

Grey-Wolf's Gift: Rise of the Wolf Pack

By flyingeagle13

Submitted: April 2, 2008

Updated: April 21, 2008

It is two months after the events of Flower of Fire and Akai anxiously awaits the results of his graduation exam, and he still has to pass a Jonin's test as well. What can a mysterious scroll sent to him by his old sensei be for?

Provided by Fanart Central.

<http://www.fanart-central.net/stories/user/flyingeagle13/52011/Grey-Wolfs-Gift-Rise-of-Wolf-Pack>

Chapter 1 - The Day After: Awaiting Results	2
Chapter 2 - Secret of the Scroll: A Test Long in the Making	5
Chapter 3 - The Unfair Fight: A Leader is Born	9
Chapter 4 - The Battle Rages: Death and Rebirth	12
Chapter 5 - Secret Revealed: A Headband is Earned	15

1 - The Day After: Awaiting Results

The academy training field. A place known to every shinobi that had ever called himself a leaf ninja. But Akai knew it for a different reason. This was his proving ground, the battleground on which he had been fighting for his dream for the past eight weeks. Here he had struggled, with Iruka-sensei's help, to master the skills of the shinobi, from simply throwing shuriken to moving from place to place in the blink of an eye, the technique known as the Body Flicker Jutsu. He had bled on this field more times than he could count in the past two months, and passed out from exhaustion a total of three times.

As Akai knelt on the edge of this field, he thought about how long and hard the road here had been. He thought about the daily pains he had during the first two weeks, as he pushed his body beyond its limits daily. He thought about the headaches, from getting too few hours of sleep because he was studying; about the two cracked ribs he had gotten when Iruka had invited Kiba to help him train, that Sakura had been able to fully heal in virtually two days; about the weekly letters he received from Izumi after the clan had left to continue traveling; and about they had helped him get threw Iruka's training regime, which the chunin himself had admitted he would normally not even put a genin through, much less a mere student. But what Akai thought about the most, was the test Iruka had given him the previous day.

The test should have been easy, students four years younger than Akai passed it annually. It covered the shinobi's most basic skills, things like physical fitness, strategy, weapon skills, stealth, and the infamous Shadow Clone Jutsu. Akai's only problem had been that the test was designed for students with four or more years of experience, whereas he had been training and studying for only two months. He could not help but worry.

It's 0700 hours and Iruka-sensei is not here yet. I just know I screwed up something, he thought to himself, *why else would he be late?* He looked out at the field again. "You have to stop this," he said aloud to himself, "worrying is not going to help anything." He then closed his eyes and forced himself to try and relax, to try and restart the meditation his worries had pushed him out of.

Snap. Akai heard the snapping twig somewhere off to his right just a moment before a shuriken flew past his face, a mere centimeter from his nose. If it had not been for the noise and Akai's sharpened hearing and reflexes, it would have stabbed into his skull. On alert now, Akai heard the faint whistling noise of two more approaching projectiles, so he instinctively reached for the sheathed bokuto lying on the ground in front of him as he willed his chakra into his limbs. As soon as his fingers made contact with the wooden sword, Akai seemed to disappear, taking his weapon with him as two thrown kunai pierced the ground where he had been meditating.

When he reappeared in a tree on the other side of the field a moment later, he already had the sheath on his back and the bokuto held in his right hand. He immediately started scanning the trees on the side of the field he had just flickered from. His opponent was getting better.

If it wasn't for that twig breaking and my flicker jutsu, he thought, *I'd be dead. Focus Akai. Your chakra reserves aren't good enough yet to use that too often.* As he finished that thought, he saw a shimmer in the trees and quickly moved his bokuto in front of his chest, blocking the shuriken that had

been aimed at his heart. *Bingo,* he thought as he watched a shadowy figure move away from the shuriken's point of origin. The figure was moving away from Akai, on the ground at high speed.

