, as penance, she'd tell Naruto herself."

"So I broke them up by keeping her secret?"

"No, no, there was no break up. Don't misunderstand," Lady Tsunade said with a smile. "No, Naruto understood, actually. They had grown distant. When he realized that he had come so close to losing her, it motivated him to talk to her more. And they worked things out, and are closer than ever."

A strong gust of wind kicked up, sending some of Tsunade's papers sailing across the office. She and Yuji scrambled around, trying to grab them before they flew out a window. In their haste to catch the rogue paperwork, Yuji bumped a small shelf. A white scroll tied with a black cord fell to his feet. He picked it up and handed it to Tsunade. She took it from him as he busied himself with putting the papers back on her desk. She read the label and gasped to herself.

"Yuji...this scroll is for you. From Lord Third."

Yuji's head snapped up, his face a mask of disbelief. Tsunade held the scroll out to him, and he took it with a grateful nod. He'd missed the Third Hokage terribly when he was sure he was alone in the village. The old man had been both friend and mentor to him. With trembling hands and held breath, Yuji unfurled the scroll. It read:

Kimihiro,

I realize that by the time you open this, I will be dead. Orochimaru must be stopped, and it is my life that is the price. I hope you understand why I didn't allow you to accompany me into battle against you. Your life is precious, Yuji. While my own son was gone, you stayed by my side. Your loyalty never wavered, and I have no doubt that someday you will be a cornerstone of this village.

Regarding the prophecy: Should it never come to pass, or should that prophecy be broken, you must not lose heart. If you fall, so does one more of the pillars of this village. We've seen far too much devastation and destruction already. Whoever is named leader after me must be strong; whoever supports him or her must be stronger still. He or she will inherit the obvious burden. You whom I have trusted to do the unglamorous work will play a vital role. I pray that someday your role become obvious and the credit you are due is given to you. That will not come in the role of a servant, I'm afraid. But your time will come. You will be called upon as a leader; as someone trusted.

I remind you now of words you spoke to me once.

“My future? Well, I won’t pretend that I can be Hokage. Maybe I can be the one under the Hokage. I guess...well, I’d like to be trusted. That’s all. I’d like to be important.”

Kimihiko, you are already trusted and you are already important. Do not forget that. Your Will of Fire will grow stronger. It must grow stronger. The village will undoubtedly fall on hard times. The threat of the Akatsuki will grow. The threat of those who wish my place will grow. You are the shadow within the shadow. All know you, yet none would suspect you. Your hands may become dirtied, but whatever else, protect this village. Your youth and strength...if I’d had them, this letter may never have been necessary. But because of the way fate had led me, I must turn these objectives over to you.

Protect the village against Danzo. His ambitions are unworthy of the title ‘Hokage’ which he covets so greatly.

Protect the village against the Akatsuki. I have no doubt that you will face them in combat some day.

You are generous, kind, and always ready to sacrifice yourself. If the time ever comes to do so, do not do so hastily. You have but one life to give to your village. One life that will not be easily replaced, regardless of what you believe.

Above all, Kimihiko, please remember that I loved you as a grandfather loves his grandson. As I prepare for my final battle, I will keep our time together precious. May you live to a good old age and die in your own time, with many loved ones at your side. Your path is a lonely one- that much I can foresee. But I can also see that you will find someone to accompany you. A female that is strong and beautiful, whose dedication to you will never waver. Your dedication will never come into question. So take heart: The journey may be lonely and demanding for a time, but everything will, in the end, work out for the best.

If you need advice, seek out my students. Jiraiya and Tsunade will likely be fond of you and more than willing to help.

With best regards and respect,

*Hiruzen Sarutobi
Third Hokage*

-

Yuji stared at the scroll, tears running down his cheeks. His expression was one of shock. He never knew that the Third Hokage had thought so highly of him! This bit of guidance was so welcome as to be overwhelming.

“My Lady...what would the Third Hokage have me do? You spent more time with him than I did.” Yuji sniffled, wiping his tears away on his sleeve, feeling very much like a child but not caring one bit. His master had thought of him as someone to be trusted and even loved. Yuji had been too young to understand then, back when this was written. Now the power of the emotions hit him hard.

Tsunade looked out at the stone faces of the Hokages. It still surprised her that her own face, etched in

stone stared back at her. It brought a smile to her face all the same. But today, her gaze centered on Sarutobi-sensei's face.

"Yuji," Tsunade said slowly, "I think that he would have told you to find your place by doing what you're good at."

"What am I good at?" Right now, Yuji felt like he wasn't good at anything specific. Just a good person in general. Or he at least tried to be.

"I think you're best at organizing others. Taking charge. Or at least, advising the person who is in charge. Were I you, I would seek out those in charge of the areas that fascinate you. Shikaku Nara, for example, is the head of the Jonin Squad. Speaking to him might be a good place to start."

Yuji nodded slowly, turning that over in his mind. That wasn't a bad idea. And maybe...

"It's too bad I won't get to do what Lord Third thought was best for me," Yuji muttered to himself. Tsunade wasn't sure she was supposed to hear that, so she kept quiet. But Yuji kept going, apparently fine if she overheard.

"An advisor to the Hokage would have been a nice position. But that won't be possible. By the time I get the required experience, the title will be Naruto's."

"You have no intention of forgiving them?"

Tsunade had asked a fair question. Yuji wasn't sure how to answer. He found he wasn't as furious anymore- until he really thought about what he'd lost because of a few stupid words. At no point was he at fault for what happened to him, and that was the most difficult thing to accept.

"I'll forgive them. I'll forgive them sincerely. But some things you just don't forget, My Lady. Things can't go back to being like they were. I can't go back to being a servant to them."

There was nothing more to be said. Yuji asked Lady Tsunade if she would join him for tea sometime. As the Third Hokage's students, they had a lot to discuss. Tsunade accepted, and Yuji went on his way.

Just outside the door, Kakashi, Naruto, Sakura, and Sai were heading in to see Tsunade. Sai, Kakashi, and Yuji exchanged friendly greetings. Sakura opened her mouth to say something, but Yuji cut her off.

"No. There's no need. You're forgiven."

Sakura moved toward Yuji, but he took a step backward.

"You're forgiven, but please understand that things can never be as they were. At least, not yet. I really need to come to terms with what happened. That's going to take time. I'm sorry, but it's...just going to take time."

--

--

Ino was sitting on her bed, idly flipping through some book, not really paying attention to the words. Her thoughts were on Yuji. He'd been job hunting today and had been accepted as chunin squad leader. It was a relatively good job that would keep him in the village a lot. Ino was pretty happy about that. But

she was pre-occupied with other things. Like wanting to live with Yuji, for example. She'd gently brought up the subject with her father, and she'd found him to be not only understanding but accepting.

"You're grown up, Ino. I can no longer tell you what to do. I can only give you information and hope that you make the right decision. If you're determined to do this, then I'm glad it's with Yuji. He'll take care of you, and I'd be proud to have him in the family."

That had really set Ino's mind at ease about that. But how to bring it up to Yuji?

tap tap

Ino looked up, startled. She found Yuji tapping at her window, using his chakra to stick to the side of the building so that he was perpendicular to it. It was so absurd that Ino had to laugh out loud at it. She opened the window and let Yuji in.

"Hey," he greeted her, stretching out his legs. "Man, that wasn't one of my better ideas, sticking myself to the wall like that for a half hour."

"What were you doing outside my window for a half hour? I mean, you don't have to peep; you're my boyfriend. If you haven't seen it all...(unless you're into that sort of thing, I mean...)"

"No, I just didn't want to be late."

"For what?"

Yuji handed her a package and kissed her forehead. "Happy Birthday."

Ino glanced at the clock- sure enough, it was her birthday. She had been another year older for a whole thirty seconds.

The box Yuji had given her was small. She opened it, half wondering if there was a ring in there. Instead, she found a keychain.

"What the hell do I do with this?" she wondered, holding it out so it dangled in front of her. "At least make it lingerie!"

Yuji chuckled. "Well, it crossed my mind. But I wanted to get you something practical. That, as you can tell, is a keychain. And this-"

Yuji reached into one of his vest pockets and extracted-

"-A key. You attach the key to this thing, and-"

Does he really think I need this lecture? I'm going to kill the simpleton!

Yuji stopped talking, seeing the look on Ino's face. "Ino...you didn't seriously think that this thing was the gift?"

"No, no of course not!" she denied quickly, her relief obvious.

“Oh, good. No, the key is the gift. I, uh, well...thought you might consider maybe moving in with me. Since I got the new job, I mean, I could move to a bigger place and we could...pick it out together?”

That did it. Ino was all over that. Downstairs, Inoichi had heard everything. He had given Yuji advice when questioned on what to get his daughter for her birthday.

Letting her pick out where to live? Poor guy. I know Ino, and she can be overbearing. I love her dearly, but she does like to get her way. Oh well. If she’s going to be with a guy, it might as well be the devil I know rather than the one I don’t. Yuji won’t mistreat her.

=

It took two days, but Ino and Yuji agreed on a house. It took them a couple days to move in and get settled, but once they did it felt so...right. Like it was supposed to happen exactly like this.

They shared a futon consistently now. Most of the time. Ino DID boot Yuji out at one point.

“Give me ten minutes,” she had said. “I got myself something for my birthday and I want you to be surprised when you see it.”

Yuji shrugged, figuring that was okay with him. He waited until he heard Ino calling him back in. He did as he was told. And once he did, he realized that would be a pattern.

Ino was standing up, dressed as a dominatrix. She was a vision of beauty in leather, wielding the most wicked selection of whips Yuji had ever seen. The one in her hand was short but with many tails to it. In her other hand was a collar and a chain. On the bed lay sets of restraints and the like.

“Girls talk to each other, Yuji. Azami warned me about what kind of guy you were. And she told me just how to keep you in line.”

--

Not too many months passed after Ino put the collar on Yuji’s neck before Yuji put a ring on Ino’s finger. Their relationship didn’t change after that. In time, Yuji mastered all the jutsu in the village, just as his master had done. And just as Lord Third had predicted, Yuji’s road wasn’t a lonely one. Ino became the leader of her clan at a young age when her father decided it was time to step aside. His daughter and son-in-law had both surpassed him.

92 - Arc XIII: The Real World- Chapter 1

Genjutsu

Why should man create fantasy to escape reality? To attain that which is not attainable; to pattern his life as he wishes, with whom he chooses. Life is but a series of event linking oneself to other people and other places and times. Fantasy allows us to bend time to our will. We can turn back the clock to a love we never had, a love we've lost, or a love that can never be. To see ourselves reach our zenith, to grow in strength, to see what we wish our future will hold. A wife, children, relationships...

And yet before me is an endless blackness. Any power I attain is dwarfed by those that I am bound to serve, and by whom I am slated to kill. Even in death, I am not allowed freedom from the chains that bind me.

With my will to fight my fate extinguished, I wait for life to be given to my body once again, so that I may do the bidding of those who set me on this damnable path.

To fail at life is expected.

To fail at death is surely the greatest of failures.

Yuji used his fingernails to scratch this into the black cross in front of him. To live to engrave your own tombstone's epitaph...what a twisted existence.

Even the genjutsu paradise which Yuji created for himself had turned hellish. Alone with only thoughts of death and failure as company when his pleasant interlude of dreaming ended. It was an existence that would finish any mortal.

But Yuji...Yuji felt sanity creep back into his body. Defeated and battered though he was, how could he have forgotten for a moment that there was work to be done? There was purpose to his existence. He would not be allowed to die before that purpose was seen through.

Neither by my hand nor by the writing on that prophecy. I may not die. And not by your hand either, Sasuke. My body is nearly mended. After that, it is only a matter of time before we are fated to meet. This time, it will be deadly for one or both of us. If it's the last thing I do, I'll see that you never hurt Ojousama or Naruto-dono again!

==

It would take another week for Yuji's body to heal completely. It would take far longer for him to be fit mentally.

Everyone wanted to ask questions, but no one dared speak. Yuji's sudden, surprising attempt at taking his own life had shaken everyone. Yuji was their rock. If you fought with him, you would not be hurt. And somehow, he'd do okay, too, even if he took twenty kunai in the back for you.

This time was different. This time, Yuji was mentally defeated. He didn't have any mental strength left to fight the feelings of shame and depression. There was just no reason to fight it anymore. For that minute, he was in control of everything, and yet in control of nothing. There was no prophecy, no destiny- no future. No pressure- no reason to live. No reason to draw one more breath.

Sitting alone in a dark room was probably the last thing he should have been doing, but he didn't honestly care. Little by little, he practiced letting his chakra flow. But he kept getting distracted by that battle with Sasuke.

No. Not a battle. A massacre. I was at his mercy. I know I'm stronger than that! So why was I so overmatched? And what about the next time we meet?

His thought process brought him back to what he had been thinking of before he was brought to the battle.

Shiroko had been a little distant the past few days. They had still planned to go together to the Land of Iron, but she seemed distracted. Yuji hadn't yet asked her why, wanting to give her space in case it was a personal matter, and instead offered his presence whenever she seemed receptive.

The lack of sex doesn't bother me. But no kissing...no close contact. That's the big indicator something is wrong.

It made Yuji smile weakly. If that was the indicator something was wrong, what was his attempt at suicide?

Wait...we were distant before this, but she hasn't been by to see me, save for making sure I'm still alive. I'm no expert, but we should be closer than that. Did she take my suicide attempt personally? I jumped because of my defeat at the hands of Sasuke and the humiliation I felt at my 'sort of' ex nursing me back to health. But did she think that maybe I was despairing over not being with Azami? Oh my God...

Yuji got up immediately, walking briskly out to the deck overlooking the water. There was Shiroko. Sakura and Azami were with her. All three jumped guiltily once Yuji made his presence known.

"A moment?" he requested of Shiroko. She nodded in silence, beckoning him down to the sandy white beach below.

-

"...I can't do it, Yuji. We need to...to..."

Yuji understood. He knew it immediately. The second he saw Shiroko with Azami and Sakura things became clear. The one thing all of them had in common was that they were all love interests of Yuji's.

"To break up," Yuji finished for her. "I...had a feeling. May I ask why?"

Shiroko looked out at the water, hands clasped behind her back. "Yuji, anyone can see you're a good man. You're easy to like...charming...and very sweet."

Yuji's temper flared a bit. "Look, if we're breaking up, you don't need to tell me what's so damned desirable about me!"

Shiroko met his eyes for a brief second, glancing over her shoulder.

"...I know. But you deserve to hear the whole truth. And the good is as much a part of the truth as the bad."

She knelt down and picked up a stone resting on the sand. She turned it over in her hand as she spoke. "I realize this is hardly fair. And don't think I haven't beaten myself up over it. But the fact is...we aren't going to get closer. I don't know if we ever had a fighting chance. Because as great a man as you are, your life is dictated by something other than your feelings."

"You're right. That isn't fair," Yuji shot back, getting progressively more angry. Her statement stung in a way he didn't want to admit. It was too close to the truth. Too close to the painful, relentless truth. "I was in love with you! I didn't just pick you for sex or something asinine like that!"

Shiroko again silenced Yuji with a look. "...I know... But if you saw a happy ending for us, why weren't you ever happy?"

"If you were waiting for me to be perfectly happy-" he started, his voice venomous.

"No. But I did think that maybe you might realize that life is more than some prophecy. It's not some esoteric concept. It's about feelings...about being close...and close is something we aren't."

Yuji was standing well behind her, and a detached part of his mind registered that Shiroko was still so beautiful, even now as she was breaking his heart.

"Then you're going to have to lay this out for me. Because I sure as hell can't follow this."

"It's simple: Yuji, you're also Ten no Kishootsu. Heaven's Temper. You're supposed to be this untouchable god of a man, sworn to protect the only hope of our world. But you don't even know who you are. You've tied your self-worth to your job for so long that the two are one and the same."

"How could I help that?!" Yuji roared, sand kicking up in all directions as his restraint was lost and his chakra flowed freely. "I didn't ask for this! I didn't ask to have a bulls-eye painted on my back, so every mindless dickhead with a kunai and something to prove would try to take me down! I didn't ask to be anyone's servant!"

"You embraced it!" Shiroko yelled over him. "The chance to be someone meant everything to you! The opportunity to be a teacher, a mentor- you wanted it! You wanted it more than anything!"

"So I desired something normal? That's your basis for this whole thing?!"

"Normal people wouldn't abandon their identity! Normal people wouldn't mindlessly serve anyone! Normal people would seek out their own happiness! They wouldn't live to create happiness for two people who don't need the help!"

Yuji settled down, breathing heavily. Something wasn't right. Shiroko's words were that of someone selfish. She was not...

"What's the other reason you want this to end?" Yuji demanded. "I love you, and you know that! There's something else here. It's not just my job that bothers you. Even if you're right, and my job and I are tied together- so what? There's another reason...something you've known about for a while. You were distant before my suicide attempt. If you're determined to break up with me, then tell me what's going on! You said it yourself: You owe me the truth. Nothing beyond that."

Shiroko gave a heavy sigh, bracing her hands on Yuji's shoulders.

"Alright. You asked for it. When I was younger, my parents tried to set me up with a boy. I rejected their interference and was completely unfair to him. Kaname- that's his name, by the way- was so good and kind about it. I probably hurt him pretty bad...probably like what I'm doing now. But I haven't been able to forget about him. And I can't commit to you unless I'm positive. I thought I was at first- so sure you were the one. But now..."

Yuji nodded in dismal, damning understanding. "Now you've had second thoughts..."

"I have. And it's not fair to you. But it would be even less fair if I forced us both to continue like this...does that make sense?"

Her eyes searched his for understanding. She saw that he did seem to understand. She also saw the pain in his eyes. Pain not caused by a physical injury.

"I...me, too. Although it was a little different in my case," Yuji murmured. "I'm still upset about what happened with Azami and I. But then you and I hit it off so well, and for a while I felt like things had come together...But then I had my doubts, the same as you..."

"So why did you stick around?"

Yuji gave a mirthless chuckle, running his hand through his hair. "Well, I knew I liked you a lot. I felt comfortable with you. And you know I'm loyal if nothing else. I decided that things would improve. I was hurt in a way I'd never been hurt before. I was figuring that sort of pain of being snubbed the way I was is a pretty lasting pain. And to be fair, I'm not wrong about that. I think that maybe we're both just in the right place at the wrong time."

Shiroko felt the same. If they had fallen for each other even a little later, then maybe...maybe things would have been okay.

Yuji looked out toward the water. "I'm sorry for what I put you through. With that suicide attempt...It was wrong, but things just got to be too much. I should have talked to you first. You and I were together, and I failed to confide that darkness to you. I guess I didn't want to alarm you...or maybe I saw this coming and I didn't want you to think that you caused it...I don't know. Not a lot makes sense to me right now."

Yuji opened his arms and hugged Shiroko. She hugged back, relishing the feeling of his body against hers. She was going to miss this. But it was for the best, and they both knew it.

“Friends, then?” Yuji offered.

“Friends.”

They stepped back away from each other. Yuji leaned forward and kissed Shiroko on the cheek. Then he turned on his heel and strode down the beach. Shiroko waited for him to turn around, but he never did. Not until nearly two hours later, when it was getting dark and the others might begin to worry.

On the way back Yuji peeled off his shirt and shoes and walked through the surf. It was cold and bracing; a bit of reality.

Okay. I'm okay. This breakup was going to happen. Now I have a fresh slate. I can stop worrying now about my relationship. I can start to mend. Now, I need to focus. I need to decide what to do. I need to plan for the future. A future I was ready to throw away.

Yuji eventually looked out to the sea. Endless water, inky black this time of night. The moon's reflection rippled on the surface. Yuji bent down to the water, reminded of an old story.

The monkey reached out to touch the moon in the water, but all that was within reach was the reflection.

93 - Arc XIII: The Real World- Chapter 2

Yuji ate little, though Azami had done an excellent job on the food. Everyone knew about the break-up. Azami and Sakura had known in advance, as Shiroko had made sure that Yuji would be okay with one more 'shock'.

It was hard, at first. But even with a couple hours, Yuji knew he'd be fine. At least with respect to Shiroko. With his other fantasies in his mind, he was much more pre-occupied at the people at the table with him. He'd had a fantasy about Azami, Miko, and then Ino. They'd all seemed so real. Rather, maybe he just wished they were real, as opposed to the reality he was now facing. No point in putting off the discussion any longer, he decided.

"...There's something we need to discuss..."

The clacking of chopsticks against bowls stopped. Yuji hadn't spoken to anyone since the break-up. No doubt no one wanted to light the fuse that blew up the emotional powder keg that Yuji was right now. They let him make the first move.

"...My suicide attempt was fueled by pure frustration. I should have talked to someone first. But I didn't, and that's that. I won't try to take my own life again. And I'm sorry...beyond sorry...for the worry I've caused you. So it pains me to cause you further worry, but it must be done..."

Yuji bowed his head, making eye contact with each person in turn.

"My mental sanity will now be in question. Lady Tsunade will likely tell me to take a good, long break. However, I find it difficult to sit still when someone else has made an attempt on my life so recently."

Yuji's eyes stopped on Sakura and Naruto.

"For all my power, I was helpless against Sasuke and his group. I refuse to believe that it was a fluke. Modesty aside, few people would give me such a fight as Ten no Kishootsu. But the fact is, I was unable to fight as Ten no Kishootsu. He effectively removed 'Heaven's Temper' from the equation quickly. He has no reason to change that strategy. And there is no counter that I can think of. However, I can make his life more difficult. I can ruin Sasuke's ambitions... and, I believe, keep him alive. But it will only work if you extend to me your greatest trust...Master, Mistress..."

The change in title was surprising to Sakura and Naruto. But Yuji's words had intrigued them.

"The one counter move I can make is to put together a group to face Sasuke. And not just 'face'-'
Yuji paused here, his face grave.
"-declare war."

Naruto and Sakura immediately volunteered.

"We're right behind you!"

"We'll make him see reason!"

But Yuji shook his head. "No. Master, Mistress- I was unable to fight last battle because I was preoccupied. My job is, first and foremost, to protect you. Because of that, I could not fight with the...abandon necessary to win. It's no fault of your own. It's mine...for caring too much. Maybe that's why this idea hurts so much now, when it wouldn't have bothered me just a short time ago..."

"What idea?!" Naruto demanded. "Tell us!"

"The group to face Sasuke. The idea isn't so much the problem, I guess. It's the process. It means alienating myself from the village. It means becoming a 'criminal' in the eyes of the Leaf. It would just be a formality...but I need to establish that I'm an outsider. Otherwise, the Leaf will be facing a war. A war I'm not positive we can win."

"How's that again?" Naruto asked.

Sakura understood better, having spent so much time with Tsunade. "If you attack them while part of Konoha, then Konoha has an alliance with you and is subject to attack from whatever forces Sasuke has gathered. Then anyone who helps us might be attacked as well. But if you separate yourself, we can keep all our allies. And if you fail...then we deny you."

Yuji nodded grimly. "That's about the size of it. The Leaf can't afford another war in terms of cost, manpower, or morale." He looked to his hosts. "Azami; Kojiro. I considered you both. But you're just starting your life together. I also thought of Kakashi-sensei, but his position is too important. And Sasuke is personal to him as well. I can only think of one other person at the moment. But for the moment, secrecy is most important. Can I trust you all to keep this secret? Knowing that you hold in your hands the lives of myself and others...can you do this?"

Azami and Kojiro exchanged glances. They nodded as one.

Kojiro said, "Yuji, for what you did for us, Azami and I are at your side. It's no sacrifice- not compared to yours," said Kojiro, wincing a bit as he recalled Yuji's rampage after he lost out to Kojiro for Azami's love. A man who wielded that much power was scary, and the slightest breach of control that Kojiro had seen had left a mark. But Yuji put that aside and became a friend, and for that Kojiro realized that Yuji had been able to quell his anger and become the bigger man. "I used to be pretty good with a hammer. If that'll do...I'm on your side."

"You need strength, kiddo? You know that I can match you. And besides, my memory is good. Very good. But more to the point- Sasuke knows you'll have come to us. If he's going to come calling, I'd rather not have to kill him and mess up your prophecy thing. My strength is yours. Direct it as you will," Azami added.

Yuji gave a small, tired smile. He looked so weak now. But even as you thought that, you could feel his chakra bubbling up. A forbidding rush of heat and power. A power that was restrained; not defeated.

"Thank you both. I think one more and our group will be rounded out. Give me two weeks to recover and find a fourth. Then I'll make my move politically. It won't shock anyone- actually, it's a failsafe plan Lady Tsunade and I discussed."

Yuji turned back to the last two. Naruto and Sakura had been listening quietly. Clearly, they were unhappy at being excluded.

“Master, Mistress- if my plan succeeds, Sasuke will be yours. Alive. And the prophecy should be fulfilled. If my plan fails, you must resolve yourselves to attack. Gather who you can and finish Sasuke. The boy you knew...I’m going to drag him out in our fight- *If* he still exists, I’ll make him vulnerable to you. It will be up to you to strike. To end this threat. But if the boy you knew doesn’t exist, I’ll at least manage to weaken him. Then you must finish him. He’s no longer just your problem. His alliances are proving more and more deadly and devious. If you want to save him, at least in name- end this threat.”

--
--

Yuji returned home that night a bit later than usual. He had taken a good, long walk around the village, taking in all he could. He had other business as well that was germane to his cause.

He still found himself fatigued after his suicide attempt. His body simply refused to recover completely while his emotional state was so unstable.

Maybe that was why he tripped over the black and white bundle just inside his door. He landed painfully on his face, biting his cheek.

“Ahh! What the hell? Kuroko?!”

Indeed it was. Laying by the door was Kuroko. She was asleep, apparently. Or maybe passed out. She seemed to be a bit drunk. Why else would she have passed out just inside Yuji’s door?

Smiling, Yuji moved to his bedroom. Something so normal could exist in this tumultuous world. Getting drunk and having a good time...so normal. So real.