Moving quickly, Akai used his free left hand to remove three small stones from a pouch on his belt. Leaping from the tree branch he was standing on, he twisted in the air to give the stones some extra momentum as he threw them in the direction of his attacker, even as he used his chakra to ignite the small slips of paper attached to them. He landed near the middle of the field with both hands on his bokuto and it held in a ready position. He looked up just in time to hear three small explosions and see his attacker leaping backwards into the field to escape the blasts. By the time the figure had landed with his feet on the ground, facing Akai with a sword drawn, Akai was already closing the distance between them. The attacker quickly shifted to a defensive stance and moved his sword to block Akai's own.

Crack. The sound of two pieces of wood crashing into each other resounded across the field and Akai knew immediately that he was in trouble. His opponent was stronger, and was pushing Akai's wooden blade back towards him. If he didn't do something fast, his attacker would break his grip on his weapon, leaving him defenseless in close quarters. Then it occurred to him how his opponent was stronger, chakra.

Timing himself carefully, Akai quickly pulled back on his sword for just a moment before swinging it forward once again, catching his opponent off guard. This time though, he also willed his chakra into the blade of his bokuto just as he made contact, causing it to shatter his opponent's weapon and continue, striking his opponent in the chest and sending him flying backward. Akai took a deep breath as his opponent and the shattered bokuto burst into clouds of smoke. It had been one of his own shadow clones. Akai took another deep breath as he heard someone step up behind him.

"Bravo, Akai," said Iruka, clapping his hands as Akai turned around to face him, sheathing his bokuto, "but I must say you take the parable, 'your worst enemy is yourself', to the extreme."

"Good morning, Iruka-sensei," said Akai as he made a short bow. "Please pardon my not waiting for you, but I thought it might be good to do some training while I waited."

"No need to worry," the teacher responded, looking his student in the eyes, "I know you were probably pretty anxious for me to get here. I'm not surprised you wanted to do something." It seemed to Akai that his sensei was trying to avoid mentioning why he would have been anxious, something that added about a hundred more butterflies to his already uneasy stomach.

"Well, Iruka-sensei?" he asked, failing to keep the worry out of his voice. Iruka just stared back at him with his sensitive eyes and Akai braced himself for the worst.

"You passed," Iruka said finally, and it took Akai a few moments to register what his teacher had said. When it finally sank in, though, his heart skipped a beat. He had made it.

"You came close," Iruka admitted, "but given that you were only preparing for two months, I'm quite impressed." He smiled at Akai as he held out a blue headband with a metal plate, emblazoned with the leaf symbol of Konohagakure. Speechless, Akai took it from his hand and held it for a moment, testing its weight in his hand. However, he did not put it on, something that Iruka noticed.

“Is something wrong, Akai?”

“I’m not ready for it yet,” he said bluntly, still holding the headband. “I’m not a genin until I pass a test from a jonin. That is what Lady Tsunade said.” He held the headband out for Iruka to take back. Iruka, on the other hand, closed Akai’s hand around it.

“Even if you haven’t earned the right to wear it,” he said quietly, “you have earned the right to have it.” He pushed Akai’s closed hand back towards him. “And about that jonin test…” Akai quickly looked up at his sensei, as Iruka pulled a sealed scroll out from behind his back. “This was sent to you by Izumi.” He held the fist sized scroll out for Akai to take.

“Okay,” Akai said slowly, wondering what a scroll from his sister would have to do with getting a test from a jonin. Iruka did not fail to notice the confusion on his student’s face.

“She said that it’s from Grey-Wolf.” At the mention of his first sensei’s name, Akai immediately stopped staring at the scroll and instead stared at Iruka.

“Grey-Wolf?!”

“Indeed,” Iruka responded. “She said that the clan ran into him on the road again, injured as it were. When she, your brother, and your parents told him where you were, he apparently asked that they send this to you. According to Izumi, he was gone the following morning, just like the last time.”

As his teacher finished, Akai looked at the scroll once again. It had a nice, ornate seal on it, but otherwise it seemed entirely unremarkable, save that it was made of a heavy grey parchment. On closer inspection though, he realized that what seemed like a second, smaller piece of parchment was rolled up tightly inside the first.