Yuji gently draped a blanket over Kuroko’s sleeping form. Perhaps in the morning she’d be okay to talk.

As soon as Yuji thought that, Kuroko stirred. So Yuji paused, waiting to see if she would wake up.

“Blegh!”

Yuji winced.

I hate vomit. Well, at least it’s not mine.

--

The next morning, Kuroko woke up and immediately slapped a hand to her aching head.

“Shiiiiittttt! Overdid it...ugh. Where did I wind up, anyway?”

Yuji entered the room, holding a cup of coffee.

“Hey, you alright?”

Kuroko got to her feet unsteadily, falling into the wall in the process of righting herself.

"I'll let you know when the headache stops. Owww..."

Yuji rolled his eyes and made his way over to help her.

"C'mon, up we get. Thattagirl. Okay, let's get you sitting down with some coffee."

-

It took a while, but Kuroko was herself again after a cup of coffee and a healthy dose of Eki-Kyabe. Although she seemed troubled. She was a mess, though Yuji would never say as much. Her make-up was running and her clothes were rumpled.

Wait, the make-up...it looks like she's been...crying.

"YOU BIG ASSHOLE! HOW DARE YOU TRY TO KILL YOURSELF!"

Yuji flinched back instinctively as Kuroko's hand seized the front of his shirt, drawing him close. Her teeth were pulled back in a snarl and her voice had a hard, angry edge to it.

"SHIROKO SHOWS UP HERE AND TELLS ME THAT YOU- I CAN'T BELIEVE IT! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA, ANY AT ALL HOW WORRIED I WAS?!"

"I'm sorry."

"OH, YOU ARE SORRY, ALRIGHT! DAMN IT! I CAN'T BELIEVE I FOUGHT SO HARD FOR YO-!"

Now there was an awkward moment. Just ambiguous enough to make Yuji wonder about her meaning; clear enough to make Kuroko sure that Yuji knew exactly what she had started to say.

"Look, Shiroko and I talked. I decided to back off of you, but I really didn't want to. You'd already rejected me, but..."

She was in tears again. Yuji leaned forward to comfort her, but the power of her voice knocked him back again.

"DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT IT'S LIKE TO HAVE SOMEONE YOU LOVE REJECT YOU?!"

"YES!" Yuji shouted back. "YES! I DO! WHAT DO YOU THINK MADE ME GIVE UP?!"

"..."

"..."

"Sorry."

"Me, too."

Yuji ran a hand through his hair, trying to get his bearings.

"Look, I didn't reject *you*. Not you personally. I just didn't want a one night stand."

“And Shiroko...she wanted a relationship...is that it?”

Yuji blushed, nodding. “Yeah. Pardon me if I’m a bit bitter, but I’m fresh off getting dumped...”
Then Yuji made a show of looking over the table.

“I am kind of distracted. What are you dressed like that for? Not complaining, believe me. But I’m curious...”

Kuroko looked down at herself. Understanding suddenly dawned on her.
“Oh, the uniform! I forgot! Give me two minutes!”

With that, she skipped into the bathroom. Yuji just stared, wondering what in the hell the human whirlwind that was Kuroko was doing. He’d seen her in some sexy get-ups, but this one had to take the cake.

Kuroko emerged from the bathroom, her hands on her hips. Her make-up had been fixed, her hair straightened, and her clothes adjusted.

“Right! As of today, Lady Tsunade has assigned me to be your adjunct. My job is to take some of the stress out of your personal life.”

“And that’s why you’re dressed as a maid? Again, not complaining, but I can’t believe Lady Tsunade would make you...”

“Oh, no. She didn’t ‘make’ me do anything,” Kuroko told Yuji, smiling widely. “She simply advised. See, I’ve decided to pursue you, Yuji. Lonely boys like you tend to get all hot and bothered around girls dressed like maids...pledging their service...”

Kuroko crawled across the table, her hands on Yuji’s shoulder so she could whisper in his ear.

“...no order that cannot be obeyed...”

Smiling even wider, Kuroko withdrew and sat back down properly.

“Now, while I’m on duty, please call me ‘Isae’. ‘Kuroko’ is a nickname and not appropriate for work.”

Yuji just blinked. How did one react to this? Conventional means failed him, and he just stared.
She must have been pretty smashed to think up this maid thing off. Not that I don’t appreciate it.

“Lady Tsunade warned me you’d be a hard one to break, even like this. Perhaps if our roles were reversed? I can stay a maid, but maybe you’d prefer to be given orders? Lady Tsunade *did* peg you as a masochist after all...tell me, Yuji- was she right?”

While Yuji tried to process that, Kuroko laughed. She couldn’t help it. The look on Yuji’s face was priceless.

“Okay, seriously now- I’m here to be a companion. To keep an eye on you. Whatever that means to you,” Kuroko/Isae explained. “Your suicide attempt was worrisome to a lot of us. Lady Tsunade feels

responsible to some degree. She thought that perhaps you needed someone who could keep an eye on you. A friend that you could speak openly to. Say things to that you could not speak of to your masters. The maid outfit...well, I just wanted to send you a personal message.”

It made sense, Yuji decided. And he would thank Lady Tsunade. The first night without Shiroko...he thought he'd understood the depths of loneliness before, but that had been a new kind of pain.

But remember, it's darkest before the dawn. And dawn is just about here...

94 - ArcXIII: Real World- Chapter 3

Two weeks later, Yuji bowed himself out of Tsunade's office. His headband stayed with Tsunade.

He was an outcast now- officially. He retained service to Sakura and Naruto, but was offered no protection as a citizen and would not be paid for his work.

Quietly, Yuji left the village just before noon. Sai joined him at the gate.

"I cannot join you as planned, Yuji."

"Superior reasoning?" Yuji asked, as if he'd expected this development. Sai didn't acknowledge him, but bowed his head and left.

Your day will come, Danzou. For now, the external threat is greater.

Kuroko joined him not long afterward. She'd shed her maid outfit, and maybe Yuji was sad to see it go. In its place she'd donned an all-black get-up: black boots that came halfway to her knee; black stockings that reached mid-thigh, black mini-skirt that overlapped her stockings slightly, and black long-sleeve shirt.

"You know, if this will put strain on you and Shiroko...you don't have to be here."

She took Yuji's hand gently, betraying no emotion- only letting him feel the warmth of another human. He'd missed that sensation. Yuji had been told long ago that men were somehow geared instinctively toward a woman for warmth, which was something beyond sex. He sort of understood.

"She understands. There's no rivalry between us. I'm here for you. We both want what's best for you."

After two weeks, it still felt too soon to be another relationship. Maybe it was the rebound, maybe not. Yuji had always liked Kuroko; he just wasn't into one night stands. But that wasn't what she was offering this time. Now, she was a companion. Someone to trust. Someone to, in time, love, Yuji hoped.

He kissed her cheek as a rush of fondness and gratitude hit him.

The rendezvous point was just ahead. He could see Azami waiting up ahead, and behind her was Kojiro. Kojiro was shouldering a huge hammer- it had to be at least as tall as its wielder, and as wide as his head.

The four nodded, muttering quiet greetings. Yuji handed each of them a white cloak.

"This will make us stand out, which is the point. I want Sasuke to find me. We're going to inhabit places where the advantage is ours, and we're going to draw him and his group in. Now, your cloaks also

reverse to a dark blue, which should make you invisible at night if you can shield your chakra. If you're outmatched, then hide- quickly. No fatalities."

"No fatalities," each one echoed.

Yuji gave a grim smile to each of them. "Now, Sasuke will come quickly. We'll all have to train. My battle is going to be different- a technique that I've never employed before. Something I've discovered since my...transformation, I guess. When we fight, Kuroko, you match up with Karin, the other female. Kojiro, you take on Suigetsu. Azami, I'll leave Jugo to you. Do what you have to. This is one mission where killing may very well be necessary. No matter what, we all need to come out alive. Even if we stain our hands in the process- *We must not die.*"

Each of them nodded yet again.

"Good. Now, let's go out and celebrate. They will be little to celebrate for some time..."

--
--

The night had been fun. Eating, drinking, playing- then coupling up and falling into each other's arms with reckless abandon. They had separate rooms for just this sort of thing. It was a way to say goodbye with an exclamation point of passion.

It was a bit awkward at first for Kuroko and Yuji. But they got over it quickly. Love or no, the warmth of another human; the touch of flesh; the togetherness- all those things would be at a premium. The distinction between 'love' and 'companionship'- it didn't seem all that important at the moment. Especially not when companionship was threatening to become love very quickly.

They lay exhausted, bodies intertwined. Yuji sleepily played with Kuroko's hair. He'd always had a thing for ponytails and pigtails. Her shiny black hair was rapidly becoming one of his favorite things.

"So, what does your name mean?" he murmured. She responded by snuggling deeper into the space between his shoulder and neck, her lips just out of reach of his skin.

"Mm. 'Isae' means 'Blessed with merit'."

"It suits you."

" 'Kuroko' suits me more."

" 'Black child', huh? It sounds cool when you say it. Knowing your real name...that's kind of cool, too."

"How's your name spelled?" she replied, her hand running down his cheek and onto his neck. She felt him subtly flinch and realized just how much he was trusting her.

"Kimihiro? 'Look for Virtue'. Sounds old-fashioned."

By now, the night's exertion had left Kuroko tired. So she slipped her hand over Yuji's stomach and

snuggled up tighter. She felt his body curl protectively around hers before the blanket was put up around her shoulders.

She would remember the warmth for a long time. The feeling of really belonging. She wondered if he, too, felt it.

Then sleep took them both.

--
--

“C’mon, it was totally hot when you and I switched clothes!”

“You remember that?! I thought you were smashed!”

“I can hold my alcohol! You were way closer to being drunk! You even said ‘it sure feels comfortable to fight in a skirt. You get free leg movement. I feel kind of sexy...”

“I DID NOT!”

“You totally did!”

“No, no, you misunderstood! That was sarcasm!”

“Don’t think so!” Kuroko declared, her arm around Yuji’s shoulders. Azami and Kojiro watched with bemused glances. That was certainly a side of Yuji they hadn’t imagined, if it was true.

“By the way, you’d make a totally hot girl. It’s too bad you were born a boy,” Kuroko added. She grinned wickedly and placed a hand lovingly over Yuji’s groin, giving it a fond pat. “Well...too bad for everyone else. You’re mine.”

Eyebrows up all around there. Yuji could only smile. His last wish had been to involve a ‘normal’ girl like Kuroko in this fighting, but there was no way he couldn’t now. Especially because, after last night, she didn’t seem as ‘normal’ as he thought. He could sense something as their bodies connected...

Doesn’t matter. With any luck, she won’t even need to fight. Right now, I need to focus. I need to find Sasuke...

Yuji put two fingers to his temple, sending a brief message to Sasuke on a wave of Ten no Kishootsu chakra. He knew Sasuke would hear it, or at least sense it. This prophecy had a lot of unknown elements to it, but one thing that was perfectly clear was that he and Sasuke would be drawn together.

--
-

It took only three days. Sasuke came, as Yuji knew he would. Their battle would take place on a mountain, with a cave carved into it three-quarters of the way to the top. It was essential to Yuji’s plan this way. If worse came to worse, he could isolate Sasuke while his partners kept everyone else off the mountain.

Sasuke had since donned a black Akatsuki cloak. Yuji stood in stark contrast to him in his white cloak.

Yuji called to Sasuke across the mountain top. "We need not involve anyone else, Sasuke. This battle is between us."

Sasuke approached Yuji alone. Yuji did the same. Kuroko gave his hand a squeeze, keeping her head down for fear her tears would be evident. It was so cute that Yuji actually stopped and kissed her- big time. It was one tongue flick away from being making out.

"I'll live. I promise. I won't die- not now. Not here."

He had promised her that already, but hearing it seemed to calm her.

God, I don't want to be a liar. I've got a reason to live besides duty. This is going to be difficult, but it's possible. And as long as that possibility exists...

Yuji made his way over to Sasuke. Even from across the mountain, he could feel a deep, black chakra emanating from Sasuke. While the remaining six held each other in check, Yuji felt for a trace of Sasuke's old chakra. He wouldn't have been able to do it without being 'Heaven's Temper', being that he hadn't felt Sasuke's chakra in so long. But even now, before Yuji completely let the Ten No Kishootsu chakra flow, he could feel a glimmer of Sasuke's old, less malicious chakra.

So he does still exist after all. That means I can bring him back. Master, Mistress...will this finally repay my debt to you? A debt that even you do not know exists, yet must be paid in full. Yes...

-

"To live without purpose, Yuji, is to simply exist. And that is not living at all."

So said the Third Hokage, speaking to Kimihiro at the end of a training session. The boy had surely given it his all, yet ended the session frustrated. He had not performed to his own expectations- a hallmark of his training. He always fell short of the benchmark he set for himself.

And that, in turn gave him purpose.

It was paradoxical, at best, to exist that way. Certainly humans sought out obstacles. But to purposely fail time and again...

Absurd.

Illogical.

And yet, here came the paradox. This failure spoke of a certain discipline. A rare one, at that. To live one's life in loathing of oneself. Contritely, it meant to be in awe of the person you could potentially be, if perfection could be reached.

A quandary. One that Kimihiro was well aware of. Yet he persevered.

“Your purpose will someday be the next legends, among which you yourself may number. Let them give you purpose. Let them give you an irrevocable reason to live. To truly live, not just exist.”

95 - ArcXIV: Uchiha Legacy vs. Heaven's Temper- Chapter 1

Facing off with Sasuke now, Yuji could feel that this purpose was at an end. Even the scant few weeks that separated his suicide attempt from now, Yuji felt different. He felt he could find another purpose to give his existence meaning. Attaining the true form of Ten no Kishootsu had been damning enough in his mind (what was there to aspire to when you reached the plateau?), but to see it so soundly defeated was something much harder to accept.

But 'it' had not been defeated. Yuji was defeated. That was good. It meant something could change. Ten no Kishootsu's power was now firmly a part of Yuji, and it would not change. But he, Yuji- he was not done growing yet. The more he grew, the more he could utilize Ten no Kishootsu.

Upon understanding this, he formed his strategy. An unwinnable scenario. He set a trap for himself and walked into it. But he who sets the trap is the one who may walk out.

What Yuji had come to understand was that Ten no Kishootsu was like mastery of a martial art. There was a physical portion, yes. But a good deal of it was mental. How could he have been so blind so as not to see what was right there in front of him? His own strength- genjutsu.

I wrote it off because of Sasuke's Sharingan. But if I remove the Sharingan from the equation, then the battle is mine. Physically, he can outmaneuver me- unless I play my cards right.

They clashed with no further preamble. Sasuke attacked viciously, and Yuji defended. Sasuke attacked again, this time with more energy. Yuji blocked yet again, this time countering with a low-strength fire attack. Sasuke dodged it effortlessly. Then two more came, and he was forced to block them rather than dodge. They did little damage, so he shrugged the attack off.

"Great Fireball Jutsu!"

The jutsu filled the cave, just as Yuji had intended. He let his Ten no Kishootsu chakra take over. His hair and eyes turned a dark obsidian and the wings extended from his body. He closed them in a protective cocoon, deflecting the fire with his stronger, more pure fire.

Through the haze his wings created, and looking through the small flecks of fire falling to ground as though blazing orange snow, Yuji could see Sasuke's eyes. One eye was closed, and blood was beginning to well under it.

I thought so. Go for it, Sasuke.

"AMATERASU!"

Jets of black fire shot toward Yuji, forming columns that threatened to pierce him and burn him into nothingness.

Yuji threw his cloak in the way of the flames. Bizarrely, the flames were contained by the thin material. Sasuke froze in shock, completely dismayed that his attack had been stymied so simply. He looked closer, however, and it became apparent:

“You sealed it using your cloak!”

Yuji looked up from his cloak, where he'd been busy making a blood seal.

“Don't be absurd. I didn't seal anything. Teleportation Jutsu, though- that's another matter.”

As Sasuke stared, Yuji's face took on a solemn expression.

“It's fitting, isn't it? At the memorial obelisk, black flames that cannot be extinguish will mark the passing of beloved Leaf comrades.”

Sasuke gave a great roar that contained no words. Only an emotional protest. He had inadvertently helped honor those who had taken advantage of his brother's sacrifice. It was completely contrary to his mission. And his mission was all he had left.

“We're the same. Truly the same,” Yuji said plainly, his wings stretching behind him, looking for more room to maneuver, since the ceiling of the cave was too low for the them. The tunnel-like place was both blessing and curse.

“We're nothing alike!”

Yuji rolled his eyes. “Idiot. Just keep proving me right. You live for your mission- so do I. This fight isn't personal for you- it isn't personal for me. You're an outcast in your eyes- I'm an outcast in mine. The only difference between us is that my power is protective; yours is destructive.”

Sasuke had heard this so many times over the years. The same redundant philosophy that these weaklings kept trying to hand him!

“You're going to tell me that revenge is a black hole. That I'm on a path to destruction. And you're going to bestow upon me the merits of righteousness and justice. And-”

“And you're interrupting me. Fine representative of your clan,” Yuji interjected, sarcasm dripping in each syllable. “No, I'm not here to lecture you. If you were too stupid to listen the first three times you heard it, that's your business. I don't care what you do. As I said, this isn't personal. I personally think you're an obnoxious jackass who uses words like 'revenge' and 'avenger' because you're a scared little boy who can't grow up. Why don't you get over yourself? If you need a purpose, find a real one, besides blindly defying the wishes of your brother. Itachi had a clue. That's the skill difference between you two. He wised up a lot faster than you. You always had more potential physically. You were just too stupid to figure it out.”

Yuji rolled his neck, watching Sasuke; gauging his chakra. Easily a third was gone from his use of the Amaterasu. Good.

“I said I wouldn't lecture you, and now I suppose I am. So I'll make my point quickly: Your excuses are lame. Your reason for existence is not valid. You're just doing the opposite of what good people do.

You're just playing at being 'evil' because it makes people pay attention. You're not 'poor little Sasuke' anymore. You're some badass now, right? Chief bad guy in your own mind? Well, I've got news- you're just an older, more powerful version of the same little boy that sat in the academy classroom hating the world. Rebel without a clue."

Sasuke attacked again, but not with the Amaterasu. His version of the Kusanagi was sweeping toward Yuji almost faster than he could track. He dodged backward twice, but was rapidly running out of room. He couldn't let Sasuke exit the cave yet. So the next time the sword came, Yuji closed his wings around him and let the blade bounce off. It rebounded with force, allowing Yuji to attack quickly with a fiery palm to Sasuke's chest. The blowback knocked Yuji back a couple steps, but the force of the attack had put Sasuke into the far wall.

Sasuke was so infuriated now that he was bleeding chakra. He lay imbedded in the stone wall, panting and staring in fury at Yuji. How could this novice be beating him? Yuji had lost so handily last time, and had even been on the verge of death.

It's like fighting a different man. But why? I have to find out why if I'm going to win! Sasuke thought desperately. When they were kids, Yuji was an adversary he could respect to some degree. Enough to not ever let him get momentum in a sparring match. Now, that was doubly true, when both boys were playing for keeps.

Yuji came flying in again. Preceding him a ball of fire big enough to fill the cave. Sasuke had to dodge it.

"SHOUKYAKU JUTSU!"

Sasuke rolled aside just in time as a jutsu he wasn't familiar with was cast. Where he had been, rock had just exploded. The remains were so tiny it was as if the rock never existed at all.

The precision of the attack shook Sasuke. It shook him to his core. That was not the attack of a normal human being. It made him look at Yuji- *really* look at Yuji- for the first time since this fight began.

His eyes could see things most eyes couldn't. And his eyes could barely see through the thick, black chakra Yuji was radiating. He could just barely sense the boy's original red chakra. But even beyond that, he sensed a green chakra. A chakra full of energy. Not at all like Yuji.

"You're curious?" Yuji questioned mildly. "I'll tell you why you're seeing what you're seeing. You see, there are three aspects to martial arts. No, actually, the world."

Good, keep your Sharingan activated. You don't know it, Sasuke, but I've already won.

"They are the mental, the physical, and the spiritual. All are in tune with each other. But doubly so with my chakra. Ten no Kishootsu- 'Heaven's Temper'- does not allow just anyone to possess it. In order to attain it, you must be strong enough mentally to understand it. Strong enough physically to control it. Strong enough spiritually to believe it.

"The chakra you sense is that of my predecessor. I don't know his name. I only know that he was a samurai, and very different from me. He was a passionate, strong man. Full of energy and willing to channel it into physical combat. His forte, if you will.

His chakra was sealed away and eventually found it's way to our Third Hokage. And then, to me. From there, the prophecy that we both know about defines the history. And here we are. SHOUKYAKU JUTSU!"

The Jutsu was cast so quickly that Sasuke couldn't dodge. He was hit by the full force of the blow.

Yuji considered this, his head cocked. "Dear God, did you survive that? It must be all that lightning chakra you've got bottled up inside you. If you were normal, there'd be nothing left of you."

Yuji's face broke into an uncharacteristically nasty grin.
"Bet you can't survive it twice. SHOUKYAKU JUTSU!"

Sasuke had to call on it quickly. There was no choice. He'd been pushed too far by this jutsu. But to call on his best technique with such a lower reserve of chakra meant diminishing it's effectiveness. Still there was no choice.

Yuji looked on quietly, sure he'd done it this time. Sasuke would protect himself in the only way he could. The most mystical- and demanding- of the Sharingan techniques. A technique that had pushed even Itachi to his limits.

Susano'O

The behemoth formed inside the gape, eventually collapsing the ceiling and sides to make room for it. Yuji flew out of the cave and hovered in the air, nearly quivering with excitement and fear. To see this was amazing.

To survive it- legendary.

Yuji could see Sasuke's chakra; no, his entire body; taking a pounding. It was clear he hadn't mastered Susano'O by any definition of the word. Just maintaining it was a horrendous strain.

"SHOUKYAU JUTSU! SHOUKYAKU JUTSU!"

Two rapid-fire succession jutsus hit Susano'O. Each one visibly reeled Sasuke, protected though he was.

For his plan to work, Yuji needed this fight to last a little longer. So he let his wings carry him high up- out of even Susano'O's reach. He circled Sasuke from above, making sure he was *just* out of reach. The more angry and frustrated Sasuke was, the better. It made him do stupid things, like attacking when Yuji was out of reach. It made him waste chakra at a phenomenal rate.

Susano'O flickered and began to recede in a surprisingly short amount of time. Sasuke's body was cracking under the strain of maintaining his defense. Yuji attacked a few more times, using very little chakra. It took him little to attack; it took Sasuke a lot to block. He battled the inevitable for nearly a minute, but finally surrendered and allowed Susano'O to collapse back into him.

Yuji fluttered down and landed opposite Sasuke.

“Give it up. You only won last time by distracting me. It won’t work again. I’ve brought nobody you’ll be able to target- not like this, anyway.”

Sasuke was panting; blood fell from both eyes. Gradually, his Sharingan, too, faded.

And Yuji struck.

Summoning the Ten no Kishootsu chakra, he attacked Sasuke- mentally. Their battle would be decided based on mental strength.

96 - Arc XIV: Uchiha Legacy vs. Heaven's Temper- Chapter 2

The fool. Genjutsu against an Uchiha is suicide. Even without my Sharingan, I can fight-

A hundred foot tall Yuji appeared on the horizon. The hellish landscape he'd created was a bastardization of the Leaf. Parts of Sasuke's past. Yuji had spent the last two weeks recounting stories, details- anything of Sasuke's youth.

Twisted images floated. There was the Forest of Death, during the chunin exams. There was the training field posts, where Naruto was tied up during their first team exercise. There was the hospital rooftop...the Hokage's office...the Uchiha dojo...

Sasuke turned his head away. These images were so familiar. Words were haunting enough, but to see these images. And to see them all through a blood-red haze. It was torture! More torture than he'd ever imagined!

When he opened his eyes again, Sasuke saw Yuji standing in front of a door, staring at it. There were black trees all around, growing up out of nothing. There were hundreds of small grave markers, all eerily familiar yet all the same so unfamiliar as to be horrifying; like something you'd forgotten that was hovering just on the edge of your memory. And the door Yuji stood in front of...

"Are you ready to face my fears? They beat you before, and they've only gotten worse. Recall our last genjutsu battle. It didn't end well for you."

Yuji was suddenly right next to Sasuke, his voice a dark whisper in Sasuke's ear.

"My fears will make you see how wrong you've been. You don't understand anything yet. But you will..."

Sasuke tried to fight back. Mentally, he willed Yuji to burn. To burst into catastrophic flame and die.

A small fire started at the hem of Yuji's cloak.

"Pathetic."

The single spoken word extinguished the flame, leaving only a curly wisp of smoke.

"Is that your best counter-attack? Now that I've robbed you of your precious eyes, you seem...useless. It seems like you're going to come with me, whether you want to or not. Come see the life I led for years."

Sasuke was suddenly in a darkened room. He could hear the rattling of something metal. Clanking as it dragged across the floor.

A chain?

“This is how much ‘light’ I had in my life, Sasuke. My family was alive and well. And yet...nothing. I was doomed to fail. I was damned to fall short of my goals. The best I could hope for was the role of a servant.”

A candle sent flickering light into the darkness, warming the room. Sasuke could now see a person in chains. All but his head.

The person was restrained at the arms. They were pinned above his head by chain, stretching his body to the limit. The figure was naked, and not a single part of the naked body had been spared torture. Wounds had healed and then been torn apart. Again and again; a never-ending symphony of agony. The floor held pools of both fresh and dried blood.. The skin that wasn't red with shed blood was horribly pale.

“You, Sasuke, had choices. You made all the wrong ones. You chose to be alone. You chose to fail. You chose to fall short of your potential. I was never given that choice. I was told I was going to fail. I would gain power, but I would fail. And I would do it alone, save for service to my master and mistress.”

Sasuke could suddenly see the head on the body. It was his own.

The sight shocked him, and that gave him just enough of a burst of adrenaline to counter.

Yuji suddenly held a knife in his hand. Sasuke forced the knife toward Yuji's heart. Yuji's arms moved, straining against Sasuke. Another Yuji appeared and gripped the knife as well, pushing even harder. The tip touched Yuji's chest and drew blood.

“I wouldn't be watching me, if I were you,” Yuji cautioned, sounding calm despite his impending ‘death’. “See what you're doing over there?”

Before the naked, chain-up Sasuke, there were older children. They had no faces, but they were unmistakably the twelve year old Sakura and the eleven year old Naruto. They were as Sasuke first met them. Once he noticed that, his vision split, so that he could see the tied up figure as well as be the tied-up figure.

The younger Sakura giggled and looked away blushing once she saw Sasuke naked. Naruto laughed and pointed. But their voices weren't their own. They were generic voices and creepy as hell. Shadows speaking through a filter. Dead, emotionless yet cruel voices.

Yuji found he was free of the limited influence Sasuke had managed to gain.

“Do you want to see what happens to them when you desert them of your own volition? It isn't pretty, Sasuke. She cried, you know. So did he, actually. And they did everything to bring you back. But they're ready to give up on you. Is that what you want? To be really and truly alone? You've felt the pain of what I've had to live with. Being born to fail isn't easy. You don't have to be saddled with that destiny, or any destiny at all.”

The children's laughter turned cruel and demonic. All Sasuke could see was glowing red eyes of his

small attackers as they used their teeth and nails to bite and rip into his flesh...

--

--

Yuji released his genjutsu and immediately dropped to one knee. That had taken a lot of effort. But Yuji had Sasuke dead to rights and had let him live.

Because of master and mistress...I hope I reached him. The old Sasuke. If not, then I'm just as screwed as he is.

Sasuke, however, seemed to be in no shape to fight back. His chakra was gone, and he was shaken to the core. He collapsed to both knees, then folded forward; a quivering mess.

Jugo, Karin, and Suigetsu had all been standing across from their counterparts in mid-battle. They had all halted when Yuji and Sasuke had burst from the cave. Their silent battle had lasted only seconds, but it seemed an eternity.

"NOOO!" Jugo roared, the sight of a defeated Sasuke triggering his violent tendencies. He partially transformed and moved to smash Yuji. But he hit only air.

Kuroko was holding Yuji on the other side of the mountain, cradling him to her chest as she rested on one knee. He was conscious, but with his chakra so low any more fighting might well have killed him.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you, Yuji. About this ability of mine. But I didn't want you to think I was weak." She set him down gently, laying his head in her lap as she settled down onto both knees. "Speed is all I'm good for. And speed is best for retreat. But even more...you seemed like you wanted a 'normal' girl. But, oh well, right?"

Yuji could only manage a small smile. "Oh well, indeed. Beautiful and strong- I'm one lucky guy."

Jugo's enlarged hand smashed down, striking nothing but rock.

Kojiro's hammer smashed into Jugo's knee, while Azami's invisible wind sword was held at his neck. Kuroko had yet again moved to the other side of the mountain. This time, Yuji saw her move.

She sort of...skates. Or glides, maybe? Either way, she's really fast. A lot of combat potential there. Oh, yeah, and she's saved my skin twice now. Hot and powerful- just my kind of combo.

"Stop."

Sasuke had barely whispered the word, but it was clearly heard by all. He pushed himself up until he was standing, albeit wobbly.

"Enough. We're withdrawing. There's too much...no, we're withdrawing now. Right now."

“But Sasuke, we just-” Suigestu protested.

“NOW!” roared Sasuke, cutting off his reply.

But before Sasuke could move, Yuji was on him again, this time a bare fist hitting him across the jaw.

“Not yet. You’re not going anywhere yet!” shouted Yuji. Before everyone, his wings exploded outward into tiny fire-filled fragments, disappearing with a sound akin to glass breaking.

“Your Sharingan is gone, and I’ve made my point. Now we fight without our special abilities. Azami, Kojiro, Kuroko- now!”

All three bit into their thumbs at once, letting the blood drop onto the ground. Underneath their feet, a symbol of summoning appeared. A black barrier sprang up, creating a wedge-shaped space.

Sasuke staggered to his feet, but Yuji knocked him down again with a hard kick to the stomach. Sasuke staggered back, but Yuji doggedly pursued, hitting Sasuke with everything he had. Punch, punch, kick, uppercut. Sasuke hit the ground, and Yuji stomped down on his stomach. Sasuke coughed up blood, and it projected upward onto Yuji’s face.

Yuji pressed his foot down into Sasuke’s stomach, twisting his heel in deeper and deeper. He was being completely vicious; fighting with a complete reckless abandon.

“Get up.”

Sasuke lay still, his body aching horribly. He had no reserves left with which to resist Yuji. He simply lay there, bleeding and panting. A hard kick hit his ribs, cracking them.

“Get up, I said. Is this all you are? All your bluster; all the damage you’ve done. I should kill you right now.”

Yuji fist rocketed downward one more time. Sasuke closed his eyes, anticipating the blow. But Yuji’s fist stopped short of Sasuke’s face.

“...but I won’t kill you. You mean too much to too many people. Naruto, Sakura, Karin, Jugo, Suigestu, Kakashi, Lady Hokage...even me. You have people waiting for you, Sasuke. You killed Itachi; you proved your strength. Whatever it is you think you have left to prove...you don’t. So do the right thing. Go back to the Leaf with them. With Naruto and Sakura. Become the legend you’re destined to become...”

Yuji felt his knees buckle. He smirked to himself, realizing just how bizarre his actions had been. No one used Genjutsu against an Uchiha like that. It was so bizarre that he had caught Sasuke completely off guard. Even if Sasuke was stronger physically, Yuji was more clever. The blacking out part was worth it to find this out. He just hoped Sasuke wouldn’t recover and kill him before he woke up.

To defeat an Uchiha in genjutsu, ninjutsu, and taijutsu...damned near legendary. Too bad no one is here to crown *me* a legend.

97 - FINAL ARC: Part 1

Yuji woke up with his head in Kuroko's lap. His whole body ached, but his mind was clear and free for the first time in ages.

He sat up slowly, breathing evenly.

"A little longer, Yuji?" Kuroko requested in a voice that was hiding a fair bit of emotion. My lap is lonely."

Obligingly, Yuji laid back down.

"Did it work?"

Kuroko was too overcome to speak, so instead Azami's voice spoke to him.

"It did. Naruto and Sakura came. The psychological damage you did during your genjutsu battle took root, and Sasuke left with them freely. Suigestu, Jugo, and Karin went with him as well, saying that Sasuke was the reason they were free, so they would stay with him."

Yuji nodded, exhaling out of pure relief.

"Good. I was worried I'd have to kill him. Or rather, that he would die before I could completely break his spirit on the physical and mental planes. I'm surprised to find that I really believe I could have killed him, if I had to. I'm less surprised that I still want to. After all, I did just fulfill part of the prophecy for him, in his favor."

With a question in his voice, Kojiro said "But you aren't dying."

Yuji shook his head. "No. But as someone who was more powerful than him, in my authority, I made him one of the next legends..."

"Which means that you won't be..." Azami murmured. "Why? Why would you do that?"

Yuji turned to face her, but kept his head on Kuroko's lap.

"If I hadn't, he would have committed suicide. I know. I've seen that look before. In the water right before I hit it. The reflection of my own face..."

--

--

Yuji returned to the Leaf Village, walking through the gate normally. He had shed his white cloak, returning to his old, comfortable black coat. His hair had dulled to its normal dark brown after a while, as his chakra receded. His tattoo had also stopped glowing.

It was clear that a celebration had been in progress for at least two full days. Banners that said 'Welcome Home Uchiha' and the like were strung all over.

It was surreal. Yuji had never felt so removed from the world. He was still in a state of shock, he imagined. He hadn't really expected his idea to work so well.

It was as if he was isolated from the party. He walked through silently, right down the center of the road. The party raged on on either side of him, but he walked straight through. The faceless crowd didn't seem to notice him either. The effects of two days worth of boozing.

He heard his name called, but didn't answer. He kept walking straight on his solitary journey.

He didn't stop walking until he reached the memorial obelisk. The black flames from his 'captured' Amaterasu attack still burned in the holder where he'd transported them. The holder itself was made by a master craftsman. The stone was thick but beautifully carved into the shape of a lantern that you might see outside a Shinto shrine.

Kneeling near the flickering black flame, Yuji prayed for the deceased, his hands folded accordingly to his religion. How long he stood there, he didn't know. He was aware that people were waiting behind him. He ignored them, as he was off to the side. If they needed to pass, they could easily. If they were waiting for him, well, he didn't want to talk to anyone right now.

I'm happy. So why do I feel miserable? Is it because there's no mission now? Or is it because I really wanted to be a legend? That must be it. I wanted to stand among Naruto and Sakura as an equal for a change. But I gave the honor away to save a life. And I know it was the right thing to do. I guess it's just going to hurt for a while.

Whoever was behind him wasn't leaving. Finally, he'd had enough. He turned around to see who it was.

Shiroko and a man Yuji didn't know.

"Yuji..."

Yuji didn't reply. Shiroko was too sore a spot to deal with right now. He just looked back at her, allowing himself to betray no emotion on his face. That was in direct contrast to the anger radiating from him.

"I had to see for myself..."

Shiroko reached a hand out toward Yuji's face. Yuji let her touch his face for a moment, letting her know that his anger had nothing to do with her.

"...I had to see that you made it. I'm glad you're alive. I was worried."

"I'm fine."

Yuji had bit the words off so sharply that even he was surprised.

Shiroko smiled sadly. "No. No, you aren't fine. But you will be. Given time, you'll be-"

“Dead. Given time, I’ll be dead, and it’ll be relief!” Yuji exploded. He was suddenly, inexplicably angry. He didn’t want to be consoled. He wanted this anger to consume him. It felt good...no, it hurt...both. It hurt and it felt good.

Shiroko’s smile faded, but she didn’t move away. “I’d hoped I could have done more for you. To ease your suffering. But I wasn’t able to do that.”

“You were. You made me happy. But it’s like you said- I tied my self-worth to my job. And more than that, I tied my entire life to my job. And now, my job is finished. So I need to decide what my life is. What’s left?”

Yuji looked to the man, suddenly knowing his name.

“Kaname-sama, isn’t it? I’m sorry, I don’t know your last name, or I would address you accordingly...”

Yuji bowed to him, and then to Shiroko.

“We’ll catch up some time, okay?” he called back. “He’s welcome, too, you know?”

Shiroko let him go, her hand still extended as if she could touch his face. Kaname moved to join her, his arm steady around her waist. Shiroko leaned her head against his shoulder.

“He’s alive. As alive as he ever is. I had to see for myself. He was...and is... so close to death. Always so close to death.”

--
--

Yuji retrieved his headband from Tsunade’s office the next day, speaking to no one unless necessary. Tsunade had all the details from Azami, who had saved Yuji from having to report, mercifully. Tsunade put up no false fronts of happiness. Yuji had done a great service, but she understood very well the sacrifice it had taken on his part. There was nothing she could do to remedy it.

“My Lady...is the prophecy still in-tact and unaltered?”

Tsunade had checked earlier, once it was apparent that Sasuke would live. The prophecy had remained mostly unchanged. The only alteration was the note that Sasuke was a legend, and that end of the prophecy was fulfilled.

Tsunade informed him of the change, trying to sound upbeat when she told him that the power of ‘Heaven’s Temper’ were his to keep, despite the fact that he and Sasuke still lived.

“...I understand. I’ll resume my duties now. Sorry for the trouble.”

--

Yuji returned home and sat down. He was so depressed and he couldn’t figure out why. He had a girlfriend, he had his old life back, and there was no way he’d ever be unemployed. So what was wrong?

You beat Sasuke, you know. That makes you more powerful than a legend. Naruto may be above you, but you're above Sasuke. And Naruto is the one you're never supposed to catch up to. So maybe things are okay.

A small smile crept across Yuji's face gradually. He *had* beaten Sasuke, hadn't he? That wasn't a small accomplishment. He'd help Naruto and Sakura achieve their mission of returning Sasuke to the Leaf. Another big victory.

So why doesn't this feel like a win? What is wrong with me?

Yuji rolled over onto his bed and propped his chin up on his pillow, staring at nothing with an angry grimace on his face. He hadn't expected victory to feel so empty. It was like...where do I go from here?

Sitting at home like this wasn't helping. So Yuji got up, extracted an outfit consisting of plain, unadorned black pants and shirt, socks, ankle boots, and his long black overcoat. He stalked out into the street, his face set in a dull, angry expression.

How long is this stupid party going to go on for? he wondered, irritated by the festivities suddenly. Why was there no party for the victor? Why did the loser get all the attention? Yuji had been on the losing end enough times to know that he certainly wasn't showered with happiness when he lost.

Once again, everyone cut him a wide path. He ignored the shocked, angry, and even the sympathetic looks. Apparently, his story was getting around, and some people actually understood that he had been involved in their big celebration.

It made Yuji's blood boil. These people. Any excuse to party. Why not train and get in decent shape? Then you can rescue your own damned friends. Even as he thought it, Yuji realized that was unfair. But he found that he didn't care much. Why should he?

Now that he thought about, Yuji couldn't figure out why he stuck his neck out for anyone. Was it because he just wanted an excuse to fight, but couldn't bear to be a 'bad guy'? That seemed eerily realistic to him. It was scary that that seemed to be the truth. When had his values become so warped? Or was he over thinking things?

Yuji shook his head. He was as sane as anyone else. Maybe more so. This anger, this unfeeling, unflinching, cold anger was not natural. It was only natural to feel disappointed when things didn't go your way. But when they never went your way? What, then, were you supposed to feel?

Apparently, a cold, dark hatred for people you know are innocent of any wrongdoing.

Yuji had been turning over another thing in his head, and it had been contributing to his foul mood. There was one more giant, looming threat. And that was Pain. They knew his base of operations. They could send a strike force of only the best (so as not to endanger civilians) and wipe Pain out. End this whole threat.

But if we attack first, it would be a nightmare from a diplomatic standpoint. It would cause

another war because we'd lose the ability to say it was self-defense. An equal number of lives may be lost either way, so I can't justify it that way, either.

Yuji's walk led him outside the village. He wandered with no destination. That was an accurate metaphor for his life, he decided. Now what did he do? If he couldn't fight Pain, and he had no more reason to protect Naruto and Sakura, then what was there? He couldn't live a 'normal' life- not now. Not after what he'd seen and done, and especially not with Ten no Kishootsu's ability living inside him.

As he pondered this, Yuji felt someone coming. Not in the normal way, either. A summoning, but in reverse. He'd felt this once before, and the last time he did it was those toads ripping him away from his peaceful reality to deal with Sasuke. He had been absolutely demolished that time, to the point where he'd be embarrassed to deal with the toads again.

This time, he went nowhere, but instead had someone else join him. It was Jiraiya, and with him were two of the toads Yuji had met before.

It was apparent instantly that they had been through the wringer. The toads were beat up and panting from exertion, while Jiraiya himself was missing an arm.

Yuji immediately hived off a clone to go get help. He knelt down to see what first aid he could administer, though it was almost instantly obvious that there was nothing he could do. Jiraiya wouldn't die, but Yuji couldn't help him, either.

Then again...

Yuji instructed the Elder Toads to hold onto Jiraiya with a loose genjutsu. Once they had complied, Yuji used his special genjutsu to put Jiraiya in a sort of mental stasis. He left his physical body to tend to the damage while he spoke with Jiraiya.

It was no accident that those toads found him.

98 - FINAL ARC: Part 2

Genjutsu

Yuji found Jiraiya just starting to stand up when he entered the genjutsu. Jiraiya was visibly shaken, and that was no easy feat. You didn't get to be a legend without nerves of steel.

Jiraiya wasted no time on small talk. He grabbed Yuji with his good arm, hauling the young man close.

"...Pain...he's coming. There's six of him...no, seven. Six that attack. One that is hidden somewhere. There's...no weakness I could exploit. Nothing. I was completely beaten... You've got to...got to get everyone out of here."

"I've sent a clone for medical help. There's no time for an evacuation. So I'll fight and buy the time."

Jiraiya grasped Yuji's arm, halting him.

"They have...one weakness. And it plays to your strengths..."

--

Yuji knew better than to tackle this alone. He relayed his information to clone. Or tried to. Instead, his clone reported that seven figures had attacked the village. Help was en route to Master Jiraiya.

Which means I'm too late already!

Yuji allowed his Ten no Kishootsu power to seep out. His firey wings extended regally behind him, free from their flesh and blood prison. Yuji's hair darkened to the black of charcoal, and his eyes to dark, shiny obsidian.

He took to the skies. It didn't take long to see his adversaries. In fact, he almost ran smack into a three-headed dog. What the hell was a dog doing two hundred feet in the air? More importantly, why was it two hundred feet tall with eyes like a demon?

No matter. It was attacking. That was all the fact Yuji needed to take action.

Sensing something, Yuji turned to his right quickly. He just avoided a spear made of...paper?

To his surprise, there was someone else with wings, flying way up here. She was female, with dark, mournful eyes, an expressionless, pale face, and piercings decorating her ears and face.

"Lord Pain will not be denied," she told Yuji by way of greeting.

Yuji sent a fire jutsu toward the girl. If she was made of paper, then problem solved.

The sheets of paper that made the girl up separated into hundreds of butterfly origami. They clustered and attacked Yuji as one. He flew upward, corkscrewing wildly to dodge the attacks. When the paper did hit him, the cuts were deep, but nowhere vital.

Finally, Yuji was tired of flying away. He decided to take a chance and test the abilities of his opponent. It was horribly nerve-wracking to just let your opponent hit you, but sometimes it was necessary. So Yuji folded his wings around him and let himself fall.

A few of the deadly butterflies hit him but simply burned up into cinders. That meant that fire was a good defense, as common sense would seem to dictate. But in a shinobi battle, where the laws of the universe were tested constantly, you could take nothing for granted.

Yuji moved himself over a bit, using a brief burst from his wings. Then he solidified his chakra and let himself fall to earth. By design, he shot right through the two hundred foot tall dog he'd nearly run into before. He took one of its heads clean off, though to his chagrin two more grew back.

More impressive was the effect his entrance had.

The embattled Leaf shinobi cheered as one when Yuji's wings peeled back to reveal him. Their response to him touched Yuji. They did care. They loved him. They accepted him. For the first time, he belonged somewhere.

And I was ready to damn these people. But...

He took only a brief moment to see the cheering faces. But all around, he saw those who were injured, and even more who were dying or dead. All within only a minute or two. The Leaf were beyond competent when it came to fighting. So how could this happen? And why?

Yuji let the warm feeling of belonging seep over him, ignoring the mindless rage he'd felt at seeing the injured and dead. He'd even battled back an image of Miko. Seeing her lifeless body again had invigorated him plenty.

Without any further delay, he charged at Pain. He didn't know or care which one. When the dog creature jumped in the way, he decided he was attacking the 'Summoning Pain'. That was fine wit him.

After seeing it self-replicate, I think the safest course of action-

"SHOUKYAKU JUTSU!"

-is total destruction. Maybe if I leave no material of the original summoning it'll take more time to cast the jutsu again.

The dog-thing from hell exploded mightily, filling the air with an oppressive heat. But when the dust settled Yuji had tackled the 'Summoning Pain' and carried him/her away, high into the air.

More to energize the people below him than out of absolute necessity, Yuji made a spectacle of destroying this Pain. He whipped around behind him, holding the arms by the hands that had caused

such damage. He stomped on Pain's back, separated the arms. He threw them in opposite directions, then shoulder-tackled Pain and drove him hard into the ground, pulling himself up at the last second- and taking the head with him.

Yuji more than anyone knew just how fast these guys could rebuild themselves. That was why he scattered the body parts as far as he could. It would buy time- he hoped.

An arm snared Yuji's coat and pushed him into a wall of a still-standing building. As soon as he felt it's touch, Yuji clapped his wings behind him, gripping the arm that was in turn gripping him. He hit the wall legs-first, rebounding backward and upside-down. He shot his standard fire jutsu at whoever had grabbed him. This Pain wasn't one he had faced before, so he wasn't sure of it's ability. In case he fell, best to illustrate it's abilities to the others, he decided, instead of trying and failing to destroy it.

He landed in front of this Pain, beating his wings to keep the moving in case he needed to go airborne again quickly.

Analyzing his enemy, Yuji had to admit he was tempted to underestimate him/it. It was fat, bald-headed, and had a stupid look on it's face. Yuji knew better than to make any generalizations; as he'd discovered, this Pain was neither slow nor particularly noisy due to it's size.

While sizing up this Pain, Yuji noticed that the other Pains behaved in interesting ways. The one Yuji had termed the 'Lead Pain' attacked more or less as he wished. He was always accompanied by one other Pain. That one was a defense-oriented Pain. It blocked any attacks that were directed toward the 'Lead Pain' and another Pain behind it, which was occasionally grabbing people and apparently ripping their tongues out. The last Pain was killing people seemingly only by touching them.

All of them were dangerous. The Pain Yuji had managed to destroy had not yet appeared, and neither had it's monstrous summon. That was one Pain down, mercifully.

Now the Pain in front of Yuji took priority. Sick as it made Yuji feel to let people die, this Pain had split off from the main group, making itself vulnerable. That had to be taken advantage of.

Yuji fainted a move toward Pain; another elongated arm shot out.

One trick. Okay, now we can-

Yuji didn't have time to react beyond tucking his chin and crossing his arms in front of him as Pain suddenly shot forward with speed surprising of such a thickly built creature. It's body barreled into Yuji at top speed, sending him flying backward through three of the remaining standing buildings.

--

--

Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura had been off by themselves, catching up pleasantly (if a little awkwardly). Their walk took them past all the places where they had memories. Naruto being tied up at the training field. The way they'd bonded during the chunin exams during the 'Forest of Death' portion of the test. There was nothing in the forest they couldn't handle these days.

They were powerful. All of them. Naruto with his Sage training; Sakura with her medical expertise and powerful taijutsu; Sasuke with his mastery of the Uchiha Sharingan and the three major jutsu that went with it. All of them were beyond formidable. And re-united, they felt invincible.

Their walk took them to the main gate of the Hidden Leaf. It was there that they finally realized that a battle was going on.

Master Jiraiya was still lying in the road, his arm not yet reattached, though one of the toads had brought it with them. Shizune and Tsunade were working feverishly, doing all they could to keep Jiraiya stabilized without any equipment outside of their own chakra.

Sakura ran to help. If two medical geniuses were good, a third could only help.

Sasuke and Naruto decided to join the fight in the Hidden Leaf. The three female medics were all capable of taking care of themselves in combat, so they didn't see the need to stick around to protect them.

As they attempted to enter the village, they found their path blocked by who Sasuke knew to be Konan. With her was a Pain, but it had performed no jutsu.

"Lord Pain," said Konan into thin air, "I've had 'Animal Path Pain' repaired. We've isolated the nine-tails jinchuriki, as well as Uchiha Sasuke, and additional others. They're treating Master Jiraiya."

She received an answer, apparently, because she said 'Understood' into the air again. She faced the Leaf Shinobi, blocking their path to the Village.

"Lord Pain is killing the heretics of this village. You will not interfere."

Sasuke was used to taking charge of a group, and he responded quickly:

"Sakura, protect the healers. Naruto, you're with me. We won't give him a chance to use his jutsu!"

For the first time in years, Naruto and Sasuke were on the same side. They attacked together, and it was like Sasuke had never left. They were charging together against an enemy that was, by all indications, stronger than they were.

Haku.
Zabuza.
Orochimaru.

Stronger or not, these enemies would get a fight. Now that Sasuke had his head on straight, he decided that maybe Itachi had a point or two about the Leaf and its people.

99 - FINAL ARC: Part 3

Yuji shook off the cobwebs, stepping out of the rubble of the building. The arm that had smashed him into the building was attacking again. Yuji dodged to the side. As he did, the hand that pushed him morphed into a dozen blades, long and thin as chopsticks. They branched out after him. He leaned farther to the side, misjudging just a bit and getting a light cut on his cheek.

If I close the distance, then this attack is useless...

Yuji kicked forward hard, his chakra propelling him faster. He zig-zagged, dodging another strike by the now-bladed arm as it drew back toward the main body. Pain lowered his head. Yuji knew that at the least a head butt was coming. But there was no good reason to put your head in danger. And given that he'd just seen this thing grow blades, he decided it might be best to hit the dirt.

Just as he did, a blast of chakra erupted out of the crowd of Pain's head, completely obliterating the building Yuji had just exited. Fragments rained down all over, covering the injured and dead mercilessly. No fragment was bigger than a pebble.

That could have been me! Yuji thought, glad he followed his gut.

Using his chakra to keep sliding forward on his back, he then got to a kneeling position. He simultaneously punched Pain's midsection and swept his legs. Pain went down, but Yuji found that his hand had been sliced nearly in half. The force of the punch had ripped the cloak off Pain's body.

A metal sash. Like having a sword that's a belt.

A blaze of fire shot up Yuji's hand, searing it closed. He used a basic first aid jutsu Sakura had taught him to stitch his hand back together. He would need it.

The sash shot up toward Yuji. He dodged backward, just beyond the blade's limit. Being back far enough allowed Yuji to get a look at this Pain's face for the first time. It had no ears. Where ears should have been were two more faces. One happy, one sad, and one angry. Abruptly, Pain's head turned around, and Yuji found himself staring at the 'angry' face.

And I somehow missed the fact that this guy has six arms. One of them contains blades. So what do the others do?

As if in answer, Pain's other arm opened up. Yuji steadied himself, ready to move. His first instinct proved to be correct as he was suddenly staring down six projectile weapons moving toward him very quickly.