What could this be? he thought to himself. *Grey-Wolf wouldn’t send me just any old scroll.*

“What does this have to do with a test?” he asked as he looked back up at Iruka. Iruka smiled, as if he had been waiting for Akai to ask.

“Lady Tsunade has already examined the scroll,” he stated, “and she thinks that it should be a sufficient test for you.” He paused and noticed Akai’s confused look. “Don’t worry. She told me that you are to report to the Memorial Grove at sundown tonight and open the scroll there. She said that the test would be revealed to you then. I am not to give you any training today so that you have time to rest. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir, Iruka-sensei.”

“Good, then I will be at the grove at midnight to check on you.” With that he turned as if to leave, but stopped and faced Akai again.

“Good luck.”

2 - Secret of the Scroll: A Test Long in the Making

The Memorial Stone, a monument to the hundreds of leaf shinobi who had died during missions. The grove where it stood was one of the most revered in all of Konohagakure, second only to the Hokage monument. It was here where Iruka had said Akai was to have his final test, the test that, if he passed it, would place him among the ranks of the leaf shinobi, just like those whose names were written on the stone had been. That was the very reason why Akai was now kneeling in meditation, preparing mentally for the challenge that he knew was lying just ahead of him. Facing the memorial, he had laid out his jacket on the ground before him and set his unsheathed bokuto upon it, as a sign of respect to the ninjas who were immortalized on it.

Well, Akai, he thought to himself, opening his eyes, *it's now or never.* He reached into his satchel, which was lying on the ground next to him, and pulled out the fist sized scroll. It was light, no more than an ounce, but Akai knew that there must be more to it than that, especially since it was from Grey-Wolf. He had never known his old sensei to give ordinary gifts, which the ANBU uniform in the closet of Akai's apartment was a testament to.

Without rising from his knees, Akai set the scroll on the ground in front of him and peeled up the edge of its seal. Then he paused for a moment, taking a deep breath. This wasn't going to be an ordinary test and he knew it. Finally, after a moment, he finished removing the seal and unrolled the scroll. To his surprise, the heavy grey parchment was completely blank, without a single mark on it. But the second piece of paper that he had noticed earlier, which had been rolled up tightly inside the scroll, was a different story.

What is this?

 The script on the paper was almost completely alien to Akai, written in what looked like ancient, arcane runes and arranged in a circular pattern around the center. The pattern was the only thing that looked familiar to him, aside from his old teacher's handwriting, though he could not think of where he had seen it before. He leaned in to examine it, thinking it must be some kind of coded message, which Grey-Wolf had always had a liking for. But, when he did so, he felt a strange energy seeming to radiate from the two scrolls and that, combined with the familiar arrangement, reminded him of what this had to be.

Summoning Jutsu!

 he realized, grabbing his bokuto and leaping backwards to his feet and away from the scrolls. He brought the weapon up to a ready position just as a cloud of white smoke erupted from the two pieces of parchment, or more accurately, from the scroll work on the parchment. The smoke quickly spread into a semi-circle in front of Akai, between him and the memorial stone. *For there to be that much smoke,* he thought as he watched it, *this must be a pretty big summoning.* On instinct, he tightened his grip on the handle of his bokuto.

As the smoke started to clear though, he quickly realized that his assessment had been wrong. None was overly large, but he could make out six shadowy figures through the receding smoke, the largest standing right in front of him, right where the pair of scrolls had been. A gentle breeze started to blow from the south, and Akai could soon clearly see what he was dealing with. A wolf pack.

A few moments pass with neither Akai nor the wolves making a move. Akai was unsure of what to do next, and was about to open his mouth and ask something when the largest of the wolves, a giant of silver fur that Akai judged was about five feet at the shoulder, beat him to it.

“Don’t move,” the wolf said, taking Akai by surprise. He had expected these wolves to be able to talk, as most summoned creatures can, but he had not expected the malice that tinged this one’s voice. Instinctively, Akai suppressed the urge to run and remained still, but he most certainly had his guard up.

I don’t think I want to mess around with this one.