He went airborne, sustaining his height with his wings. The mini-missiles changed direction and followed him. Yuji took off flying quickly. He didn't want those things to hit him, but if they did, he couldn't let them explode near anyone else.

Suddenly, Yuji was pulled away from his high-speed chase. He couldn't see anything pulling him, but he knew the feel well enough. It was Pain's 'Universal Pull' jutsu, and it was bringing him right to the 'Lead' Pain. A quick glance behind him revealed that the missiles were still following.

The 'Lead' Pain was now in full view, holding that odd black sword of his. He stood ready to impale Yuji. The big Pain that Yuji had seen absorb jutsu after jutsu was nearby, apparently in case Yuji decided to counter-attack. That was fine with Yuji.

"SHOUKYAKU JUTSU!" he shouted, aiming his strongest jutsu at Pain. As expected, the big Pain jumped in the way and took it. The impact of that jutsu shook him, but he held. That wasn't very promising, Yuji decided. No, he couldn't defeat that thing. But that other Pain...he knew his tricks and had months to think about how to counter it. Coupled with this 'Defending' Pain, Yuji had to think fast and creatively, but he did. It was as if he couldn't become flustered; as if the fire protecting his body also shielded his mind.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Three clones appeared outside of 'Lead' Pain's pull and ran around the 'Defense' Pain to attack. 'Defense' Pain stayed still, as Yuji expected. Yuji himself was the most potent threat. Yuji could deal with that.

Giving up on his initial plan, Yuji simply pulled away from Pain's pull. It wasn't easy, but it wasn't impossible. Not with his new abilities, coupled with the distance at which Pain had initiated the jutsu. And now those missiles would come in handy. Yuji flew just out of reach of the 'Defense' Pain. The missiles followed. Once they were over 'Defense' Pain, Yuji detonated them with a fire jutsu. That gave him a temporary smoke screen. He aimed to take advantage of it.

"Almighty Push!"

So much for that, Yuji thought, soaring higher, circling the group of Three Pains below. As the smoke cleared, Yuji saw three tongues of orange hair. Something about that bothered him. He couldn't quite place what until he felt a huge chakra behind him.

Another one! And he got behind me!

--
--

Yuji moved higher still, narrowly avoiding the touch of a Pain with long orange hair. He felt a chill around him as the Pain's hand just touched his wings. He had no visible means of flying, which probably meant that one of the other Pains threw him up here.

That feeling...Like someone walked across my grave...

Below him, Yuji saw the bald Pain with six arms he'd been fighting breaking rank and running toward the gate. From this high up, Yuji could only see a few specks representing people. The number in the group and position told him that there were two people kneeling next to one lying down. Three were in front, standing as if in defense, trying to get through the gate. When a surge of lightning chakra flared

from that position, Yuji could figure out that it had to be either Sasuke or Kakashi.

Either way, he's likely to be with Master and Mistress. But they've got two enemies on them, plus that 'freak' Pain en route. I've got three of my own here...I should protect Master and Mistress first...but over there with them is Lady Tsunade, Master Jiraiya, Shizune, and Sasuke. I'd be of no help. That's almost all of the village's strength over there.

...

So I'll focus on my fight here. That's five of six Pains accounted for. Sasuke, Naruto and Sakura are more than a match for that group, especially if Jiraiya tells them about the abilities he saw. That leaves three for me and whoever shows up as back-up.

--

--

Shoki had been with Asuna on an enjoyable date. They hadn't left the temple grounds, but they were so beautiful and peaceful there was hardly a need to. The trees were almost bare since winter was approaching, but that added a certain beauty. When the last green leaf fell into Asuna's lap as they sat under a tree to have tea a ripple of unease went through Shoki.

"An omen- ngh!"

Shoki was already kneeling or he would have fallen. His head dipped forward. Asuna immediately moved to catch him. As she touched him and their chakras mixed, she saw what he saw through his one good eye.

-

The Leaf village, split into six views. Three of which were trained on Yuji from different angles, each showing the destruction of the village. One was moving constantly, showing destroyed buildings and the dead and dying. The other two were battling with Sakura, Naruto, and Sasuke. In the very edge of those fields of vision lay Master Jiraiya, covered with green healing chakra, Tsunade and Shizune on either side of him.

The destruction was unbelievable. To view it while not being involved was crippling. Even as Yuji engaged three Pains and was blown backward hard, Shoki found it hard to move. He eventually forced himself up.

"I've got to go," he said simply. Before Asuna could answer, he held her and kissed her. They were alone, so there was no reason to be ashamed of a kiss. She was certainly receptive, as though the idea had crossed her mind as well.

They broke apart, touching foreheads briefly.

"I'll be back," promised Shoki.

Asuna nodded. "I know. I'll be waiting. But now we both have our parts to play in this final battle."

Shoki nodded and used a teleportation ninjutsu to move toward the Leaf at top speed. Asuna watched

him go only for a moment before she stood up and summoned Akari. The girl arrived at her feet in a kneeling position.

“Akari, the future I saw is coming to pass. Our role is beginning now. Please summon the necessary elements from the Leaf village-”

Asuna stopped there, suddenly bristling. A dark energy suddenly invaded the temple. But it was not malevolent- not now. Just a different order of chakra. And it was familiar at that. Someone Asuna had met before, when her guard was down.

She didn't wonder for long. Kuroko and Shiroko came around a building, each of them carrying a bag in their arms. They approached respectfully, bowing at the right time at a respectful distance.

“We had a feeling these would be helpful. We found ourselves well supplied suddenly,” Kuroko announced, somewhat uncomfortable. “These are legally obtained, with permission granted. That can be verified as necessary.”

Shiroko came closer, holding both bags now. Her energy was not the dark energy that Asuna had felt so she did nothing to deter her approach. She also did nothing when the bags were laid at her feet without a word. Shiroko bowed and walked backward toward her cousin.

“We know something of your arts, Lady Uzume. Our families intertwine back several generations. So we know the old legends as you do. But the practical side of this eludes our ability to practice in a...pure way. Regardless, please help them all. And if there is any sin, we take it on ourselves.”

Shiroko finished her speech, looked to Kuroko (who smiled grimly and nodded), and they left without another word.

Asuna watched them go, but very quickly her gaze drifted to the bags at her feet.

“Akari.”

Wasting no time, Akari got to work. She made the necessary markings on the ground while Asuna prepared the torches. When they were both prepared, Akari unzipped the first bag. She placed her hand inside the bag and closed her eyes.

“Male; age thirty. Death by...drowning. Not murder. An accident. He had given permission to use his remains...”

Asuna swallowed some rising bile and indicated the bag.

“Then he'll come first. Please find clothes to fit them while I do my part...”

I wasn't aware of this...Miko never passed this knowledge on. What is their involvement? And why did the chakra of the one feel so...different? A different order of chakra. Black like Yuji's original chakra, and deep...but it felt like...two chakras. One overlaid on the other. Not existing side by side in harmony like Yuji's and Heaven's Temper. These chakras were in conflict.

Asuna shook her head, forcing her thoughts back to the delicate task at hand. Akari was being her usual efficient self, having already prepared the second body as well as clothing.

--
--

Yuji stood off against the three Pains. It was a stalemate for the moment, and Yuji was prepared to hold it as long as he could. Even a few seconds might save a life. At this point, minimizing the damage was about all he could do.

Since this fight began, Yuji had felt it. His first instinct was, first and foremost, to protect his master and mistress. But in this case, he could feel his thoughts being pushed elsewhere. Already he'd allowed them to fight their own battles against three Pains. He found he was fine with that. As if it were the natural course of things.

He knew it would be time to step aside soon. Only Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura could deliver the final blows. That much was evident from the prophecy. But just as evident was that Yuji's job was to clear the path for them. To make something like this as easy as possible. To wear Pain down was his job now. If he could defeat Pain, great. But if not, well, the others would do that.

Despite the horrid devastation, it never occurred to Yuji that they might not rally and win. This battle was over already, and the Leaf won. They would survive, as they always had. And grow stronger. And now it was time for him to play his part.

Eyeing his opponents, Yuji noted that the 'Lead' Pain was not one he could defeat. It didn't 'feel' right. But the other two were fair game.

The entire village seemed to be watching. Most had never seen Yuji in his most splendid form. He realized now was not the time to hold anything in reserve. Not with everyone watching. And they were rooting for him. Depending on him. It was all the acknowledgement and responsibility he ever wanted.

Yuji politely asked the Pains: "May I have your names?"

The 'Lead' Pain spoke for all of them.

"Your turmoil is fascinating, Heaven's Temper. To show respect, I will grant your request. I am Tendo. To my right is Gakido. To my left is Ningendo. But collectively, we are Pain."

Yuji gave a short, polite bow in reply to each name. "Courtesy requires I give my own name, though you know it already. But to go through the motions: I am Yuji Itou, formerly Kimhiro Tadayoshi- also 'Ten no Kishootsu'- Heaven's Temper."

Pain looked at Yuji. Yuji looked at Pain. They were sizing one another up.

The next second, one Pain had rushed forward. Yuji jumped back instinctively, not knowing what this Pain's ability was.

"Universal Pull!"

Yuji found himself being pulled forward again. He dug in his heels and fought. The Pain with the unknown ability jumped in the way. His hand reached out to touch Yuji.

“NO!”

Konohamaru jumped in the way. He knew what this Pain could do. He also knew that he had no chance to fight these monsters. Yuji did. So he sacrificed himself to show Yuji what this Pain could do all while saving Yuji's life. He took a vindictive swipe by jamming the most powerful Rasengan he could muster into Pain's arm, blowing the arm clean off.

And Yuji...he watched Konohamaru's soul get ripped away from his body. He had no time to grieve at that moment. He could only thank Konohamaru silently for the intelligence he'd sacrificed himself to give Yuji.

That gave Yuji an idea of his own. He formed a clone of fire- the first time he'd ever done it successfully- and had the clone begin to pass on his findings to any jonin or chunin it could find.

“My abilities don't seem to affect you like they do the others,” Tendo stated calmly. “But your ability doesn't affect me. It would take more than you've got to destroy Gakido, and Ningendo can easily kill you. So we're at a stalemate until Ningendo gets a hold of you.”

Yes! Exactly!

“You don't know that. You've been so busy with Naruto that you've got no idea what I can do. I'm not the same man you defeated before. When I lost my wife...and I nearly lost Shoki, too. I gave you a fight back then, and I'm more powerful now. But I don't think you've gotten more powerful. I think you've peaked. So we are down to two options. One: I defeat you outright. Two: We stay at a stalemate. Whoever you really are, you'll lose a lot of chakra by fighting me. Even if I don't get you, the next guy in line will. I'm only the appetizer, Pain. But will you have enough left for the main course?”

Pain and Yuji locked eyes. Again, perfect for what Yuji wanted. Without using words or handsigns, he manipulated his chakra to use a genjutsu.

Bringer of Darkness!

Tendo blinked but didn't seem all that troubled. Gakido also stopped moving.

“That is a pointless effort,” came Tendo's chiding voice. “What one sees, we all see.”

He's walking right into a trap. Perfect.

“Yes, and? You can't break the genjutsu through pain, since you, ironically enough, can't feel it. And since all six of you share the same chakra, you can't break the genjutsu on each other.”

Tendo had taken the bait. Yuji couldn't believe it worked that perfectly. When Tendo charged with his sword, all Yuji had to do was make sure he didn't get hit with a fatal blow. He got stabbed through the left shoulder with that odd black sword and he couldn't have been happier.

Pain realized too late what he'd done. The chakra receiver shared by all the Pains! He had said it himself- what one saw the all saw. All the Pains' vision turned to absolute darkness as Yuji's chakra ran through Pain's sword back into his body, and therefore to all the others. If the 'Pain Master' could still see, his pawns couldn't.

"That fire clone...you pushed your Ten no Kishootsu chakra into it so my sword couldn't affect it. Only 'Yuji's' chakra is jammed. But your clone cast the jutsu, not you! He just pretended to run for it."

Yuji nodded, forgetting that Pain couldn't see the gesture. So he acknowledged: "Yes, that's right. That's it, exactly. And by letting you stab me, I delayed your arrival at that conclusion just long enough. Even if you had prevented me from using my genjutsu, my clone would have been free to without fear of reprisal from you. I'll have to remember to thank Master Jiraiya for cluing me in to your weakness."

100 - FINAL ARC: Part 4

All of a sudden, the Pains stopped moving. Konan kept attacking at first, but she froze when she realized the Pains had stopped moving. Sasuke took the opportunity to launch a fire jutsu at Konan, catching her on the left side of her upper chest and face. It did enough damage to at least stun her.

“Let’s go!”

Jiraiya wasn’t patched up yet, so Shizune, Sakura, and Tsunade stayed behind to deal with him in case the Pains began to move again. It would be up to Naruto, Sasuke, and Yuji to stop the rest of this invasion. Well, actually, that wasn’t true.

“Shizune, I’m going to get Katsuyu in there. The wounded should be healed as quickly as possible.”

Tsunade prepared for a summoning jutsu. In a flash, her slug summon Katsuyu had appeared.

“Split off and heal the wounded, Katsuyu.”

“Understood,” came the surprisingly gentle reply from the giant summon. She split off into hundreds of tiny versions of herself. They slithered toward the village, moving around the frozen Pains and the downed Konan like a river around boulders.

--

The Leaf group gradually got their courage back. Upon seeing the frozen Pains, they all rushed forward, weapons in hand. They all wanted a measure of revenge for the destruction.

“STOP!” Yuji bellowed, halting everyone in their tracks. “They’re far from helpless! Stay back! Attack from a distance!”

He was beginning to strain with the effort of holding six Pains with just his regular chakra. But he couldn’t tie up his ‘Heaven’s Temper’ chakra. Not yet.

Tendo faced Yuji’s approximate direction. “Not being able to see is, at most, an annoyance.”

All of a sudden, the two Pains Yuji could see dropped to the ground. He could feel a massive surge of chakra coming from Tendo. That only got worse as Tendo jumped skyward, floating imperiously over the village (in the process painfully freeing Yuji from his sword). He spread his arms wide.

Yuji didn’t know what was happening, but he pulled his fire clone back into himself, feeling his power surge again. He flew upward toward Pain.

This chakra!- Oh no! I won’t make it in time to stop him!

“ALMIGHTY PUSH!”

“I won’t let you!” Yuji shouted back. He spread his wings wide and pushed all his remaining chakra into one last effort. He flew headlong into Tendo’s jutsu, ‘catching’ it with his arms and pushing it back. He spread his chakra in a web all around Pain, redirecting all of Pain’s force into himself. His wings pumped furiously with the effort of holding the monstrous power back.

For a full five seconds, the stalemate was held. The chakra from Pain died down, and he began to fall.

Yuji’s wings flickered, then shattered outward like glass. He fell, too. It wasn’t a controlled fall, either- Yuji was plummeting head first.

Then a black sword thrust by Pain from below him pierced his chest from behind, through his back and to his heart. When he fell, the sword fell with him. The force of him hitting the earth knocked the butt end of the sword into his chest, doing further damage. The resounding tremor shook the entire Leaf village. But no worries- Yuji was going to get up. That couldn’t defeat him...could it? When Yuji’s hair went from its powerful obsidian color to its natural dark brown, the village began to realize what had happened. The fade in color made the injury seem so...final.

Tendo looked down dispassionately at Yuji’s body.

“It seems he died from using up all his chakra before my sword ever touched him.”

Leaning over the fallen Yuji, something like pity crossed Tendo’s features. He simply stared down at Yuji’s face. It was settled in a peaceful expression. He had died trying to save the village, and he had succeeded. At least for the time being.

The Konoha shinobi were awed at what had just happened. They had literally felt their destruction coming. Pain’s chakra had leaked through Yuji’s in mini hurricane-like pockets of wind. The embattled shinobi didn’t bat an eye at that. Instead, they watched as one man flew in the face of a false god and took the worst he had to offer. ‘Ten no Kishootsu’ Yuji Itou had died...it didn’t seem possible, but at the same time it made sense. How far had death ever been away from him?

“As a god, I can admire his sacrifice for all of you. He truly knew pain,” said Tendo, almost solemnly. He stood over Yuji for a moment before reaching for his sword and pulling out of the dead boy’s chest.

It was bizarre, seeing an enemy deliver a eulogy like this. But if Tendo thought it odd, it didn’t register on his face. Not even as he wrapped up his speech.

“As a god, I have the right to declare him equal to a legend. Certainly he deserves that much acknowledgement...”

...

Though his efforts were indeed futile.”

Pain had recharged. All of them. They could see again now. The downed pains began to stir, and once again the Leaf seemed to be on the verge of destruction.

==

-

Akari had been sitting in a trance, monitoring Yuji’s vital signs. That was one advantage of being a sensory type. But it was also a disadvantage. She had been the first- besides Yuji and Pain- to know

when 'Miko' Lady Uzume had perished. The mental anguish had left her stricken for days. In this case, when waiting for death, the wait itself was worse.

Akari opened her eyes calmly. "Lady Uzume, Yuji has died."

For a moment, Asuna faltered. She allowed a tear or two to fall.

Shoki didn't make it in time.

She wondered if her selfish insistence for a long goodbye had done it. Would those few seconds have made a difference? No, and she knew better to begin with. Yuji was going to die because of that damned prophecy. The only difference was who was supposed to kill him.

How cruel, she mused, resuming her work. And how odd. A prophecy that chose to endow a boy with such magnificent powers chose a human whose own self preservation wasn't first on his list. And the power, awesome though it may be, would never be sufficient. Yuji defied it to the last, of course. Typical of him. But one wonders...why was he chosen for this role?

That didn't matter either. Only her work mattered at this point. Death had a different meaning to someone like Asuna. As the Fourth Lady Uzume, she knew that death could be tamed if one's intentions were pure. Oh, sure, you could always summon malevolent spirits. Orochimaru's twisted kinjutsu proved that. But to bring back *all* of a person; to restore their vitality, free will, and even emotions- THAT was no mean feat.

"Akari, these two are ready. I've only to collect the souls. Yuji will find his way back. 'His' chakra is gone. But that of the 'Heaven's Temper' does not die so easily."

With that, Asuna descended once more into the hellish stomach of the Shinigami. Her body stayed in place while her soul roamed. She ignored the fire that blazed all around her, reaching a ceiling somewhere above that was so high it had no apex within sight. She disregarded the demons and the damned pawing her, reaching out to her. Even the worst of the fiends sealed here could see how pure Asuna was. Their hands were repelled as they reached toward her, a fierce white light burning them.

At last, she stopped. There were only a few souls in this place that clearly did not belong. Two of those souls had been waiting for Asuna.

Ever since I helped Yuji realized his 'TenShin Ten no Kishootsu' abilities at that festival they've waited. Yuji had no idea that I marked him. I knew his fate. For whatever reason, once I was allowed to reach inside his stomach in his private genjutsu to undo the seal inside him, his future suddenly became obvious. He, too, was destined to die as Miko did. But no one would kill him- it would be by his own hand. Now that that has proven true, I have to use this unholy ability to save him. And not just him- more lives on him than he may be allowed to realize. His fate is not his own. It has always been tied with the fates and lives of others. He must not be allowed to die!

--

--

The Leaf wanted nothing more than to avenge Yuji. Little by little, his story had leaked out. What he had done for the village; what he had wanted to do back when the Third Hokage fought Orochimaru. How he

was ready to perform the jutsu that had killed the Third Hokage. How he held the village together behind the scenes until Tsunade had been found. And then how he had been cast into a role of servitude.

“I will not forgive you for this!” Lee shouted, taking an attack stance against Pain. “Gai-sensei! We must!”

“Right, Lee! To cut down such a man with at the pinnacle of his power of youth is unforgivable! Let’s do it! Tenten, Neji- back us up!”

Together, Lee and Gai released their ultimate jutsus. Both opened the Gates of Chakra. Five Gates...Six Gates...Seven Gates. And finally- *Shimon*. The Eight Gate.

Lee and Gai attacked the Pains with a blinding fury. They had only seconds before their power consumed them. They had discussed this last option, and had chosen to target the Pain that had focused on defense.

As one, they barraged the Pain mercilessly. Within five seconds they had each landed more than ten thousand blows with power that would have fallen any Kage in one shot.

This Pain was destroyed beyond repair, finally. And Lee and Gai with it. For when you opened the Eighth and final gate of chakra, you gained a nearly unsurpassable power- but you paid the ultimate price. The being that uses the gates is under tremendous strain from only one gate. Eight gates...there was no surviving it. The body was destroyed at a cellular level.

Lee and Gai were no more.

Tenten and Neji stomached their grief and went on the offensive. Neji struck Ningendo right over the heart, disrupting his chakra supply in a way that would have killed an ordinary person.. But for that, Neji died as well, as Ningendo pulled the soul right from his body before collapsing; unable to operate any further.

Tenten was the last one left, but she was left without any idea as to how she could be useful. All her weapons...what could she do? Then, out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Kakashi and Yamato. They were waiting for an opening. After the sacrifices the rest of her team made, Tenten knew that this was the best thing to do. She charged at Pain, releasing every weapon at her command at every Pain within range. Several of the Pains turned toward her. She was brutally ripped apart, pierced by swords and then blown apart by an Almighty Push.

The retaliatory strike by Yamato and Kakashi was quick and severe.

“Now, Tenzo!”

“Understood!”

A wooden dome encompassed the Pains. Yamato’s Wood-Style Ninjutsu was a mix of water and earth chakras. Using that to the end that water conducts electricity, Kakashi used a variation of his Lightning Blade. He ran it through Yamato’s wooden dome, electrifying all inside.

There was a dubious silence. Some more experienced jonin called for the ranks to reform; for civilians to run for it. It seemed as if the Pains attacking had fallen. Gradually, Konoha cheered again.

Then the dome ripped apart from the inside out. When all was said and done, half the Pains were destroyed. The ones left standing were the Gekido, Tendo, and Jigokudo.

I knew better than to hope to get them all. All right, now we-What? What's it doing?

Jigokudo's purple tendrils shot out and pulled the three 'dead' Pains into the King of Hell's mouth. Kakashi analyzed the situation quickly, though it became unnecessary. What this Pain did was obvious; Kakashi had seen it's offensive capabilities. Now he knew it could heal as well. Even it's own kind.

"Tenzo, get the word out: Attack the Pain with three piercings in the ears from a distance, but take him out first! He can heal!"

Whatever Kakashi had planned to say after that was left to question, as the odd black sword of Tendo pierced him through the neck. Yamato saw this, considered retaliation, and knew that was the wrong move. He turned to run for it, splitting off a Wood Clone. The clone was only half-formed when Pain pulled him back in. The sword through the back spelled the end of Yamato.

The village turned back to despair. Kakashi, Yamato, and all of Gai's cell had been destroyed in a matter of maybe two minutes. Even Yuji in his most powerful form had fallen. The Leaf's defeat seemed to be inevitable.

And then, their salvation came.

Naruto. Sakura. Sasuke.

101 - FINAL CHAPTER

Naruto was flanked by two enormous toads as he stood on the head of a third. On the head of the one to the left was Sakura; to the right was Sasuke. The three surveyed the six Pains, neutral expressions on their faces despite the devastation.

“He killed Kakashi-sensei...Captain Yamato...All of Gai-sensei’s team...” Sakura said in naught but a whisper. She shook her head sadly. “Unforgivable, Pain.”

Sasuke didn’t have anything to say. He knew what monsters the Akatsuki were first hand. They were to be feared and respected. But above all they needed to die. Such a twisted organization had to perish. He only wished his own eyes hadn’t been closed for so long.

Only Naruto knew the third part. In all the devastation, his body had been all but buried. Since using Nature Energy for Sage Jutsu, Naruto could feel each chakra as a distinct energy source. One source was now missing, and he knew to whom it belonged.

“...Tell me something, Pain. Did you kill him? The one with the wings of fire?”

Tendo met Naruto’s eyes, staring deeply.

“...Yes. He fought bravely, but he died.”

“...Is that so?...” Naruto said quietly. His head dipped slightly. When he raised it back up, the lines on his face had darkened and become jagged. In his rage, Naruto’s words were magnified powerfully. He snarled in the most ferocious, menacing voice a human could manage:

“I...will never...forgive you! No matter what, Pain! Never!”

Shoki appeared at Naruto’s side in a puff of smoke and swirling leaves. In an instant, his eye captured the image of three Pains. The three froze, their attacks nullified.

“Keep them away from these three!” Shoki shouted to Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura. Something in the boy’s voice made all three of them obey. Naruto paired off with Tendo, Sasuke with Gekido, and Sakura with Jigokudo.

This is what I was born to do.

Shoki ran toward the three ‘frozen’ Pains. Now he could see them trapped by his Awase Kagami jutsu. The mirrors that held their images glistened brightly. Shoki could see himself running toward the mirrors. It was bizarre, to see yourself running toward yourself.

I swore I wouldn’t be made a weapon by anyone.

Shoki leapt high, his foot extending out. The three mirrors were lined up in a row.

And I didn't. I became a defender. Just like Yuji-senpai. I freely chose to do this.

Shoki's foot connected with the three mirrors in one sweeping roundhouse kick. They mirrors shattered, and the Pains they contained shattered out of existence with them.

Shoki landed in a crouch, panting heavily.

It's too bad that it cost me all my chakra. I'm so sorry, Asuna. Miko...my sister...see you soon.

--
--

Naruto's Sage Chakra had run out. Tendo had him cornered. He prepared himself to fight with all he had- nine tails chakra included.

Elsewhere, Sasuke was running low on chakra himself. He hadn't fully recovered from his battle with Yuji yet. He stared defiantly at Gekido, frustrated horribly at how the monster could absorb anything.

Sakura had narrowly avoided Jigokudo's grasp, but her strength meant next to nothing against a monster she could not touch without being subjected to death.

--

"Having trouble, Naruto? Perhaps this old man can lend a future Hokage a hand!"

Before Naruto's eyes, help appeared. Clothed in all black and as yet swallowed up in shadows from the sudden transport, Naruto couldn't see who had stepped in. But the voice...