After a moment, during which the pack seemed to be examining Akai, another, smaller figure caught Akai’s attention. It was a young wolf pup, probably no more than a year old though Akai didn’t know for sure, considering it was a summoned creature. It was one of four little ones that he had not been able to see through the smoke and that were standing behind two of the larger wolves, who Akai guessed were probably the females in the pack. This first little one, with a coat of earthy brown fur, looked interested in Akai, and started to walk past the adult wolves to get a closer look at him.

Almost immediately, the large silver wolf that had first spoken to Akai rounded on the little one, teeth bared and growling like he was rabid. Akai almost moved to try and stop the larger wolf, but, like before, another wolf beat him to it. This one was a fair bit smaller than the silver one, only about four feet to the shoulder, but Akai instantly felt like there was more to this wolf than what he could see. Its fur was a rich brick red, with a rough yet majestic quality that made Akai think of fire. It jumped between the silver one and the pup, standing his ground to protect the little one.

“Out of my way, Hishin,” the angry silver wolf barked, refocusing his attention on the flame colored sentinel, “or you will take his punishment for breaking ranks.”

“Given that he is a little one,” the second wolf replied as the pup backed away from the two adults, “I will gladly take his punishment, if only to spare him from what I know will be far too harsh for a little curiosity.” He stared the larger wolf in the eyes as he said this, not moving an inch. Akai was impressed.

“Why you little,” began the now furious wolf, raising his right paw as if to strike the red one for some insult, “I’m gonna...”

“But now is not the time for any punishment,” the red one interrupted without flinching, tilting his head in Akai’s direction. “Let’s handle the Grey-One’s business first.” The silver one momentarily glanced at Akai but quickly turning back to his fellow.

“I am the Alpha of this pack. I will decide when we are to handle business.” He raised his paw once again as if to strike.

“Peace, Tenma,” said another voice that Akai had not yet heard. It was deep with age and came from an elderly, tawny colored wolf that now stepped forward. Surprisingly for Akai, the silver one, who he now knew was the leader of the pack, lowered his paw as the old wolf stepped forward. “You will have the chance to punish the insubordinate.” He looked at the arguing pair as he said this and the two backed away from each other. Then the tawny wolf turned and looked Akai in the eyes. “You can lower your weapon now.”

Almost instinctively, as if it were Iruka or Tsunade telling him to do something and not a summon wolf, Akai did as he was told. He couldn't explain why, but something made him feel like he could trust this older wolf. He slid his bokuto back into the sheath on his back, all while maintaining eye contact with wolf.

"We are the Eihei Wolf Pack," he explained after Akai had sheathed his weapon and lowered his hand. "This is Tenma, leader of the pack," he motioned with his head toward the silver wolf, who simultaneously stood taller in an effort to intimidate Akai, "and I am Waizuten, his advisor. This young upstart," he indicated the fire colored wolf, "is Hishin, the pack's Beta, or second in command. He still has a good deal to learn but he's coming along." Hishin bowed his head to Akai when he was introduced, a stark contrast to Tenma's gesture.

"I am Kajihana Akai," Akai said as he offered a slight bow. As he stood tall again, Tenma gave a brief chuckle. Akai turned to face the alpha, who looked rather amused.

"You are Kajihana Akai, the one that the Grey-One wanted us to test?" He chuckled again as finished, which Akai decided it would be best for now to ignore.

"That depends on who this 'Grey-One' is," responded Akai, doing his best to stay respectful with the pack leader laughing in his face. He had an idea of who that might be, but he wanted to be sure before making any assumptions. It was Waizuten who replied.

"The one we know as the Grey-One is an old friend of mine," the old wolf said, "and he is the one who encouraged me to and helped me form this pack. I believe you probably know him as Grey-Wolf," he added, confirming Akai's suspicions. This also raised some questions though too.

"Indeed, Grey-Wolf was my teacher," he told Waizuten, "it is an honor to meet any friend of his." He bowed to the old wolf once again as he said this.

"Huh," interrupted Tenma with another chuckle, "what makes you think we believe that you are or even were the Grey-One's student? Do you have proof?"