--

Sakura's leg was caught in rubble. She had no time to shift it to escape. Jigodudo's hand reached for her throat. It caught her around the neck. Her mouth opened automatically, and a purple octopus-like tendril seized her tongue.

"Release her!"

The strong voice command came as an arrow made of pure light severed the tendril. Sakura fell to the ground, unharmed but more than a little shaken- not least of all by her savior.

--

Sasuke swung again at Gekido, knowing his Chidori would do no good.

"He didn't save your skin, boy, to have you die like this!"

Sasuke knew the body that this voice belonged to. But the voice itself was...wrong. And the body shouldn't have been moving. Yuji had died, according to Naruto. Dead people didn't normally get up and move around.

"It's a lucky thing this child merged with my chakra to fight you, or this might not have been possible!"

--

The shadows lifted and in front of Naruto appeared the Third Hokage. But he was not a Naruto remembered him. The old man was in his prime. His hair was black and not yet receded. His muscles were not yet weakened by age, and his body was not yet dotted with liver spots.

“Earth Style: Mud Wall!”

“Almighty Push!” countered Tendo. Then he suddenly shot away.

“Earth Style: Earth Flow River!” the Third Hokage added belatedly. Turning to Naruto, he said: “We’ll have to defeat him together, Naruto. I’m afraid he’s too much for me alone and you without Sage Jutsu.”

“You know about the Sage Jutsu?”

The Third smiled at Naruto. It was the old, familiar smile that he used to give Naruto when he was alive. “I’ve watched you all. You’ve grown so much. To think what you’d accomplish. And now, you’re so close to becoming Hokage. I’m very proud indeed, Naruto, and the splendid shinobi you’ve become. Now, to the task at hand...”

--

--

Sakura freed herself and leapt to the side of her protector. She could now see clearly who it was, and she was in awe.

“Lady Uzume?”

She started to respond, then stopped and shook her head. “No. That title belongs to Asuna Hideyama now. I’m just ‘Miko’ now.”

Sakura couldn’t believe that the name was the first issue Miko had brought up.

“I don’t mean to be rude, but...aren’t you...well...”

“Dead?”

“Well...yeah,” Sakura murmured, unsure of what else to say. This wasn’t a question you asked someone often.

Miko smiled, shrugging as if saying ‘what can you do?’.

“I am, yes. I’m afraid my successor brought me here with a jutsu that was lost- or so I believed- after my predecessor stepped down.”

“Is it like...Orochimaru’s jutsu?”

“Yes and no. Yes in that it reanimates the dead, and yes in that there must be a corpse used. But the corpse must be given with consent to be used in the ritual that brought my soul back. It is not ‘kinjutsu’; it is just not often used. To return, a soul must come back willingly. It will be restored to youth, vitality- in short, they will appear as they did when they were their strongest. But as I said, the soul cannot be

enslaved. Our emotions remain. We cannot be controlled, as Orochimaru controlled souls. We have free will.”

Miko looked at Jigokudo. She could clearly see the King of Hell behind him. She'd been inside the shinigami's stomach and knew what an awful place it was.

“This abomination, with dominion over life and death...it must be destroyed! It's very existence is a sin! It has no soul! Sakura, please lend me your strength!”

Sakura circled around to the other side of Jigokudo, heaving shuriken and kunai at him. He still seemed reluctant to turn his back to her- at least until she picked up a section of the stone road beneath their feet and dropped it on his head. At that point, Jigokudo caught the stone, holding it above his head.

“Light Style: Light Archery!”

--

--

“You?!” Sasuke exclaimed. “But you're dead!”

It was Yuji's body, right down to the wound where there used to be a sword through him.

“Dead twice over, I might add. I'm not the boy you know...well, not really. I'm the previous owner of the chakra inhabiting him. As for why I'm here...well, maybe 'how' is a better question. But regardless, the gist of it is this: The boy used my chakra once. For the moment, his body is healed and his soul is in limbo. That means I can keep it warm for him until he gets back. Amazing stuff, that slug healing ability.”

Sasuke processed what he could, but in the end left a lot to faith. This guy wasn't Yuji, but he was using Yuji's body. And Yuji wasn't totally dead. He'd been healed in time. Okay. No stranger than anything else Sasuke had seen and heard in the last three plus years.

“Now then, how do we do this?” ‘Yuji’ was muttering to himself. “Well, anything has a limit to the amount of strain it can withstand. So maybe if we...yeah, yeah, that'll do it.”

‘Yuji’ recalled Sasuke's attention after a moment. He pointed toward Gekido, who had been hanging back from the fight, waiting for an opening.

“Okay, boy. Give what you've got left of that lightning chakra to an attack. Between the two of us, we can probably destroy this thing.”

Sasuke shook his head. “Not possible. I've hit this thing with the most powerful jutsus I can muster. I haven't even scratched it.”

‘Yuji’ ignored Sasuke's warning completely, instead rushing it to attack.

“Back me up, boy, or you're just as dead as I am!”

Gekido readied himself for the attack. ‘Yuji’ charged into him, tackling him head-on. He locked his arms

around Gekido and began to squeeze. He trapped Gekido's arms at his sides, pushing with physical force and chakra both.

Sasuke, against his better judgment, readied his Chidori.

--
--

The Third Hokage rushed in at the full speed of his prime. Tendo used his Almighty Push, but hit only a Mud Clone. Naruto charged in from behind, but Tendo kicked backward with incredible force, stuffing him in the stomach. The tell-tale sound of a Shadow Clone being destroyed complimented the kick. From there, the ground suddenly melted beneath Tendo's feet, sucking him into a muddy quagmire.

"Fire Style: Fire Dragon Bombs!"

Tendo couldn't move, but he used his Almighty Push to snuff out the powerful attack like a candle. But as soon as he did, he realized he'd made a grave mistake.

"RasenShuriken!"

The resulting explosion shook the entire Leaf Village. All of Naruto's power had been put into that attack. It had struck Tendo dead-on in the head. The force of the attack ripped out all the chakra receivers implanted in Tendo. It also removed his head.

Naruto sagged, exhausted. The Third Hokage caught him, a strange smile on his face.

To think he's come so far! I suppose I shouldn't be surprised- you are the son of the Fourth Hokage, after all. His genius is, in a way, yours. From maverick to beloved son of Konoha. Well done, Naruto. Well done.

--
--

Once Miko's arrow of light hit Jigokudo, he dropped the slab of stone Sakura had tried to drop on him. It fell onto his body. His physical strength was such that he did not die outright.

"Damn it!" Sakura cursed loudly, favoring the ankle that had been caught in the rubble. "If that didn't kill him, what will?!"

Miko leapt high into the air then. She floated as she gave Sakura a final instruction.

"Once this arrow strikes him, you must move quickly. Hit his ki point with all the strength you can. And pray it's enough."

Jigokudo had just begun to shift free of the stone on top him when he saw the female hovering above him, an arrow of light as big as her entire body aiming directly for him. He did not have the power to defend as the other did.

The shaft of light pierced him in the center of the chest. Miko's aim had been true. And yet, he still lived.

The stone prison that had held him shattered into pieces. Four more arrows hit him, each one trapping an arm or leg. He couldn't move.

Sakura saw her opening. She moved as fast as her sprained ankle would allow her to and drove her fist home with all the power she had.

Jigokudo's body exploded outward along with the ground beneath him. The power disintegrated his bones. The arrows that had held him in place held even in the face of such immense power. Being held in place while the rest of his body strained to move put him in a violent tug-of-war. His arms and legs stayed put. The rest of his body went.

Miko landed gracefully as a cat. Sakura was still standing, though it was clear her strength had faded now. Miko held her in an embrace, holding Sakura's body to hers.

"You did well, Sakura. You've more than earned the respect bestowed upon you. A healer...a warrior...a tender girl with a pure heart. Such a rarity! It's a pity your path is not that of the priestess. Your power could rival mine, or even Asuna's."

With that, Miko and Sakura disappeared in a flash of light.

--
--

Sasuke's Chidori hit Gekido where he aimed. But it was absorbed, just like every time before this. He was about to pull back, but 'Yuji' shouted:

"Hit him again! Once more, Sasuke! He can't absorb another shot!"

Sasuke pulled back, having to recharge when his chakra was this low. He let his Sharingan deactivate; he needed all the chakra he could get. It was like he was back in training with Kakashi, and he had to charge up the Chidori. The difference was the immense power he now wielded put his younger self to shame.

"Now!"

Once more, Sasuke charged. He saw 'Yuji' move from Gekido- A curse mark had appeared on Gekido's body- and he wasn't moving as fast as before. But he was moving fast enough to be a problem. Until 'Yuji' acted. Sasuke had noticed something in his hand before, but didn't know what it was. Until now.

'Yuji' thrust the black sword that Pain had impaled him with through Gekido's face. He held onto the handle, eyes closed in concentration. To Sasuke's eyes, a green chakra was visible, coming from 'Yuji'.

So that's what-

Sasuke thrust his most powerful Chidori into Gekido's body. The force of the impact threw Sasuke clear around Gekido. He spun and landed on his feet just in time to see 'Yuji' let go of the sword and drew

something (kanji for 'defend') in the air with blood.

The Gekido's body exploded.

The blood in front of 'Yuji' had apparently been some sort of defensive jutsu because Yuji was unhurt.

Sasuke wished he could say the same. He felt his world starting to darken. He had reached the limit of his chakra. He wouldn't die, but that was the last bit of fight he had in him.

'Yuji' regarded Sasuke with a look that was unreadable. It was something that combined contempt and admiration along with sincere gratitude. Then the face that was normally 'Yuji's returned to it's default neutral expression.

Slingshotting Sasuke over one shoulder, 'Yuji' raised two fingers to his face and disappeared in a puff of smoke.

--
--

The Hokage mansion had been left standing even after all the attacks. Lady Tsunade, Shizune, and Jiraiya were already gathered on the roof. The village was quiet now, with only occasional sobs and cries of joy piercing the intense silence.

"To think one man could orchestrate such a horrific act..." said Shizune.

"Humans are capable of amazing and horrible things. Such potential..." added Jiraiya. "Tsunade, how many did you save?"

Tsunade looked out across the village, a grimace on her face which had begun to crease, revealing her true age. She had expended an enormous amount of charka.

"Everyone but those whose souls were pulled out by Ningendo. Gai and Lee, too. I couldn't save them after their bodies degraded. Even so, Pain only got a dozen victims..."

"But it's a dozen too many," Jiraiya finished for her. He put his newly reattached arm around her. "I'm sorry, Tsunade. But you kept this from being the outright disaster it could have been."

"I played my part," Tsunade acknowledged, nodding a bit as if to confirm it to herself. "But it was them...those children. No...no longer children. Those amazing shinobi who stood up to Pain and the evil he represents. Naruto, Sakura, Sasuke, and Yuji. They bear so much for the sake of those they love...I should, by all rights, bear that burden."

Three puffs of smoke, and six more people appeared on the roof. Eyes grew wide all around as half of the new arrivals were people who had been dead.

Before any explanations could be made, A shadow on the roof opened up. From the shadow came Asuna, Akari, and finally Azami and Kojiro. Asuna's hands were still locked together in the hand sign that kept the Third Hokage and Miko bound to their earthly vessels.

There was quiet conversation as the conscious people spoke about the village and what an enormous task lay ahead of them. There was time to bury their dead now. The Akatsuki had been devastated with the loss of seven of their charter members. An ANBU squad had found the 'Pain Master', dead in a fake tree made of origami not far from the village. Next to him lay Konan, also deceased. They had been found dead, apparently from pushing their chakra so hard they simply could not recover. Konan's overuse of chakra was suspected as suicide, though that was never proven.

The casualty count for the Leaf was low. Katsuyu had saved nearly all the injured. Konohamaru, Neji, Gai and Lee were the four most notable injured. Konohamaru's limp body, devoid of a soul, was cremated, as was Neji's. Gai and Lee had no bodies to be cremated; their names were etched onto the new memorial obelisk, as the old one had been demolished by Pain's assault.

Yuji was one who fell into the 'what happened?' category. His body was alive, and he would apparently return to it once the original 'Ten no Kishootsu' was done with it. The Third Hokage and Miko would have to return to the shinigami's stomach.

The original Ten no Kishootsu wrote a few things down on a scroll, to be given to his successor when he returned. He departed first, pausing only for a minute inside Yuji's personal genjutsu to speak with the young man. After that, Yuji came back in his body. He was so pleased to see the Third Hokage that he couldn't decide to hug him or bow, so he did a strange amalgamation of the two. They talked for a brief while. Then Miko gently took Yuji's hand and led him away.

He and Miko went off alone for a while. It wasn't long, but you could see that it was hard on them both. They eventually parted after one last hug and kiss on the cheek. Yuji left to be alone immediately after that.

"Losing your bride is difficult once...but twice is just cruel," said Tsunade.

The Third Hokage took his pipe out of his mouth, the deep baritone of his voice full of wisdom. "This war...this way of life...has demanded much from all of us. Were you to offer him another role, he would decline. That is the heart of the prophecy."

"Why write the damned thing at all? Do you know how much suffering it caused him?! The hell that I've had to help that boy deal with is completely unfair!" Tsunade exploded, shaking her fists. "Why would you do that to him?!"

Sarutobi shook his head, eyes unhappy. "Not by choice, Tsunade. The boy was cast in such a role because of his own paradox. He is a peaceful person, yet lives to fight. He cannot settle for peace; he must strive for conflict with the aim of *creating* peace. Peace for other people. He would take on a burden that others would shun. Even for this battle, the heroes are these three," he said, indicating the unconscious Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura. "But had Yuji not been here to help them from the shadows, this battle may have been lost. And it would have, no doubt, been twice as devastating."

Sarutobi looked at the direction Yuji had gone, again shaking his head. "If only I'd had more time with the boy. He might very well have made Hokage someday. At the very least, had I allowed him to fight Orochimaru with me, I may not have died. But events unfolded the way they did for a reason, I suppose. You've done an admirable job, Tsunade. I can safely leave the village in your care...and in the care of

your eventual successor.”

Naruto never heard those words as he lay unconscious with the remainder of his cell. Kakashi and Yamato came later and watched over them.

The organization ‘Akatsuki’ was not yet defeated, but held in check, at least for the moment. The Leaf would rebuild, as they always did. They united more in the face of danger; their ‘Will of Fire’ becoming a strong defense against any and all threats. They had one Hokage, but they had many to look up to. The Leaf would continue to grow and prosper under the watchful gaze of the FireShadow and her eventual successor.

102 - "After" Arc- 1

It took me so long to get the power I craved. The power I needed. To protect them. All of them. The list of people I want to defend is too long to write down, but I know who they are. I never forget. Even the ones I was too late to protect.

I still breathe. My heart still beats. Yet there are those I cared for who do neither. My fiancée, Miko. My teacher, Lord Third Hokage. A friend of a friend, Konohamaru. And so many more. But my master and mistress are safe. They defeated the worst the world could offer and did their part to make the 'Ten no Kishootsu' prophecy come true.

But where, I wonder, does that leave me?

They've outgrown my protection.

We can never be equals.

So where do I go from here?

For now, I've gone to the Land of Iron with Isae, or Kuroko, as she prefers. Her sister, Shiroko, and Shiroko's fiancée, Kaname, have come, too. To what end, I don't know.

I can't honestly say I'm happy to see them right now. Not just because I want to be alone with Kuroko. But because I was Shiroko's boyfriend. And Kaname had won her over. Or had I lost her?

I was in such a different, difficult place back then, I can scarcely remember. Coming off of my suicide attempt; waking up to see the first girl I admitted my love to with her new husband; the one I was in love with breaking up with me, and my ever-present master and mistress, whom fate brought together.

I've stitched myself together. I've sewn up the worst of my wounds, mental and physical. But I still ache.

For purpose.

For love.

Yuji looked at the girl on his arm, a smile on his face that belied the harsh thoughts in his mind. Kuroko, as she preferred to be known over her birth name, 'Isae', had snuggled up to Yuji against the cold.

It was winter, with snow covering everything as far as the eye could see. It wasn't snowing now, but it was bitterly cold. The kind of cold that got under your clothes and chilled your skin to the point of it being wet when you took your clothes off. It was no wonder Kuroko was snuggling up to Yuji. Besides the fact that they were a couple, of course.

“Over the next hill, you’ll see it,” narrated Kaname. Yuji had to try hard not to frown at his voice. Kaname was Shiroko’s fiancée. And Shiroko was Yuji’s ex. It still stung a bit at the way she’d broken up with him.

Except for the fact that you right and truly deserved it. Yuji reminded himself. What kind of boyfriend went off and tried to kill himself without at least saying goodbye to his girlfriend? Who, he had to admit, he was never sure he was completely in love with.

Shiroko was still a great girl and a great friend. So he could deal with this for her sake. And besides, she and Kuroko were family.

They climbed the hill in silence, as it was really too cold to talk, especially with the wind constantly blasting in their faces. Yuji stepped half in front of Kuroko to block the wind. She took advantage and jumped on his back.

“Piggy back ride. This way, we’ll both stay warm.”

Yuji didn’t object. Being that close to her was never an issue with him. He bent down obligingly, holding his arms back. With a giggle, Kuroko climbed up and settled herself against Yuji.

Shiroko looked over at the pair, chuckling despite herself. “God, you two are so gonna fall! This is all ice and snow!”

Even as the words were leaving her mouth, Kaname scooped her up and carried her in front of him. “Yuji, wanna race?”

“You’re on, Kaname!”

They took off, their girls giving a loud whoop and a big ‘giddy up!’ as the two boys took off through the snow. It was surprising to both girls that the boys had become friends. Yuji wasn’t an easy person to understand and Kaname was a bit standoffish until you got to know him. But all the same the two had bonded.

After five minutes, they were at the foot of two enormous estates. One was noticeably bigger than the other, though no less huge for the comparison.

“Go to the one of the left,” Shiroko called from Kaname’s arms. “My parents are waiting there.”

--
--

The Lord and Lady of this enormous estate matched how Yuji imagined them. They were both tall with light hair (so light it seemed unnatural; Yuji suspected they dyed it) and a graceful elegance about them. They both also exuded the power due to their station. For all his power, Yuji knew that these were not people to be trifled with.

Nearly my in-laws, too. Jeez.

Yuji was only half-listening as Shiroko made introductions. Yuji bowed at his name, offering a 'please think well of me', keeping his head down for as long as politeness required. It gave him a cover to analyze something. More an instinct than anything.

Kuroko warned me that my Ten no Kishootsu chakra wouldn't work here. So it's not that I'm feeling. It's something else. Some sort of...emotion. I can't pinpoint it.

Yuji frowned, keeping his face toward the ground. There was something off-putting about this situation. But what?

"Ah, Isae! It's been so long since we've last seen you! Why, you've grown!"

Yuji perked up- something in that tone of voice bothered him. It fit the feeling of unease he'd had. He had initially been able to chalk it up to being nervous about meeting Kuroko's parents. He'd never had to meet his girlfriend's parents before. Turns out, it was as painfully worrisome as he'd imagined.

The voice- belonging to Hiro, Shiroko's father- continued. This time, with a chastisement.

"You know, we were worried when you didn't come to visit us. I believe we agreed that you'd return here once every two years. And, dear me, it's been three since your last visit. That won't do at all. I realize that your position doesn't have much in the way of responsibility or dignity, but you should at least follow your own people's laws!"

Michiko, Shiroko's mother, chimed in at that moment saying "Dear, you know she is...not a learned girl. Rather...slow, honestly. She may have simply lost track of time."

"THAT ISN'T IT AND YOU KNOW IT, YOU DAMN-!"

Kuroko had begun to speak. Yuji expected some sort of reprisal, but what he saw shocked him. Jarred him to his very core.

SLAP!

"Know your place!"

Kuroko actually sunk to her knees after that slap, with Shiroko standing over her, a reddened palm extended. Yuji couldn't believe it- Shiroko had just demeaned the girl she called 'sister', and slapped her hard enough to loosen her teeth. Even as Yuji watched, Shiroko kicked Kuroko- hard. Hard enough to make her cough up something.

He could stay silent no longer.

Shiroko's leg was coming down again. Yuji ran forward and shoved her high on the chest, dropping her backward. He knelt protectively over Kuroko, glaring at the people gathered here. What kind of monsters were they?!

"This is our way, Mr. Itou. You would do well to respect it."

Shiroko's father. He was an imposing man with a harsh face. Yuji could see the harshness now. But Yuji didn't care. He could be pretty damn imposing himself.

"You'd do well to respect *her!*" he shot back, picking her up as gently as he could. "I don't know what kind of game you're playing, but-

"You see only what your eyes show you, Mr. Ito," said Shiroko's father. "We see further."

"Yeah? Show me what she did to deserve this treatment!" Yuji shouted back, arm extended violently in a breach of etiquette that made him mentally chastise himself. "This is senseless, and I will not allow any further violence against her!" For good measure, Yuji glared at everyone present, his most fierce battle expression etched on his face.

Silence. No one ever openly challenged Shiroko's father like that. No one who had lived.

Then:

"Down, Lord Yuji!"

Yuji fell to the ground obediently, making sure he covered Kuroko as he fell. He cradled her head to his chest. He could feel her pulling him closer in a move that might even have been an unconscious reaction at that point.

Smoke bombs were thrown into the room through the windows. Shiroko's family and their guards stood up, but the smoke confused them. They shouted confused orders to each other.

But when the smoke cleared, Yuji and Kuroko were gone.

103 - 'After' Arc- 2

Yuji found himself surrounded by what he could only describe as druids. He carried Kuroko in the center of four of them. They all faced a different direction, circling continuously. The odd side-step movement they had to do continuously didn't seem to slow them down at all.

"We're sorry we're so late. Is Ojousama well?"

Yuji looked down at Kuroko. It took him a minute to make the connection that Kuroko was the Ojousama they referred to.

"She's fine. She got slapped around a bit. But the slap looked like it..."

"Burned, Lord Yuji?"

It seemed that this one...person had been designated to speak with Yuji. Yuji couldn't see much of him, except that he was a bit older than the others and he was wearing glasses. He had a kind voice that Yuji found himself instantly warming to.

"Yes, burned is a good word. And please, call me 'Yuji'."

Gasps of shock came from the druid-ish group.

"I dare not, sir! You are as important to us as Ojousama! It does my heart good to see that you two have chosen each other!"

Yuji stopped moving. He noted that Kuroko was awake but seemingly very upset. Not that he blamed her. So he continued holding her without protest. But now a new question had been raised.

"What makes me so important to you?"

The older man glanced around nervously. "Please, Lord Yuji, keep moving. I'll tell you everything when we reach a safer place."

--

They kept traveling, packing tightly together with Yuji and Kuroko in the center. They descended an old stone staircase that led into a dark tunnel. Four of the silent guards escorting them took torches from brackets on the wall. Yuji used his Dragon's Path Jutsu. He rarely used this in combat these days. The Jutsu had become outdated after he developed the Shoukyaku Jutsu and grew wings. But seeing as something seemed to be wrong with his Ten no Kishootsu abilities he brought out this relic. The Jutsu lined his feet with chakra, which he then used to create a low-intensity fire jutsu that would allow him to 'skate' across a path his chakra created, blazing fire all the way. Here he just walked, using the jutsu to light his path.

They eventually reached what appeared to be a shrine. There were paintings on the walls, lit by candles

that were tended to regularly. The paintings all featured the same person. A handsome man wearing a hakama with jet-black hair drawn into a ponytail. Yuji tried to place him, feeling sure he knew him. It took a picture of the man growing wings of fire to place him.

“My predecessor?” Yuji intoned, craning his neck for a better look.

“I’ll answer your questions when we’re safe, Lord Yuji. For now, please keep moving. And please, whatever you do- don’t let go of Ojousama.”

Yuji shelved his questions for now, focusing on keeping Kuroko safe. She seemed to be in shock after Shiroko’s violent attack.

They walked for a while longer, occasionally turning down another passage. Yuji tried to keep track of where they were with respect to the entrance but had long since lost his bearings when they finally stopped.

They were in a room with four stairways leading out of it. It was empty save for a table in the center of the room. Yuji laid Kuroko on it. She was conscious, but apparently out of it. She didn’t seem in any pain to speak of.

Yuji stood next to Kuroko, keeping one eye on her. She hadn’t spoken or even made eye contact with him the entire time. He had seen her tears but said nothing. Instead, he slid closer to her so their bodies were touching. In this way, he let her know that he was with her without using words. Yuji felt her slide even closer, acknowledging how grateful she was.

The image of Kuroko being hurt fresh in his mind, Yuji decided to take charge and demand answers. “I want to know what the hell caused her best friend to hit her like that. I want to know why I’m so damned popular. I want to know what gives that man the authority to act the way he does. That... Shiroko’s father. I want answers- now.”

The older man Yuji had been talking to bowed his head in deference to Yuji. “Lord Yuji, I will-”

“ ‘Lord’?”

The older man smiled wryly. “That’s part of the story, I’m afraid.”

Pacified, Yuji settled down next to Kuroko, cradling her close to him. He felt a few hot, wet tear drops land on his chest and lap, but he said nothing. Kuroko was a proud girl; if she didn’t look up then these weren’t tears he was supposed to see.

--

“Lord Masashi, please!”

Masashi, now in his forties, held the look of a much younger man. His long black hair was kept in a neat ponytail; his body was firm with muscle that showed through the tight clothes he wore.

Most distinctive were the wings of fire coming from his back.

"I have no time to hear complaints, Yoichi! This is the duty I am required to perform!"

Yoichi, Masashi's servant, could only bow. Lord Masashi never erred in judgment. He was the youngest head of the Tsukishiro family in history. It was a pity he had no blood heir. Instead, only one adopted child, now in his twenties. And the child had children- two boys, twins. But the legend that the birth of twins should not be celebrated but mourned held true.

The Tsukishiro family was splitting.

Under Lord Masashi, they were united as one. But his son had damned them with his foolish insistence on inheriting his father's power now, rather than at the appointed time. It came to pass that two factions formed.

The 'Shiro' faction- the side that allied itself with Lord Masashi.

The 'Kuro' faction- the side that allied itself with Masashi's son, Kanichi

The Kuro had all but succeeded. Only Lord Masashi and a handful of followers had escaped the surprise assassination attempt. Now it was time for the leaders to meet in final, deadly combat.

No father should have to fight his son, thought Yoichi. Yoichi was the servant, so he should be the one to fight. He had plenty of ability. Not as great as Lord Masashi, but skilled enough to give his son a fight.

But the lord had insisted. He would fight.

--

In the enormous hall, father and son stood across from each other. Each one glowed with power and ability, their faces frozen in stares of malice and regret.

Lord Masashi's son was not evil. Misguided, perhaps. Or perhaps not. He asserted that he knew what was best for the family, and that his father's rule would destroy the family. Maybe it was true. It could have been.

But Lord Masashi had never been wrong.

The hall was enormous, its cavernous ceiling more than one hundred feet above. Enormous pillars ran along both sides of the hall. The only decorations were numerous candle holders made of iron, one long table and a single throne-like chair.

The supporters of both sides entered through the doors of their respective lords, armed for battle should their lord be defeated. There was no doubt that this would be the last stand for at least one of the two great men, if not both.

Some unspoken signal started both father and son. Masashi was armed with two swords; Kanichi with a halberd.

They rushed in, their weapons swinging and meeting with a resounding clang that shook the pillars surrounding them. They began a give and take battle, dancing in and out of attack range, with neither one gaining a particular advantage.

A younger servant came to Yoichi's side.

"Why does Lord Masashi not use his ability? The one with the blazing fire? Surely he would win before his own blood is spilled, then!"

Yoichi had made the same appeal to Lord Masashi with no success.

"The master will not fight his own son with abilities granted from Heaven. This battle is unholy, he says. And an unholy battle is fought between men, not gods."

The servant fell silent, and Yoichi's focus returned to the match. Yoichi was the servant to his master for good reason. On the battlefield, he was a master tactician, crafting strategies that fooled enemies and bolstered his own troops. Lord Masashi relied on him for the large battles. When it became a smaller engagement, however, Masashi was in his element.

Masashi and Kanichi were still fighting to a stalemate. Kanichi was using some form of archaic chanting as a battle aid. As he chanted and then made a pushing gesture with one hand, an invisible force seemed to strike whatever was in the way. Sometimes it was Masashi himself; other times it was a pillar. The destructive power was evident, though it's source was invisible. At least to Yoichi. Lord Masashi could often see more than Yoichi could.

Yoichi could remember the day when Lord Masashi was gifted with his abilities. A particularly hopeless battle was being fought. Even Masashi himself seemed doomed. But he continued to fight and fight, his two swords bloodstained and chipped from prolonged use. The two weapons broke finally, and Masashi fought empty-handed. How many opponents he defeated had long been forgotten by Yoichi, whose forces concentrated on at least slowing the continuous onslaught of enemies.

Then, from nowhere, a man that he had mistaken for a monk, wearing a white robe, rode up on a horse. He chanted a few words in varying languages. The Japanese stuck out to Yoichi. The monk had thrown a bottle into the fray. Out of it came fire, isolating Lord Masashi.

"Your fight has been deemed just by heaven. The temper of heaven is your sword now. Continue your righteous fight, Ten no Kishhootsu."

The fire from the bottle had shot towards Lord Masashi. Yoichi had abandoned his post, fearing the worst. He was ready to throw himself on top of his lord to put out the fire.

But the fire was out. Or, rather, it was in. Sucked in to Lord Masashi. After that, the lord's hair turned a solid black, and his eyes darkened to match. Then the wings of fire burst forth and allowed Masashi a tremendous advantage over his enemies. The battle that had been so lost before was now a sure victory.

-

The lord and his son had been fighting now for twenty minutes. Both were tiring. Masashi attempted a double thrust with his swords. Kanichi countered by spinning his halberd just as the swords entered the

right range. The centrifugal force stripped the swords from Masashi. But Masashi kicked upward, knocking the halberd away.

The shorter of Masashi's swords fell back toward him. Without hesitation but plenty of regret, he thrust the sword into his son's chest.

104 - 'After' Arc-3

“What have I done, Yoichi?”

“You had no choice, my lord! You know that there was nothing else to be done!”

Masashi bowed his head, his son’s corpse at his feet. The sword had since been withdrawn and cleaned, and the other retrieved. Both had been replaced in Masashi belt. Some realization occurred to him as he looked at his son’s corpse.

“Yoichi, take my son’s children. Raise them equally, with each being groomed to be the successor. Until they are of age, you will rule this family. You should. You were always better at seeing the larger picture, my brother.”

“Lord Masashi...” Yoichi stammered, unable to think clearly.

“No more ‘lord’, Yoichi. You and I are family! I was only named head of the family because I was born two years earlier than you. You’re more suited! I’m only a warrior. You are a diplomat, a strategist...and the finest man I have ever known.”

Masashi gave a big smile and clapped his brother on the shoulder. Soon after that, he took a few possessions and retired to a cave.

-

In this scroll is the abilities of the Temper of Heaven. The man destined to wield this fire from the skies will be of strong character, of unshakeable virtue, and with a mission to protect. By nature he will be solitary, for those around him will lead lives soaked with blood in his presence. He must unite woman and man, and even then protect the bond between them to all costs. His life will be at the command of others. He will be the consummate warrior.

This power will be earned. It must be cultivated; controlled. Learned just as the fighting arts. Oneself must be defeated that so that true victory can be obtained. The seven deadly sins; the one-hundred-eight earthly desires- they must be suppressed to make way for virtue and honor.

The next man to wield this power will be in a powerful nation. This is so that he will be in the position to do the most good and protect the most people with these abilities.

For the future, I predict that the Land of Fire will become this strong power. Therefore, I guide this scroll there, confident that the correct owner will be found.

Masashi put the finishing touches on the scroll, eventually putting his personal seal on it in wax. He exited the cave for the last time, though he would live many more years, and threw the scroll with all the

might remaining from the dregs of the Temper of Heaven he had kept.

--

--

“...the two children never got along. Eventually, after Lord Masashi’s insistence that they both be groomed as heirs, two factions formed. One ‘white’, and one ‘black’. Shiro and Kuro. Each one backed a brother for power. The two boys fought their entire lives and died early. And since then, the family has been split.”

Yuji had listened silently, his posture and face still as stone. He felt Kuroko’s grip tighten around him now and then, and he understood that this story was a painful one she had been told all her life. At the end, he thanked the older man for the story.

“We’ll see,” Yuji replied, getting up. “So, if I’m getting the gist of this whole thing, then the side that ‘possesses’ me is automatically in power? Since my abilities belonged to the original ruler, that would make me some sort of authority figure?”

“Yes, in a nutshell. However, there is a third faction, Lord Yuji.”

“A third faction?”

“Yes. ‘ShiroKuro’, the Japanese word for ‘black and white’. The faction I am head of. Our wish is to reunite the family. Our members come from both sides of the family. I myself helped raise Ojousama...rather, the Ojousama that is by your side.”

“Which makes you from the ‘Kuro’ side.”

“Yes. The daughter of my former master.”

“Then Shiroko is...” Yuji muttered.

“Yes. The daughter of the ‘Shiro’ side’s master.”

Yuji got up and paced around. “Something isn’t right. Shiroko and I were close...why didn’t she ever try to bring me here? She seemed against it, come to think...”

“Because she cares about you.”

This came from Kuroko. She had gotten to her feet, wiping the tears off her face.

“She didn’t want you to get caught up in all this, Yuji. That’s part of the reason why she broke up with you...”

Yuji moved back to Kuroko’s side. “You sound like there’s more...”

Kuroko nodded around a snuffle. “Yes. She loved you. But she also loves me. The Kuro side of the family is traditionally the weaker side. We were close to dying out. But if the ‘Heaven’s Temper’ were

to be allied with us, we would survive.”

Yuji bit down on his thumbnail, turning all this over in his head. Had his romance been at least partly a political ploy?

“But I love you, too,” Kuroko said, sensing Yuji’s thought process. “I wouldn’t be with you if I didn’t. I told you that I don’t agree with my family. Neither does Shiroko. But I’m openly rebellious, whereas she plays the ‘good daughter’ to sabotage the family from within. Her fiancé, Kaname, sided with her.”

“ ‘Sided with her’? That sounds like there’s a war coming...” said Yuji.

“There is, Lord Yuji. Shiroko and Kaname are part of our group. What you witnessed in the hall was a show for the ruling Shiro side of the family. In a few hours time, we will be at war with both factions. Shiroko and Kaname will be joining us here. Then we’ll launch our final attack. We want you to spearhead us, Lord Yuji. Lead us to victory and stop the bloodshed.”

Yuji started to walk around the room in a relaxed way, murmuring to himself as though making calculations in his head. After maybe a minute had passed, he gave a single nod, confirming something in his head. He turned to face the others.

“There’s been something nagging at me since I came here. You said that I couldn’t use my Heaven’s Temper chakra, right?” Yuji asked the older man. “And if I could have your name so that I could address you properly...”

“Of course, Lord Yuji. My name is Tetsu. And as to your question, that is correct. The seal that your predecessor left is still very much in effect.”

“Seal?”

Tetsu nodded. “During the battle with his son, so as not to be tempted to use his power, he put a seal over his land so that his power couldn’t be used. I can’t imagine where he got the power to do that, even with his remarkable abilities, but the seal has held even this long after his death.”

Yuji had bowed courteously as Tetsu gave his name. “This seal...can it be destroyed? Or removed?”

“No.” Tetsu shook his head. “It’s hidden somewhere. Legend says inside an ordinary object, but that is only speculation. None of the lord’s original retainers or aides are alive to help us locate it...”

Yuji looked as though he expected this. It didn’t seem to disturb him that his greatest abilities weren’t of use to him at the moment.

“Well then, I think we need to settle this in a different way. My chakra- that is, my Heaven’s Temper chakra- has been agitated. As though it’s trying to get my attention independent of my own controlling it. Given what happened last time I merged with this chakra outside of ninjutsu, I think I understand something. I think that we’re being guided down a different direction. I’d ask you to trust me on this.”

There were a few mumbles of curiosity at that rather vague statement. Tetsu asked Yuji to elaborate.

"I can't really. Not yet. But I think I can. But if I may ask one more question..."

"Certainly, Lord Yuji."

"My friend, a priestess...Lady Uzume...she told me that she sensed Kuroko and Shiroko's chakras. They were...agitated. Like two chakras in one body warring with each other."

Tetsu shrugged, but Yuji thought that any sort of relaxed gesture was fake. This information was too critical. Yuji would know if Tetsu was lying, thanks to his own experience with two chakras in one body.

"Lord Yuji...it's a further sign of division in our family. We were known for having enormous chakras at one time. So enormous that we were forbidden formal ninjutsu or samurai training from our government. Even today, our bodies have an unnatural 'seal' imposed on them, dating back to Lord Masashi original duel restriction. The ban is an honored tradition now. Each child born into our family is 'branded', and his or her chakra divided. The chakra pathways are divided unnaturally. So as a matter of nature, the two chakras try to find each other. Thankfully, these seals were engineered by masters in the Land of Eddies. They are unbreakable."

A small voice echoed in the chamber. "Tetsu, enough. Please. You've answered his question. Before this is over he'll learn this whole family's ridiculous history!"

Yuji walked over to Kuroko and took her hand. Her statement had taken a lot out of her, it seemed. For some reason, this bit of history really bothered her. That was enough of that, then.

Through the confidence Yuji was projecting, Kuroko's melancholy mood was really disturbing him. She had suggested this trip and now it was going to hell very quickly. So, time to make a request, Yuji decided.

"Is there a place where Kuroko and I can spend some time resting privately? Your hospitality is wonderful and most certainly appreciated. But if we're going to war, I'd like some time to think quietly and rest up from the long trip here. And to spend some time with my girlfriend. After all," Yuji grinned, sliding closer to her. "It's not every day you meet your girlfriend's parents for the first time. I wouldn't want to embarrass her."

105 - 'After' Arc- 4

Kuroko found herself in a huge room that had recently been renovated to a European style. The room was largely unfurnished. There was a double-wide futon (no bed yet, apparently) rolled up in the corner, two large wooden candleholders, a huge mirror in the center of an ornate stand, and a chest of drawers.

“Thanks for keeping my room the same for me, Daddy...”

She was unable to keep the sadness out of her voice. This had been her room when she was little. Her bedroom. Her playroom. Her own safe haven, away from the harsh demands of her father and lukewarm indifference of her mother.

Kuroko moved to the mirror, looking back at herself. She saw not a strong, capable woman...instead, she saw a scared little girl, cowering from her father's wrath. If she extended her hand, she could see the child inside the mirror also putting out her hand.

No! She shook her head. That isn't true! My father was harsh but not unfair! And my mother...she only became distant after Shiroko was named the heir and not me. She was never unkind to me! Just...not loving.

Try as she might, Kuroko could not think of a single happy memory. It took her another twenty minutes before something occurred to her. She had been happy as a child, until age ten. Until then, she and Shiroko had played together. As sisters. Sure, Shiroko had a real sister, but she was younger. Kuroko was just the right age for Shiroko.

They had shared everything. Even their first crush had been on the same boy. The very same Kaname that Shiroko was now engaged to. Before that, he was just a servant boy of an slightly lesser family who was strong, funny, kind, and had this little shock of hair that fell over his face all the time, lending him some boyish charm that Kuroko and Shiroko both found cute.

Kuroko could remember one time, back when she was seven, when her father and mother had taken her and Shiroko on a picnic. They hadn't ventured far into the mountains that was part of their backyard, but enough to where she was excited for the adventure.

I was always the more rambunctious of us, I guess. I would climb trees and wrestle with Kaname while Shiroko acted like a perfect little lady.

The picnic had been fun. But then, three years later, Shiroko had been chosen as the ultimate successor to be head of the family. The talks of the two families uniting had failed again. Kuroko's family was once again on the bottom of the heap. Kaname was promised to Shiroko. And Kuroko...she couldn't take it anymore.

When I was thirteen, I ran to the Leaf Village. I lived there by myself, eventually making friends with Satoko and Kasumi. I tried to have fun nonstop, just to feel something. *anything*.

Then, after five years, I met Yuji.

And he turned me down cold. Which is what I deserved, begging for a one night stand like that.

Then Shiroko took him. Now I have him. But what do I want? Why did I bring him here?

Kuroko absently began to change her clothes. She stripped naked, as she had been soaked through to her skin with that heavy snowfall. She both loved and hated the snow for that.

She looked in the mirror again, this time smiling. Her body was attractive enough. Her skin was snow white and very clear. Her breasts were full and perky; her bottom was toned and firm. Her stomach was flat, showing a hint of feminine muscle. Same with the rest of her body- toned, muscular, but very cute.

Kuroko padded across the room to her bag, extracting her clothes. Black bra and panties, black stockings, black dress that fell to just shy of her knees. She also took out a pair of black barrettes. They, too, gave her a flash of memory.

Daddy gave me these when I was ten. Right after I wasn't chosen to be the successor. He told me he would always love me, and to...

To...

To please forgive him for how he was going to act. That it was no fault of mine.

That memory hadn't surfaced in a long time. Kuroko had forgotten just how much her father loved her. Still loved her.

Knock Knock.

"Kuroko? You okay?"

Kuroko perked up at Yuji's voice. The first man to make her feel special since she was ten. The last time she'd been 'Daddy's girl'.

"Come in, Yuji," she called.

Yuji opened the door and stepped in, closing the door behind him. "I just thought I'd check in an- oh! I, uh...that is...sorry!" He slapped a hand over his eyes and turned away.

Kuroko cocked her head, moving toward him. Then it occurred to her that she hadn't gotten dressed yet. Ah. That was what had made Yuji do that.

"Oh, come on, you've seen me naked," Kuroko said, a hint of teasing in her voice. "Or does my body not please you, 'Lord Yuji'?"

Yuji didn't move his hand yet, but he did say "Oh, shut up! You know I didn't ask for any of that!" He didn't sound harsh as he said it. Rather amused, actually. Like he was trying not to smile.

"Come to think," Kuroko continued, "We've only had sex once. And it was under duress then. Though passionate, I admit. Hard to top the whole 'we might die tomorrow 'cause I'm chasing a psycho' thing."

“I just came to check on you. You seemed really upset earlier, and I wanted to look at your cheek. That slap...”

Kuroko took Yuji’s hand away from his eyes. She pushed him backward against the door, leaned against him, and turned the key that she had left in the lock. With one hand on his chest, Kuroko kissed Yuji. The kiss was fairly innocent despite her nude body. It wasn’t a kiss that was meant to be provocative. It was a kiss that was meant to pass on a whole plethora of emotions. Love, gratitude, concern, care- all the things Kuroko would have a hard time forming into words she instead formed into a kiss.

It was like a movie. Her pigtails fell over her breasts as she moved away. The huge bedroom had a romantic feel to it suddenly.

“Yuji...thank you. Just...thank you. I love you.”

Kuroko had turned away out of embarrassment. She hadn’t meant to say it. Not now. Not like that. This was the interim step between ‘dating’ and ‘love’- or, it was supposed to be. Now she’d just blurted it out. She waited to feel regret, but it never came. Instead, she felt relieved. She’d spoken with her heart. She had told Yuji she ‘loved’ him before, but that was the love between friends. This was a different level altogether.

She felt Yuji’s strong arms wrap around her from behind. His hands folded around her stomach, his head leaning on her shoulder.

“I love you, too. I’ve been wondering how to say it. That’s why I was so quiet on the trip here. The timing just never felt right. And then with all this ‘lead us into battle, Lord Yuji’ stuff...” Yuji’s voice trailed off. Kuroko could feel the heat of Yuji’s reddening cheeks on her neck. It made her shiver to think she could have such an effect on him with just words and a single kiss.

Kuroko put her hand on his head, pulling it into her shoulder. She could feel his warm breath on her neck.

All too soon, that feeling was gone. Instead, she felt a warm weight placed around her neck and chest. She looked down and spied a beautiful black obsidian gem encased in silver around her neck. The gem was in the center with four arms of silver gripping the oval stone in two places at the top and bottom of it.

“For you,” Yuji said unnecessarily. “It sort of matched the whole ‘dark’ look you’ve got going, so...”

Kuroko turned around quickly, ensnaring Yuji in a hug. She was beyond ecstatic. Though she knew he wasn’t looking for any sort of ‘physical gratitude’, there was a time and place for it. Here. And now.

“Help me unroll the futon. *Now.*” she whispered urgently. This couldn’t wait.

--

Yuji and Kuroko lay together, curled up in her futon. The blanket covered their lower halves, leaving Kuroko’s shoulder and most of Yuji’s chest uncovered. After the exercise they’d just had it was taking

a while to cool down.

Eventually Kuroko dozed off, feeling warm, happy, and safe. She hadn't felt this sort of contentment in...years? How many years?

Not since I was ten. I'm twenty-one now. So eleven years. Mmm...worth the wait.

-

It seemed to Kuroko that she had just dozed off when she heard a voice. An urgent whisper.

"Ojousama?"

Sleepily, Kuroko opened her eyes. They moved slowly at first, then they shot open. Yuji suddenly grabbed Kuroko and rolled her away from the person who had invaded her happy place. A split-second later, a sword slashed down where her neck had been.

Yuji rolled up to his feet. He dodged a sword strike that missed him by inches. His hand flashed out and grabbed one of the two huge candleholders that this room contained. He swung it at his opponent, backing him up. Yuji placed himself between Kuroko and the attacker. He slid the candle off its place, tossing it backward to Kuroko. Thankfully, it wasn't lit. Only the light from the moon lit the darkened room.

"Don't light it yet. Just keep it with you."

Kuroko would never forget what happened next. Yuji's naked, muscular body, still slick with sweat, sprang into action. He jabbed at the attacker with the candleholder. When the sword came down to parry the strike, Yuji rolled the candlestick over and used the four small legs on the bottom to trap the sword against the floor.

"Watch out!" Kuroko shouted. The attacker was drawing a shorter sword that had been concealed in the darkness.

Yuji knocked the long sword away and thrust the candlestick at his opponent, right at the throat.

Blood shot across the room, covering Yuji, the walls, even the ceiling. The attacker fell backward to the wall, blood gushing from his throat. His arms had abandoned his sword and were now trying to keep the blood from flying out of the enormous puncture wound on the front of his throat. It was futile, however, and he was dead in seconds. Yuji withdrew the candle holder, revealing the long spike on the end meant to keep the candle securely in place. He had 'unsheathed' it when he pulled the candle off. A most deadly weapon.

Calmly, Yuji let the candle holder drop to the floor. He moved across the room toward Kuroko even as he made a shadow clone (who appeared clothed). The clone nodded and left quickly.

Yuji knelt down next to Kuroko, though he didn't touch her. He was covered in blood- none of which was his.

“Are you okay?”

Kuroko was shaken up but unharmed. She hugged Yuji, regardless of the blood spatter she was sure to get on her. The next thing she knew Yuji had picked her up and carried her across the room to the bathroom.

-

They showered together in silence for a good ten minutes. It felt to Kuroko like she'd never be clean again.

“Kuroko...I promise you that that is the closest you'll come to death as long as I'm with you. I'll protect you. No matter what. I'll protect you.”

It was then that Kuroko realized Yuji was beyond upset. He'd never had to murder someone before, and certainly not so gruesomely. It was odd to think that such a thing could bother Yuji. But then Kuroko remembered that his tenderness was something she loved about him.

Yuji was leaning against the wall, an arm bracing his head. His face was set in a grimace that was showing an emotion somewhere between fury, disgust, anguish, and relief. Without a word, Kuroko washed the rest of his body. It was only when they were toweling off that she spoke again.

“You're brave. I couldn't have killed that man. But you had no choice. You know that.”

Yuji nodded. “I know. I'm not upset that I killed him. Well, I mean, I am. But I had no choice. I'm upset because he almost killed you. I can't imagine what I would have done if he'd gotten you...”

They dressed, falling into silence again. Kuroko put on the clothes she'd never gotten around to putting on earlier. Yuji was dressed in a dark-colored hakama and top. As one, they nodded to each other. Kuroko tucked a dagger into a garter on her leg. Yuji put a short sword into his belt.

This was war.

106 - 'After' Arc- 5

Ignoring the scores of protests shouted by those who would be his followers, Yuji marched straight toward the enormous greeting room where he'd first met Shiroko's parents. He kicked the doors open. Two guards moved toward him, but Yuji dispatched them each with one hand. They flew to the sides, hitting opposite walls with horrible force. Yuji kept marching forward, his stride never breaking. He locked eyes with Hiro from across the room.

"You send assassins? *Assasins?!'*"

Hiro smirked nastily, his head cocked to one side. "Why would you think that... 'Lord Yuji'?"

Yuji's fierce walk took him all the way up the platform Hiro was sitting on. He glared upward at the smug man. Yuji could hardly contain his rage. In fact, he couldn't.

He swung his short sword into the platform. At first, nothing happened. Then, all at once, the platform broke and came crashing to the ground.

"This is war. Aiming for me is one thing. But you tried to strike at Kuroko. Unforgiveable, you incredible pig. And- YOU! BEHIND ME! ADVANCE FURTHER AND I WILL MANGLE YOU INTO AN UNRECOGNIZABLE PILE OF BONE!"

Yuji heard a weapon clatter to the floor. An odd smell reached his nose. It took him a moment to identify it, but when he did he almost smirked.

Apparently, the Shiro faction didn't have men with strong bladders in the face of danger.

Yuji reached into the wreckage and pulled out Hiro, who was shaken but unharmed. He held the man close to his face and snarled:

"I have no proof of what you've done. But I know very well what you think of Kuroko. I also know that, as leader, you could have any number of men make an attempt on her life. So this is to put you on notice: Any further attempts on her life mean the end of your little dynasty. Understood?"

Everyone fell silent. Yuji sensed another presence. This one was stronger. But familiar.

Yuji dropped Hiro and turned to face his new foe.

"Yuji, have you lost it?"

It was Kaname. With him was Shiroko. Yuji felt a presence at his side- Kuroko. She had been hiding nearby, ready to get him out of here with her speed if necessary. Now she stood opposite the one family member she felt close to.

As one, Kaname and Yuji rushed forward.

“Kuroko!”

“Shiroko!”

The two men shouted, spun as one and threw their swords to the girls before continuing in for empty hand combat.

The two men clashed, strength against strength. Yuji punched and Kaname parried. Kaname kicked and Yuji ducked, aiming to sweep his leg. Kaname jumped backward, throwing his other leg out in a second kick. It struck Yuji in the chest, but Yuji held on and threw Kaname by his leg. Kaname landed gracefully and charged again. The two began a high-speed duel, racing around the room.

Kuroko and Shiroko dueled with the short swords, meanwhile. They were evenly matched. Shiroko was the more natural swordswoman of the two, but Kuroko was in better physical shape with more muscle and agility. They were also evenly matched. Their swords clanged off each other as the girls battled. Shiroko managed to kick Kuroko and tried to finish her off, but Kuroko rolled onto one knee, deflected the sword, and punched with her free hand, knocking Shiroko backward.

Meanwhile, Yuji and Kaname were at the far wall, near the door. Kaname had driven Yuji backward and now aimed to unleash a devastating side kick. Yuji rolled aside just in time. The force of Kaname’s kick shattered some of the stone wall, leaving a person-sized gap where Yuji had been.

Yuji leapt between two pillars, using the two to climb higher. Kaname matched him, trying to grab Yuji’s leg. Yuji kicked off one of the pillars, narrowly avoiding Kaname’s grasp. Spinning in the air, Yuji threw a punch. He connected with Kaname’s face, using centrifugal force to add to his power. Kaname plummeted to the ground below.

Shiroko had been at a stalemate with Kuroko when she spied Kaname falling.

“Kaname!”

Shiroko broke the stalemate and ran across the room, managing to just catch her man in time.
“Time to withdraw, Kaname.”

Kuroko moved at top speed to Yuji’s side as he landed.

“Yuji, we should retreat for now. He has more forces that you can imagine at his command.”

Yuji nodded. He held Kuroko close with one arm, the other digging into his hakama.

“Remember what I said, Hiro-sama. Any more attempts on her life and off with your head.”

Yuji threw down his smoke bombs and disappeared, taking Kuroko with him.

--

--

Shiroko, Yuji, Kaname, and Kuroko all met in a building that had been abandoned for most uses. Yuji had made it his headquarters and had set up every genjutsu trap and physical barrier he could think of

to make it safe. Others from the ShiroKuro faction had been instructed to escort their loved ones away, then to return with weapons.

With any luck this will be over before they return.

Yuji looked at the other three with him. It was time for him to take charge.

“Our act had the desired effect, I believe. I hope I didn’t tag you too hard, Kaname.”

Kaname rubbed his jaw. “Maybe a tad easier next time. But I’ll live. I know you could have obliterated me. Which begs the question: Why make me seem so strong?”

“If I just barely beat you, someone whose strength was unknown to Hiro, then he’s sure to have his best warriors ready to go, sure he’ll be able to defeat me. You’re also close to him now; you can influence his decision. Doubly so now.”

That made sense to everyone, so Yuji moved on to the next point.

“I plan to finish this before the others return from escorting their families away. I’d like to do it with as few casualties as possible. For that, I need to get my Heaven’s Temper abilities back.”

“But how?” Shiroko asked. “We don’t know where the seal blocking your powers is, much less how to break it.”

“I have a theory about that. Shiroko, when you slapped Kuroko earlier, why did it burn her?”

“It’s an old ability that the ruling side of the family inherits. And I’m sorry, Kuro. I didn’t mean to do that.”

Kuroko shook her head, waving off the apology. “Don’t apologize. I hit Yuji harder when we-”

“*Anyway*,” Yuji stressed, willing everyone to stay on topic (which did not include Kuroko divulged how rough he liked his sex), “The slap bothered me for a number of reasons. The fire resonated a bit with me. It felt...familiar. And the fact that you weren’t burned despite wielding fire makes me believe that the fire is a product of chakra. And if that’s true, then that chakra can be manipulated by certain people. Shiroko, if you try, can you do that slap thing again?”

Shiroko took a moment to focus, then slapped a wooden support beam. They were in an old greeting hall made of very old, very flammable wood. The place was a bit downtrodden but still serviceable. Regardless, Shiroko’s hand decorated the wooden beam with a handprint that sunk in a good six inches.

Yuji nodded. “Kaname, will you try, please?”

Kaname did, and his handprint wound up next to Shiroko’s.

“Good. Kuroko?”

Kuroko slapped the wooden beam but only got splinters for her trouble.

That settled it for Yuji.

“The Shiro faction knows something about this seal. Something that is taught unconsciously, probably since birth. They’ve turned it into an advantage. We need to negate that advantage.”

“What if we can’t find it? The seal, I mean,” Kaname questioned.

“Well, without the Ten No Kishootsu abilities, I’m still above a jonin level. But to stay alive, I would need to kill. I couldn’t ‘play nice’ and still avoid being killed. Not with this many people attacking...So there’s really no option. Kaname, you and Shiroko need to find out more about this seal. How to destroy it if you can. Shiroko, you can say that, since you dated me, you know a way to use my chakra against me. If the seal is unlocked, you can control me. Or something like that. Whatever gets you close.”

Shiroko nodded. She turned to leave, but Yuji stopped her.

“...if things get rough, get out of there. If necessary, I’ll fight everyone. None of us get killed. So no taking risks, okay? Kaname, don’t leave her side, either.”

Kaname nodded gravely then put his arm around Shiroko’s shoulders and guided her out into the corridor. That left Kuroko and Yuji alone.

“Kuroko...what will happen after this battle? If I win, then what? This ‘ShiroKuro’ faction is in charge, right?”

Kuroko was pacing the room, looking at the woodwork that was so rare these days. It took her a minute to answer.

“I guess that’s what would happen. I’m not sure who would be in charge. Probably whoever you say, since your word would be law. You could even take charge if you wanted. But...”

Yuji waited for her to finish her thought, but Kuroko kept pacing around. So Yuji followed her, not wanting to miss the last part of her thoughts. After a minute, Kuroko finally deigned to finish.

“...But I don’t think you should. Rather, I don’t think it would make you happy.”

Yuji cocked his head. “How so? I’ve always wanted a role with lots of responsibility.”

Kuroko smiled knowingly. She reached up and touched Yuji’s face, unable to keep her hands to herself. This might be their last moment together for all she knew. She had to touch him at least once more. To remember the feel of the rough skin on his face that contrasted the smooth skin on his body. It helped remind her of the fact that he was as tough as they came but he still held a sensitive spot for her.

“You could never leave Konoha completely. You wouldn’t be happy here. Even surrounded by the sword dojo, the temple grounds; everything you love about this place. Konoha is your home, filled with your people. Whatever role you’re in there, whatever position of authority you do or don’t have, it will be the same. You are a pillar of the village. Born in the Leaf or not, they depend on you. And you depend on them.”

Yuji had heard that before. He started to say so, but Kuroko beat him to it.

“I thought that might be familiar. It’s something that the Third Hokage told me when he visited with all of us. While you were gone with Miko, I mean. That last time...”

That was still the most happy and sad moment of Yuji’s life. He got to see his deceased master, his deceased fiancée, and was possessed by the original ‘Heaven’s Temper’. He had gotten to meet all these strong, wonderful people that he admired so much. To speak with the dead once again. But the brief respite from the expanse between them only made their second departure from his life more painful.

One thing that had come up while talking to Miko was Kuroko. Miko gave her blessing for Yuji to be with her. Yuji never doubted that she would, and he would never love Miko any less for loving Kuroko.

“...Listen, Kuroko. If the worst happens...save yourself. No matter what. You must not die. Even if I fall, the battle is only truly lost if you die, too. I’ve sent word to the Leaf Village that you are in charge of my estate if I am killed in combat here. I know I can trust you. In fact, I...”

--

--

Kaname and Shiroko met with Hiro immediately after speaking with Yuji.

“The fool is throwing away all troops that ShiroKuro can give him. He plans to fight on his own, without the Heaven’s Temper abilities,” Kaname reported. He was on one knee, supported by a fist.

“Your findings after battling him?” Hiro demanded.

At this, Kaname smiled. “He’s strong. Very strong. But alone, against sheer numbers, he’ll fall. He is very reluctant to kill, even in defense of his own life. He is only a danger when you threaten someone- anyone- else. Even then, he may not kill. It may have been Kouichi’s choice of target that pushed him to kill...”

Hiro frowned, stroking his chin. “Kuroko, then? A weakness to exploit?”

Kaname waved his hand. “We needn’t bother. That would only give the Kuro faction incentive to rise up with Yuji, with or without his desire for them to do so. If I may be so bold as to offer a recommendation...”

Hiro gestured for him to continue. Kaname was astoundingly bright; he would be a fine asset and potential successor.

“I recommend we use the Heaven’s Temper abilities against him. Mark him with the same seal that keeps his powers in check, but release the abilities fully to our faction.”

A bold move, Hiro had to admit. One with a lot of potential gain- and risk. He looked to his daughter. “Can that be done? You know him well, Shiroko. Is there a way to use that chakra against him?”

Shiroko considered the question carefully before nodding. “Yes. I believe so. If we keep him in ‘this

state'. Ah, I should explain. To fully use the Ten no Kishootsu abilities, Yuji has to transform. That means constantly putting the chakra out, as though expending it. He forms wings at the mid-stage of his transformation. The chakra being expending circles within the wings and is recycled back into his body. In his full state of transformation, the sheer power alters his physical appearance. His chakra level, sensitivity to all his senses- they're all enhanced, and the changes are reflected physically."

Shiroko shook her head, buying time to organize her thoughts. When she did, she had a smile on her face that she had never shown Yuji. It was the smile of a cunning woman who knew how to control the right person.

"We can't do anything about the chakra inside him. He inherited the abilities and that's that. But that doesn't mean we have to let him *use* those abilities. What good is a dog on a chain? It can bark, but it can't bite."

Not unless you get too close, Father.

Hiro nodded, dismissing his daughter. Shiroko kissed Kaname on the cheek and told him 'see you later'. Kaname smiled at her and nodded.

Once the door closed, Kaname's face turned grim.

"I don't like to conceal things from her, if she's to rule by my side when this battle is finished. But it's true that we can't risk her having any left over feelings for Yuji. Now, if I may deliver my *true* report..."

107 - 'After' Arc- 6

This is what Hiro had been waiting for. He leaned forward, listening intently.

“Kuroko is vulnerable. Yuji has kept her out of the battle. Since the attempt on her life, he’s kept her under constant guard. That means his attention is divided. If we make an attempt on her life again, he’ll rush to defend her. If we capture her, and then torture her in front of him, we’ll win. Because there is a way to get rid of Yuji’s annoying little ability.”

“There is?”

“Oh, yes. Yuji has shown the ability to manifest the chakra outside of his body. Given that the chakra was given to him through an unsealing ritual, that means the chakra can be resealed. So we capture Kuroko, threaten torture and death- unless Yuji freely gives us his abilities.”

Kaname paused, a wicked smile crossing his face.

“Then we implant the powers in a new host. A host loyal to us. Then we incinerate them both. The ShiroKuro faction will fall. The Kuro side will have to surrender. We’ll have regained complete control.”

Hiro chuckled to himself. Knowing the future was always so pleasant. A pity Kaname didn’t also know the future.

“Your report is accurate, I’m sure. But you missed a detail. You’ll have to do better if you want to run the family.”

Kaname tried not to visibly bristle at that. “Detail? What have I missed?”

“This fight will never happen,” Hiro said plainly. “Because I’ve already got the answer. Something that hasn’t occurred to ‘Lord Yuji’ just yet...”

--
--

Jiraiya, Shizune, Sakura, Naruto, Sasuke, Sai, Kakashi, and Yamato surrounded Lady Tsunade. Yuji could see ANBU black ops scattered around.

Quite a power play, thought Yuji calmly.

“Yuji,” began Lady Tsunade, “It seems that you’ve caused some trouble here. This...war, I’m told?”

“Yes, My Lady. War.”

“...I see. This ‘war’ involved you, and you are one of us. We cannot have war with a nation that has contributed so much to our rebuilding. Surely you know that...”

Yuji smiled. “I’m fairly well versed in politics after the last three years, yes. And there is a certain...logic to my actions. My message didn’t arrive to you in time if you’ve made the trip all the way here.”

Lady Tsunade cocked her head, then gestured silently for her honor guard to move aside.

“Message” What message?”

Yuji scratched his head, sort of embarrassed. “So many...didn’t think I’d have to say it like this...”

“They can leave...” Tsunade offered.

Yuji shook his head. “No, no, they’re all part of this, too, I guess. You don’t serve and/or work with people for so long without becoming involved. No matter how hard one tries to remain aloof, *some people*—” Yuji glanced at Naruto and Sakura, smiling even wider, “—will insist on dragging you into their lives. But if I’m going to do this, then everyone should be here...”

Yuji opened a scroll, bit his thumb, ran the bleeding digit across a scroll, and then began to speak to it. “Azami? Yes, sorry. Could you come here, please? Kojiro, too, if he isn’t fishing. Thanks! Oh, could you swing by and grab Asuna, Akari, and Shoki, too?”

Yuji rolled the scroll back up. Tsunade commented on the technique, asking what kind it was.

“It uses chakra waves to communicate with another person over long distances. You have to know the person’s chakra really well, so it’s sort of useless for battle. But I was thinking of marketing the technique to boyfriends and girlfriends who live far away...Ah, here they come!”

Up from the shadow of a large building came Azami, Kojiro, Asuna, Shoki, and Akari. There were murmured greetings all around. Those tapered off as all eyes shifted to Yuji.

“So, the reason that this battle won’t be a political nightmare for the Leaf is...?” Tsunade prompted.

Yuji’s face turned serious. Deadly serious. He asked Tsunade: “Would defending my fiance’s life and family be an acceptable reason to enter into this battle?”

The implications of that message hit everyone hard, and all at once. There were cheers and cries of ‘congratulations’ all around. Asuna was the last one to speak to Yuji. She leaned close in for a hug— but also to whisper to Yuji.

“This isn’t like with Miko, is it? You really love this girl?”

Yuji bowed his head. “I loved Miko, too. I was just too immature to realize it. But yes, this time is different. I’m doing this because I love her. Not because it makes sense politically.”

“...I see...If that’s the case, then I’m happy for you, Yuji. And proud, too.”

Asuna stepped back, holding Yuji at arm’s length, studying him. “Then, I guess I should give you your present.”

“Present? You didn’t have to...” Yuji said, surprised. Did they know in advance about this?

“Miko advised me on it, the last time she...visited,” Asuna said thoughtfully. “She said that she felt bad you had buried her in your old coat, and suggested I get you a new one. But then everyone else here found out, and they had an idea. You’ll see when you open it.”

At this, a large gift box was thrust into Yuji’s hand. With nods of permission from everyone, he unwrapped and opened the box.

Inside lay a new coat. But the surprise didn’t stop there. Emblazoned on the back, in white letters with red edging, were the words “Ten no Kishootsu”. They ran vertically down the back from the collar of the coat all the way to the hem (which was at about Yuji’s knees).

“You guys...” Yuji sighed, feeling a sudden rush of affection for all of them. There were more hugs all around. By now, Kuroko had returned. She entered the group timidly, which was so out of character for her that it made her immediately stick out. She was swamped immediately with congratulations of her own. She smiled brightly, eventually working her way to Yuji.

Kuroko stood before Yuji, head bowed. In an abrupt motion, she thrust a box upward to him.

“Fo-For you! It gets cold here and...”

Kuroko mumbled the rest of whatever it was she was saying. Yuji opened the box, surprised at what was inside.

It was a handmade scarf. It was all black material, but a small bit of white yarn at one end of the scarf spelled embroidered letters. ‘Yu + Ku <3’.

Kuroko wrapped the scarf around Yuji’s neck, arranging it so that the excess material hung in front of him. It complemented his usual wardrobe perfectly.

“Did you make this?” asked Yuji.

“...do you like it?”

“Of course!”

“Then yes.”

Scattered laughter greeted the couple. Yuji picked Kuroko up and kissed her, letting her know in his own way that he loved the scarf. Not the most masculine accessory, but it was the sweet intentions behind it that made it special. That, and Yuji had to admit that it was cold as hell here! He had been spoiled by the Leaf’s comfortable climate.

Looking to all his friends and supporters, Yuji finally felt like he’d found a place he belonged. He wondered what had changed. These people had been with him all along. His journey had lasted ten years, since the start of his training with the Third Hokage to this moment in time. In that time, he’d become strong. Strong mentally. Strong physically. And stronger emotionally.

His service to Naruto and Sakura had ended- at least in the true master/servant sense. Truthfully, Naruto was going to be Hokage someday, and chances are Sakura would be right at his side, as the 'First Lady' of Konoha. Sasuke would be up there, too. Kakashi, Yamato, Sai...and Yuji. Where he fit in, Yuji found he couldn't guess. But that suddenly seemed okay. The uncertainty was...nice. For the last ten years, his life had followed a more or less linear course. Now, he had his chance to live life like a normal person. His fate was his own; his power his own to command.

I have to command it now, he reminded himself. I have to free Kuroko and the others from this oppressive household. Even if I have to dismantle this place board by board, with my bare hands. This tyranny can stand no longer.

-

The Leaf delegation stayed nearby, quietly supporting Yuji but staying out of the fight. Azami and Kojiro stayed even closer, standing by to help Yuji evacuate injured. He would have to fight alone, against who knew how many people. He hoped to avoid killing, but he knew how likely that was. Injury was a certain thing.

Azami and Kojiro also had another hidden duty. They were going to go with Kuroko, Shiroko, Shoki and Asuna to find the seal that was keeping Yuji from using his Heaven's Temper chakra.

Yuji had already decided his battle strategy. Until he had his Heaven's Temper chakra back, he couldn't risk major confrontations. He decided to make a whole bunch of racket and do a whole bunch of damage. That way, he could run into a building and keep the number of people on his tail down. Less chance of killing anyone that way.

For once, Yuji had no thought of dying himself. It didn't seem right, and if the years had taught Yuji anything, it was to go with your gut instinct when it made itself known strongly enough. He felt certain of his victory- if he did everything right. That wasn't always the case. Sometimes you could do everything perfectly and still fall short of your goal.

Yuji decided on a diversion of bombs, dropped from above. He suspended nearly transparent wires from the trees, hanging on each end a bomb made of a mild explosive and a lot of smoke. The illusion he hoped to convey would be that he was flying overhead (therefore, using his Heaven's Temper abilities), which would really scramble all his enemies. *All* of his enemies- not just the obvious ones. Another gut feeling Yuji had. Not everything was as it seemed to be; of that he was certain.

-

At precisely eleven fifty-seven that night, Yuji cut the one central wire supporting all the others. He had cut the strings suspending the bombs at different lengths so that they wouldn't all fall at once, further giving the impression that he was flying overhead at a high speed. Since it was night time, he might just get away with the illusion. Whether it worked or not, he had his route mapped out in advance. He knew just which building he was going to head for.

All hell broke loose. Roads were destroyed. Buildings fell. Trees lay prostrate across the ground, their leaves burning with fire.

Yuji waited at the epicenter of this destruction, leaving only one exit. The enemies came, as he knew

they did. As many of the 'Kuro' side came as the 'Shiro' side. The Kuro side had hoped to use Yuji's abilities to put themselves in power. The Shiro side wanted to kill Yuji and reclaim his abilities, sealing them into someone on their side.

They agree they want to kill me, but they couldn't agree on how to dispose of my carcass, Yuji thought with a bit of macabre amusement. Both sides of the family were approaching now and lining up to attack, heedless of whether their own mates or enemies were on the side of them. Yuji was the common enemy right now, and all eyes were on him.

He struck a heroic figure, with the light of a giant fire burning behind him and his coat billowing in the wind. He stared defiantly against the mounting numbers against him, waiting as long as he possibly could.

The more of them that are aiming for me, the less that will be after Kuroko and the others. Come on, keep coming...

108 - 'After' Arc- 7

Then Yuji felt something. Something that was very wrong. It was the feel he got when facing someone of Orochimaru's caliber. Dark, evil, and endless chakra. The endless chakra part is what bothered Yuji. These people were supposed to be incapable of using chakra in any ninjutsu-like manner. So what the hell was up with these ridiculous chakras?!

Yuji looked for their source, and to his surprise the chakras felt familiar. But the chakras he was feeling now had been weak before.

No...not weak. Suppressed. Damn it, of course! If they could even seal Ten no Kishootsu chakra, then of course they could seal regular chakra. Or conceal, in this case.

The four chakras loomed in front of Yuji just as a more diminutive presence landed next to Yuji.

Tetsu was kneeling at Yuji's feet, a dagger in his sash.

"Forgive me, Lord Yuji! I was sure they were loyal, so I undid their chakra seals so they could fight..."

The four 'druids' that had helped Yuji and Kuroko before were now aiming to kill Yuji. Their chakra was weighing heavy on Yuji. But he heard them saying something. A low, continuous whisper came from all of them. They were all in harmony with whatever they were saying.

Their chakra changes with that chant! It's slight, but there's a fluctuation when one stops chanting to take a breath or to stay in rhythm. But what does it mean?!

Tetsu tugged at Yuji's sleeve, pulling him back. "Lord Yuji, their chanting augments their chakra. No, more than that- that chanting is what allows their chakra to unite in their bodies and be expelled! The 'black' chakra and 'white' chakra, which keeps the chakra in check, is united with that rhythm! Only the most skilled among us can do that!"

"No problem," said Yuji, flexing his fingers. "I've been spoiled; haven't had to make handsigns in a while...let's see..."

Yuji's hands blurred as they formed a set of signs that you wouldn't find in any academy scroll.

"I had to learn how to seal chakra, in case my master ever needed to seal off his Kyuubi chakra. This wouldn't quite hold five tails, but for these guys-"

Yuji dashed forward, one hand each smacking into the stomachs of two of the druid-like shinobi before they could react.

"Five-pronged Seal!" Tetsu exclaimed. **He figured out how to unbalance the chakras again! Genius!**

Perhaps wisely, the other two with newfound shinobi abilities backed off.

“THE LEAF WILL PAY FOR THIS!” came a shout from someone in the rapidly expanding group.

“The Leaf,” Yuji asked, making sure to sound confused just to irritate the crowd more. Best to keep their attention as long as possible. “The Leaf have nothing to do with this. Unless there’s some law about defending your fiance that I don’t know about...”

That little comment caused the ‘Kuro’ side to cheer.

“Lord Yuji has sided with us!”

“Kuro will rise!”

That led to a whole bunch of in-fighting in the crowd. Yuji just shook his head, saddened and amazed by the display of the worst side of human nature.

“Uh, guys? I’m not on anyone’s side except my fiance’s side. But by all means, keep making asses of yourselves.”

The crowd stopped their battles, some still holding onto their opponent’s shirts; some were even holding others in headlocks. Their heads turned toward Yuji as one, ready to shout more insults and threaten-but not ready to attack yet.

“Good. Now, I’m only after one person. Hiro. Your would-be leader. Problem is, he’s been harassing my fiance, and I suspect manipulating more than one of you out there. Anyone want to question what I’ve said?”

One fool ran up. Yuji dodged his attack and dropped him with one punch.

“Next?”

One more person tried. Yuji was less merciful this time. This attacker earned a fire-laced kick to the gut, sending him sprawling and hacking up fluids. One of his friends ran over to him, checking on him.

“I can’t believe that fruit in the scarf just did that to you!”

In a second, Yuji had kicked the man in the face, sending him sprawling.

“Hey! The scarf is off-limits! My fiance made that with her own hands! Mock it again and it’ll be your life!”

The crowd was silent again, staring at Yuji with expressions of disbelief. Yuji glared at them all, not backing down an inch.

“What? You’ve never had your girlfriends give you something?! It’s a treasure, fools! And...why do I feel like I sound like Master Jiraiya? Ugh, Three Shinobi Prohibitions. Women really DO screw with your head. In a positive way, of course...heh heh.”

A person from the ‘Shiro’ faction stood up and risked Yuji’s wrath with a comment that made everyone think.

“How can you be in love with that demon girl?! We heard she boils snakes and drinks their blood! That’s what we’ve always been told!”

Someone from the ‘Kuro’ side shouted back. “Oh, yeah?! YOUR heiress strangles cats and uses their blood to summon demons!”

“HOLD IT!” Yuji shouted, his arms up to halt both sides volley of insults. “What the hell is wrong with you people? I’ve been with both these girls! They don’t do any of that! Either of them! If they were satanic she-demons, why would I still be alive? Why settle for the blood of cats when you could have the blood of Ten no Kishootsu? Does that really make sense?”

A murmur rose through the crowd as they discussed this. That did make sense. Yuji standing before them unharmed was proof. And if both sides agreed on one thing, it was that ‘Heaven’s Temper’ was a symbol of the best part of their culture.

“What are we doing, fighting over something like that?” cried out an old farmer, his kama dropping to the ground. “Those rumors are stupid and clearly meant to make us battle each other. Each heiress is as good as the other, right?”

There was a shout of agreement from someone Yuji recognized as being in the faction opposing the farmer’s faction. More weapons began to drop as others began to talk excitedly, realizing how the truth had been staring them in the face all this time. Yuji let them go for a while before he called attention back to himself.

“As one who intrudes upon your culture, I respectfully ask your permission to meet your leaders. My fiance’s life has been threatened once already. I will not allow it to happen again. That sort of cloak and dagger stuff is meant for enemies. I am not your enemy any more than my fiance is.”

The crowd parted for Yuji, allowing him passage. He walked down the center, aware that this could very well be a trap. But he had to give these people the chance to show integrity or they would never function as a whole.

As he got to the end, one woman reached out- slowly, carefully- and grabbed Yuji’s sleeve.

“Will you kill Hiro-sama?”

Yuji’s eyes were filled with worry as he faced her. He braced himself quickly after allowing the woman to see that trace of what he was feeling.

“I’d rather not.”

With those words spoken, Yuji continued his march toward the final battle.

--
--

Kuroko, Shiroko, and Kaname worked their way into the depths of the land, using passages long since forgotten by all those who lived ‘normal’ lives. The resistance knew these tunnels well. But the tunnels

were not for hiding. They were for searching.

“Once you found Yuji, Kuroko,” Kaname said, holding a lit torch and ducking under a tree root, “We began to try to find ways to control his power. The seal that binds the Ten no Kishootsu chakra is down here, hidden away by those who followed Lord Masashi’s son. Since it’s been six months or so, we’ve been able to narrow our search to the East portion of the area.”

Shiroko exchanged glances with Kuroko. Both girls were worried, though they had faith in Yuji.

“I don’t want him to kill my father,” said Shiroko. “I know he’s been evil, but I can’t just give up on him. It wouldn’t be right. He taught me a lot about Battoujutsu and Kyudo. In a backward sort of way, he’s the reason I’m still alive now.”

“I don’t want him to kill Hiro-sama because he’ll feel guilty. No offense Shi, but I was never a big fan of your father,” added Kuroko, thinking about how close she’d come to being murdered by Hiro’s orders. If it hadn’t been for Yuji...

There was silence for a time as the three kept walking and searching. But eventually, Kuroko stopped, her head down. Immediately, her companions stopped to check on her, asking her what was wrong.

Kuroko forced herself to look at Shiroko. Then she forced herself to ask a very difficult question. But this had been plaguing her for a long time now, and she had to know.

“Shiroko...why did you step aside with Yuji? Why did you let me have him?”

“We broke up-” Shiroko began, but Kuroko cut her off.

“You were in love with him! Even now, you’ve never spoken a harsh word about him! I’ve known you for too long, Shiro! Please, don’t lie to me! Tell me the truth- *why did you break up with Yuji?!*”

Shiroko didn’t answer. She seemed to be thinking carefully. That made Kuroko all the more tense and suspicious, and again she demanded an answer.

“Why, Shiroko?!”

Shiroko finally gave a small, sad smile. “Because I loved you both. Kuro, if Yuji wasn’t in your life, you might well have died when my father decided to end the threat of the Kuro side. I had Kaname all this time, regardless of what I felt- at one point- for Yuji. I had my family. You had no one. Yuji knew that pain, maybe better than anyone else. You both needed someone. You needed each other.”

Kuroko seemed relieved, but persisted with one more question:

“It wasn’t politics, then? You didn’t just pair us up because you wanted ShiroKuro to stand a chance in the civil war?”

Shiroko leaned forward and kissed Kuroko’s forehead, just like she did when they were children.

“No. I would never mix love and politics like that. That would be a grave sin against the people I love.”

Kaname smiled, happy to hear talk like this even in the middle of a war. The ground above them rocked with more of Yuji’s fighting, shaking loose dirt. That shook him back to reality.

“Girls, we need to get moving! If we don’t, Yuji won’t be there for either of you to love! We have to be getting close!”

They started to run, but suddenly Kuroko stopped. She seemed to be in some kind of trance. No matter how hard they tried, Kaname and Shiroko could not rouse her. They were faced with a choice: Split up and leave her, or stay by her side and let Yuji fight without the power of Ten no Kishootsu.

109 - 'After' Arc- 8

The white flash had blinded Kuroko. She stopped dead, unable to move due to shock and a strange jutsu both. She felt no fear, despite not knowing who it was that was attacking her.

It was a man wearing white, on a white horse. He looked very old, yet did not seem slowed by age in the least. In fact, he stood atop his mount, both feet on the sturdy animal's back.

"You were chosen by the second incarnation of Heaven's Temper," stated the man. Kuroko nodded numbly, sensing that she was here to listen, not to question. Sure enough, the man leapt up- high up, probably a hundred feet in the air- and landed before her with the grace of a cat. All this, despite the fact that the man leaned on a staff. And the staff itself!

The top of the staff was crooked, with a lantern dangling off it. The flames in the lantern felt so warm and familiar, and unlike any firelight that Kuroko had seen or felt before. She broke her gaze with the man in white to stare at it.

The man smiled at this, reaching up to open the lantern. He took the flame in his hand, bringing it close for Kuroko to see.

"You can touch it," he told her, his voice seeming to come both from his mouth and from all around. "Your blood is in this fire. One of your venerated ancestors drew this fire- and me- to him. Now, the one who has chosen you- rather, the one you also chose to be with- has called me here. This fire is his, and it will also be yours."

"Wh-who are you? What is your name?" Kuroko stammered, still transfixed by the fire.

"My name? It's been so long, I'm not certain I remember," said the old man, making a few handsigns as he spoke. He seemed to speak several different languages, but somehow Kuroko understood them all. "I think it best not to assume any individual identity. This old man will merely forget again. However, my title may mean more. I have been called the 'Deliverance of Heaven's Temper'."

"What does that mean?"

"For you, it means I have come to render aid to your loved one in battle. Listen closely; this is what you must to do free the second Ten no Kishootsu's abilities..."

--

--

Yuji was finally face to face with the 'final boss' of this group. His clothes were tattered from continuous combat, though none of his own blood was shed. Hiro's followers had set up ambush after ambush, but none had yet succeeded in even slowing Yuji down.

Hiro was standing atop a small platform. On his left, kneeling subserviently was a man clothed in all black. He look similar to Hiro in terms of body shape and face, except that he had an eye patch over one

eye. The parts of his body Yuji could see were covered with scars and burns. The burns sometimes took the shape of a handprint.

Yuji forced himself to look at the other people in the room. The two druid-shinobi from before were standing at a distance from Hiro, but still on the same side of the room. They were chanting in their low tones, voices reacting with each other perfectly. The level of power between just the two of them was amazing.

**That power is masking something else in the room. There are four chakras, which there should be.. But one of them feels like it's...leaking. Or probing somebody. It's not me. If it was, I could have sent a reaction back along this 'stream' of chakra...
Someone is being careful...There!**

Yuji drew his sword just in time to parry Kaname's strike from above. Kaname was spun as his power was deflected, and Yuji took his back, the sword at the base of his neck.

"Don't move, Kaname. Not yet. You're going to bare witness to this..."

Yuji sunk the blade of his sword in. Kaname yelped in pain...
And the chakra that Yuji had sensed before evaporated.

"Genjutsu, was it? Good thing I didn't attack for real..." Yuji murmured, giving his sword a quick shake to sweep Kaname's blood off it. "Sorry, Kaname."

Kaname massaged his neck, turning to face Yuji. "You could have just broken it with your chakra, you know!"

Yuji shrugged. "Left over rage from Shiroko picking you?"

"...Fair enough," Kaname conceded. Then he smiled. "Glad I didn't kill you."

"Me, too."

Hiro didn't seem to panic, even with his chief henchman now on Yuji's side. Yuji moved toward Hiro, his sword drawn and held in an attack position. He had every intention of chopping Hiro up if he made the slightest move. He was a cancer, Yuji decided. And cancer had to be cut off before the body could recover.

That was what Yuji thought, but what happened was different. With impossible speed, someone bounded in front of Yuji, ignored the fact that his shoulder should have been cleaved off by Yuji's sword strike, and hit Yuji hard in the sternum with a palm strike, sending Yuji barreling end over end to the opposite side of the enormous room.

As he bounced off the far wall, Yuji noticed that he couldn't summon his regular chakra to attack. Another damned seal, he realized. That left him with his weakest weapon- taijutsu.

These aren't shinobi, he reminded himself. I'm not fighting Lee. I'm fighting largely untrained

minions. Hiro can manipulate chakra a little bit, but he's no master. I can do this.

Yuji got up, narrowly dodging a flying kick from a henchman. His own leg flashed out and caught his assailant in the ribs, causing him to lean to one side. Yuji's up thrust knee smashed his attacker in the mouth, ending that threat. But instantly, he was surrounded by four more.

Yuji ducked low, scooped up a piece of stone off the wall that he had bounced off of, and threw it. It smacked flatly against the face of one opponent, who immediately sank to the ground. In the same motion, Yuji spun gracefully and snapped his leg out toward an opponent's knee. He missed, and in return had to dodge a dangerous head-level strike. He did, but he didn't dodge the sweep that nearly took him off his feet.

One enemy suddenly dropped; assaulted from behind by Kaname.

"Mind if I cut in, Yuji?" Kaname asked, standing back to back with Yuji.

"Geez, first with Shiroko, now this fight? Can't you let me have anything?!"

But there was a smile in Yuji's voice. Kaname grinned in return. The two began to fight back-to-back.

--

--

Kuroko ran with Shiroko, following the white specter that only Kuroko could see. The lantern of the 'White Monk' led the way to the seal blocking Yuji's Heaven's Temper abilities. Around one curve, then another, deeper and deeper into the caverns beneath the main house's palatial estate ran the two girls. Occasionally, dirt from overhead would be knocked loose by the concussive blasts of the combatants above.

The 'Monk' had finally stopped, his staff planted in the ground and the light from his lantern illuminating a section of rock.

"There!" Kuroko shouted, running up to the rock face. She could just see, illuminated by the light of the 'Monk's' lantern (or because of that light specifically?), two hand prints. Remembering the 'Monk's' instructions, Kuroko took Shiroko's hand.

"We've got to touch the rock at the same time and let our chakras mix. The quickest way..."

Shiroko nodded, smiling lightly as she remembered why Kuroko's voice trailed off. "We haven't done anything like that since we were children."

"It's for an innocent enough reason, really," murmured Kuroko. "Let's just do it, okay?"

The two girls leaned in. To share chakra, one had to make a physical bond. The more potent the movement, the better. Sex was one way; mixing blood was another. In this case, a light kiss would be just the right amount of power.

Their lips met, brushing slightly, and their hands found their proper place on the wall. There was a flash of fire as their chakras mixed and freed the Ten no Kishootsu abilities of Yuji Itou.

By the end, Kuroko was standing once again in a trance. The 'White Monk' reached out and touched her forehead lightly with his fire-coated hand.

"That is done, and so is my role with you now. Kuroko...Isae, rather. Your real name and it's meaning 'blessed with merit', suit you well. Now then, it is time to allow your real power to show through! Go to his side and support him in this final battle!"

A huge blast from above shook loose a boulder-sized chunk of rock from above. Shiroko shouted 'look out' and pushed Kuroko away just in time.

"Rima!" Kuroko shouted, using Shiroko's real name. "No!"

Shiroko's leg was trapped, and from the angle it was at it was surely broken.

"Go! Leave me here! There's more at stake!"

"I can't!" Kuroko shouted back, tears of frustration running down her face, their hot wetness stinging her eyes.

"Yes, you can! And you will!" Shiroko yelled back. "We agreed! This pointless fighting has to end! And I can't do it! Not me; not you- Yuji! And Yuji needs you! GO!"

Another blast from above reminded Kuroko of what really was at stake. With all the reluctance in the world, she left her best friend; her 'sister' trapped beneath the boulder.

FINAL CHAPTER COMING AUGUST 25TH!

110 - FINAL

Yuji wiped a trace of blood from his lip, looking around. The endless waves of enemies was daunting. Worse yet, he was sure that he'd just gotten some of these people to see the error of their ways. A slight tug at the back of his mind made him realize the truth.

Genjutsu. Hiro is either more talented than I thought, or he has someone helping him...

There was one man who Yuji hadn't been able to catch yet. Everyone else was vulnerable to Yuji's taijutsu, but not this man.

That man with the eye patch who looks like Hiro...I can sense his chakra, even in this room full of people. He hasn't left Hiro's side, except to neutralize my chakra. He's the key to all this somehow...!

Said man suddenly raised an arm in the air. At once, everyone left the room through means of a teleportation ninjutsu.

"Goodbye, you damned pest!" Hiro shouted, his wife at his side. He had his arm around her waist. "In case you were curious, you've just met your father-in-law- and look who he's working for!"

The man with the eye patch looked at Yuji deliberately. A single tear fell from his good eye. Then, he disappeared with the remainder of the group.

All at once, metal fell across the windows and doors, and the lights were completely extinguished. Yuji could feel chakra around the metal, sealing it in place.

There's no way I can break that with just my normal abilities. I don't have ninjutsu or genjutsu-only taijutsu. That won't cut it. I need my chakra. Or better yet, Ten no Kishi-

As he tried to finish that thought, Yuji was suddenly slammed with emotions. The emotions of the people outside. Two sides being pitted against each other; influenced by a powerful genjutsu. A genjutsu that had maintained the division of the people in this land for years. So long, in fact, it felt natural, as though it was just the normal atmosphere here.

I missed that before! And now, when I came, I broke that genjutsu hold somehow. Briefly, it was disrupted and everyone stopped fighting. Unless it wasn't me at all...Kuroko's father looked me in the eye and shed a tear...does that mean that he isn't doing this of his own free will? Damn it!

All at once, Yuji felt something new. Rather, familiar. The 'Heaven's Temper' chakra was running through his body unrestrained again! He could access it anytime!

They must have taken down the seal! Yes! But this feels different...there's more power...

“Ten no Kishootsu: Honshootsu,” supplied a voice. *“Beyond a perfect release is an ‘ultimate’ release. ‘Hontshootsu’- ‘True Nature’. This is the reality of your abilities, as reflected by your soul.”*

“Who is this?” Yuji asked in awe. “Please, I know you’re familiar, but I can’t remember...”

“We will speak. For now- save yourself, Ten no Kishootsu! Save them all, as your predecessor tried to do!”

The voice was gone now. But the ground was shaking. Yuji could feel- somehow, actually *feel* the energy buildup below of a bomb. The room was rigged to blow! He had to get out!

“Azami! Put up a barrier around our group, quick!”

Yuji still knew her chakra well enough to send a telepathic message along the natural waves of her chakra. His augmented abilities could only help. He just hoped she would understand in time. He couldn’t promise that he had complete control over this level of power.

--

All at once, the room that Yuji had been in exploded. For a moment, Hiro was assured victory. For one moment, he had won.

For one moment.

After that, it was all Yuji.

The windows blew out of the building. A beam of fire stretched up to the heavens. At the point of it was a glowing human being. He streaked across the sky like a comet. His wings extended far out from his body.

If you looked close, you could see Yuji’s hair and eyes had turned jet black. But you couldn’t look that close for long, even if you *could* follow Yuji with your eyes.

With power overflowing, Yuji could touch everyone’s chakra, and as a result, their minds. He could sense fear, hate, and even truth. He could feel those who meant him or his friends harm.

Their attempts on his life wouldn’t go unpunished.

Majestic, he streaked through the sky, multiple bursts of fire exploding at his command. Buildings housing his enemies were suddenly on fire as though spontaneously combusting. Evil was being driven out in to the open, where nothing short of a miracle would protect them.

--

“Don’t just stand there!” shouted Hiro, pointing toward the sky. “Go! Destroy him! Annihilate him!”

The four druids, who had since recovered, took to chanting again. They paced in their small circles, continuously speaking their ancient chants until, as one, they began to walk in the air. Yuji floated in front of them, letting them get within range.

Better to keep something in reserve. I don't trust Kuroko's father. He's under some genjutsu influence, for one. AND he's powerful. So, then...

The druids were within range now, and they began their 'attack' chant, now circling vertically while facing Yuji. Between them a beam of pure chakra began to grow.

Not quite like Naruto in four-tails state, but dangerous enough, Yuji decided. He skipped the dramatic flourish and raised one hand, pointing upward. The druids looked at his hand, though their chanting continued uninterrupted. They watched as Yuji's hand moved back. They watched as he threw it forward. Then *all* they could do was watch as a circle of fire that spanned one hundred feet blasted toward them.

--

Fire lit the sky, sending the four druids spinning to the four corners of the country.

Yuji himself floated downward, his wings beating in a controlled way. Once he landed, the wings folded in to him again, and his body glowed even more fiercely. He strode purposefully toward Hiro and the last group protecting him. Nearly one hundred men strong, they were armed with crossbows, knives, swords, and even some with rocks. One man in the back, ten feet tall, hefted a huge boulder and began to move with it raised high over his head.

"Fire! Firefirefire!" Hiro shouted hysterically, all vestiges of leaderly calm lost at last. He realized now that maybe there was a chance Yuji couldn't be stopped.

As Yuji walked straight into the hailstorm of arrows and knives, completely unscathed, Hiro knew for sure his defeat was certain. But something compelled him to sacrifice every last man, woman and child to protect himself until the very last.

Arrows bounced off of Yuji as a shield of fire sprang up around him. It encircled him like a dome, moving with him. He did not run, or even attack. He simply walked straight ahead, his eyes fixed on Hiro.

The giant man in the back threw the giant boulder with all the strength at his command. It was on target- and the rock was bigger than Yuji's shield! There was no way to dodge in time.

I've won! I've won! I've-

Yuji raised one hand, and a jet of fire responded, shooting toward the boulder. It exploded, and the fragments became shrapnel that destroyed Hiro's own troops. It was now that Yuji attacked.

"SHOUKYAKU JUTSU: OKUDEN DAGEKI!" (Destroy by Fire: Secret Strike)

The ground in front of Hiro erupted with fire. Spikes of it shot up from the ground like icicles from hell, spearing while moving. The earth itself had turned on Hiro. The full fury of Ten no Kishootsu was unleashed on him, and he was more than afraid.

"I SURRENDER! I SURRENDER! DO YOU HEAR ME?!"

Even as he said it, Hiro planned for one last bit of deceit. His brother- Kuroko's father- would defend him to the last, as the genjutsu implanted in the 'weaker house' at birth would compel him to fight, even against his own daughter.

Yuji was now within mere feet of Hiro. He stepped over the injured, having eyes only for Hiro. Sakura and Tsunade would take care of the injured, as Yuji had done the innocent no severe harm. The genjutsu over them was broken now, and they truly had their free will back. Now this entire family and it's section of the Land of Iron needed to be free of this tyranny, once and for all.

Without a single handsign, three fire clones spawned from the original Yuji. They fanned out around Hiro, surrounding him. As one, they erected a fire barrier, isolating Hiro and the original Yuji.

Hysterical, Hiro made a threat that would have shaken the old Yuji to his core.

"I'll have Kuroko's father kill himself! Do you want her to be an orphan? A REAL orphan? A father that loves her would-"

Yuji hand snapped around Hiro's neck. He lifted the man up high, tightening his grip.

"No man may enslave another in that manner. Not in my area of jurisdiction."

Hiro gurgled a response which Yuji took to mean 'What? This is MY land!'

"I relieve you of your duties as of now, Hiro. You've abused your power, your people, and your resources. I name myself *soke* (headmaster/steward) of this land until such a time that I may appoint a new ruler. In this matter, you have no further ability to choose. However, I leave you with a final choice: Death by by Shoukyaku Jutsu, or your voluntary surrender of your abilities. And if you DO attempt to do harm to Kuroko's father, I will kill you. Make no mistake- this is the last time I will offer you mercy."

Yuji let the man down, dropping him to the ground. Yuji then fanned his wings out to their full splendor, beating them threateningly.

"And do it properly. Thanks to your daughter, I know the ritual involved quite well. Do it correctly. One deviation and I will kill you."

--

--

Hiro performed the ceremony with no deviations. The chant, the bowing, the official transfer of the 'Crest of Nobility' that had been perched on Hiro's left shoulder for so many years- all was done correctly. Once Hiro had finished did, Yuji lowered the fire barrier. The crowd that was watching was silently stepped back. Yuji up close in this form was too much. In response, Yuji allowed his Ten no Kishootsu: Honshootsu abilities to draw back into his body. However, his hair and eyes stayed the deep obsidian color; his power was boiling just below the surface. Here, where the story of Ten no Kishootsu had begun in the previous generation, Yuji's power was at it's zenith.

Now, clearly, Yuji could see the 'white monk' sitting next to him on his steed.

"Well done, Soke of this land. It seems the abilities bequeathed to you were properly used. What now for

you, Ten no Kishootsu?"

Yuji smirked a little bit. "Well, I don't know about 'Heaven's Temper', but Yuji Itou has a fiance who deserves his attention. Ten No Kishootsu, however, is going to rebuild this land. The factions will be dissolved and a true heir will be named within a year. I think that, perhaps, I have already chosen. But a year from now I will know for sure."

--

It was nearly a year before the Leaf envoy returned. Team Kakashi had been chosen to act as the diplomatic group to meet with Yuji. It was time for him to return home if he so chose. He had fulfilled his year's duty to his wife's home village, and the Leaf was anxious to get him back.

A small delegation met the Leaf group just outside of the mansion of the 'Village of Steel'- the newly renamed village in the Land of Iron that was inhabited by the now peaceful clan, renamed 'Shinzen' collectively by it's *Soke*.

The group was comprised of a handful of samurai and two female priestesses. One priestess did the talking, bowing to the guests.

"The *Soke* is anxious to see you. Please, follow me."

As they walked through a seemingly endless corridor, Naruto leaned in to Sakura and said "Geez, is Yuji really gonna leave? He's the man here!"

Sakura had been wondering about that herself. Yuji would have made a great leader, she thought. And here, he could be just that. Naruto was well in line to becoming Hokage within ten years, while Sakura was ready to become the chief medic of the entire Village upon Shizune's retirement. It was safe to assume that she would leave when Tsunade did. By 'leave', that simply meant stepping down into similar but less demanding roles. Tsunade's days of wandering were over.

At long last, they were shown to the end of the corridor. A thick door separated them from Yuji. Only a year had gone by, but they wondered how he had changed.

The door opened to a splendid scene. Shiroko and Kaname stood together, both wearing formal western attire. Shiroko wore a white dress that fell to her ankles, her hair done up into a loose ponytail. Kaname was wearing a black suit and jacket with a white shirt and red tie. They grinned happily at the Leaf delegation but said nothing.

Kuroko and Yuji were on the other side of a large desk that brimmed with papers. Kuroko turned to face their guests, bowing happily, resplendent in a black gown with the chain Yuji had given her more than a year ago now.

Finally, Yuji. He was looking out the window, white-gloved hands clasped behind his back. The white gloves were a symbol of someone who served other people, Kakashi noted.

It seems Lord Third's training in the formalities hit a nerve with Yuji.

Yuji finally turned, smiling in a way that could only be described as 'regal'. He bowed low, and his group followed suit. It was clear from this position that his hair had stayed its powerful obsidian color. If you weren't used to his chakra, you could feel Yuji's Ten no Kishootsu abilities practically undulating with power.

"Welcome, Ojousama, Naruto-dono, Kakashi-sensei, Sai-sama, Sasuke-Sama, and Yamato-Sensei. I'm glad to see your journey was a safe one. Please, sit down. We are waiting on a few more people..."

As if on cue, the 'few more people' arrived, falling upward through a shadow. Asuna, Shoki, Azami, and Kojiro were all dressed formally in the same manner as Yuji's group. Azami was resplendent in a golden gown, while Kojiro looked out of place in his suit, and he'd clearly been pulling at it in an attempt to make it more comfortable. Shoki fit perfectly into his suit, looking perfectly content to be next to Asuna. Asuna was not wearing the robes of a miko any longer, nor the ceremonial hairpiece.

"Are congratulations in order, then, Shoki; Asuna?" asked Yuji, a smile threatening to unzip his face.

Shoki smiled, looking much older for only a year to have passed. "Yes. She accepted, Oniisan. We'll be married next year in June."

Ah, that's right. A priestess cannot take a husband and remain a priestess, Yamato remembered. The Leaf didn't typically take notice of such things, but for *the* Lady Uzume to step down...

"Was it Akari who replaced you then, Asuna?" Yuji inquired politely, speaking like a leader. His calm voice somehow seemed to hold a noble ring now.

"Yes indeed. She's already surpassed, to be honest. Very bright girl."

Yuji looked to everyone, his smile remaining in place.

"Then, with everyone here, let me announce my decision: First, I will be returning to the Leaf. As for my replacement, I have named a joint council, consisting of an equal number of representatives from the two major sides of the previous factions. Someone needs to be in charge, however, and I've decided who that should be as well."

Turning to Shoki and Asuna, Yuji bowed deferentially. "Will you, Shoki? Will you and Asuna become the joint leaders of this village?"

Shoki and Asuna had already talked about this. They agreed that it would be a good way to live an interesting life. Both of them were powerful as warriors and trustworthy as people. They were the perfect choices.

Shoki and Asuna bowed, then stepped behind Yuji's desk. He smiled at them, removing his white gloves as he did.

"Then, my service to this village has come to an end. It was a regrettably short period, but I think, at least in part, the people of this village felt 'forced' to accept me, thanks to my most recent battle as Ten no Kishootsu. This place will not truly heal until fear is no longer the glue holding the nation together. But know this: Ten no Kishootsu will always call this village 'home', just as Yuji Itou will always call the Leaf

Village home. There will always be a connection. In times of need, Ten no Kishootsu will defend this place.”

--

Yuji returned home to the Leaf, carrying only a small bag across his shoulder. His return was not met with a party or a parade. Rather, the people of the Leaf would see him and bow. They had heard of his battle to save his fiancée's home. But more than that, they remembered his battle against Pain. Naruto was the hero of that battle, but just as the Third Hokage had predicted, Yuji had been a pillar who kept the village standing upright, through actions and words.

His latest action- giving up power he earned and cherished to show loyalty to his home- were proof of that. The right man had been gifted with the 'Heaven's Temper' abilities.

Yuji stopped in front of the Memorial Obelisk, looking at the names of those he had failed to protect in the last battle. Konohamaru, Lee, Gai, and all the rest- lives extinguished in the hope that Yuji may have prevailed against Pain. Yuji in turn became one of those sacrifices to be sure that Naruto could save the day.

The Akatsuki threat had been delayed; Orochimaru would not return to power without Jiraiya catching him; the Akatsuki being so summarily dismissed from its Leaf-related aspirations solidified the Leaf's hold as the strongest of the five villages- everything wrapped up nicely in this way.

Yuji had wondered what to do with himself now. Stepping down as a ruler; fighting that final, earth-shattering battle- where did one go after that?

Maybe, Yuji thought, glancing at Kuroko, Maybe for a while I'll live like a normal person. I've got every reason to believe that Naruto and Sakura will surpass my power, no matter what. They will become leaders, and I will support them. If that much is written in stone, then maybe I'll control what I can. And for now, that is my happiness and Kuroko's happiness.

But should a day ever come when my abilities are needed, I will not hesitate to deliver protection to those who need it. Be it my life or honor that is the price, I will lay it down gladly to defend those in need.

“Yuji!”

Sakura and Naruto were calling him, standing near Kuroko and waving.

“C'mon! Let's go to Ichiraku! We've got to celebrate!” yelled Naruto, wearing a big smile.

Sakura shouted her agreement, her smile wide.

With one last bow, Yuji turned away from the memorial obelisk.

“Coming, Naruto-dono, Ojousama!”

Four years ago, when all this began, Yuji would have been too bitter to go drinking with those whom he had to serve. But that no longer seemed such a terrible thing. Being strong did not mean not having a

life as well- that much he had learned as a leader. There were worse things, he supposed, than joining his friends for a meal and some drinks.

Maybe I have learned something, Lord Third. And maybe I've gained a whole lot by learning it, too.

Yuji caught up with the group, and they went to celebrate Yuji's return. The Leaf was strong; peace had been earned; the dead had been mourned. All that remained was to look to the future. And the future was looking bright.