"Only my word," Akai replied calmly, his dislike for the wolf leader growing even more.

"Your word is not good enough," Tenma then said, a wicked smile crossing his face, "you are not the Grey-One, and therefore your word has no standing among us."

"The sheath on his back is proof enough," interrupted Hishin, glaring at Tenma as he came to Akai's support, "I can smell the Grey-One on it, as I know you can as well." Then, turning to Waizuten, he asked, "Do you recognize it, wise one?" He ignored Tenma as he asked this.

"That I do, Hishin, but you forget your place. You do not ignore the alpha under any circumstance." He stared at Hishin with what Akai could only describe as disappointment, before turning back to Tenma and saying, "I vouch for his word. I believe he is, or at least was, the Grey-One's student."

"Very well, then," agreed Tenma, with a reluctance that even Akai found it hard to miss. "Then we will test him as the Grey-One requested." He turned and focused his well hidden rage at Akai, who, though

wary of angering the wolf further, had a few more questions to ask.

“Wait. Before we begin this test I would like to ask a few questions first,” Even though he wished to direct this comment toward Waizuten, who appeared to be the mediator between the packs two leaders, he directed it toward Tenma, in an effort to avoid furthering the wolf’s temper.

“If you absolutely must,” Tenma replied in a not so comforting semblance of courtesy, “little child.” Now Akai knew that Tenma was mocking him, but he refused to be baited into doing something foolish. Waizuten did not let this escape his notice.

“I understand that Grey-Wolf apparently asked you all to test me,” started Akai, doing his best to control his voice, “but it seems like some of you are not even interested in doing that. So why would you?” Akai expected either Waizuten’s wise words or Tenma’s mocking to answer this, and so was surprised when Hishin spoke up.

“It was part of our agreement with the Grey-One,” he told Akai, looking the shinobi in the eyes. “He gathered us from our separate paths and gave us a chance at survival as a group, rather than no chance as estranged individuals. His only request after doing this was that we test his student when the time came.” He glanced at Tenma, something akin to loathing shining in his eyes, before continuing, “Some of us wish to honor that request.”

So Grey-Wolf gathered these guys for the express purpose of testing me, Akai thought to himself. *Well, he never was one for easy tests.* He looked up at Tenma, who was still smiling with some sort crazed amusement.

“So how does this test work?” Akai asked as he stared into the giant wolf’s mocking eyes.

“Simple,” Tenma replied with a grin, “You have to fight me.”

3 - The Unfair Fight: A Leader is Born

The other members of the pack quickly backed away as Tenma pounced, catching Akai off guard. It was all he could do just to duck and roll to his right, away from Tenma's jaws. Not only was the alpha enormous, he was also fast. He was on Akai again before he could get to his feet, forcing him to roll again. He rolled just quickly enough to escape Tenma and throw him off balance. Now was his chance to recover.

As he rolled to his feet, Akai was already drawing his bokuto. He would need it if he was going to compete with Tenma's teeth and fangs. He dropped into a low ready position, sword above his head, as the wolf regained his footing. He paused, glaring at Akai, as if surprised that his prey could react so quickly.

"You're pretty quick, for a little runt," he taunted, just before leaping at Akai again. Using a burst of chakra for added strength, Akai was able to use his blade to flip Tenma over his back, much to the wolf's surprise. He was able to land on his feet, but only just.

"Funny, you seem rather slow for a wolf," Akai taunted back, shifting feet into a better stance. At this Tenma just laughed, not a soft chuckle like before, but a full blown laugh.

"Do you honestly think this is my best? That I would start against a weakling like you by going full force?" He laughed again, and Akai had a feeling that he wasn't bluffing. "You are more foolish than I thought. Let me give you a taste of my true strength." With that he spun around quickly and with a flick of his tail, sent a blast of wind flying right into Akai, knocking him backwards and causing him to lose his grip on his bokuto. He landed about twenty feet away from it, winded by the concussive force of the blast.

"Now do you see why I call you weak, fool?" Tenma gloated as Akai slowly picked himself up off the ground. "Now you are disarmed and therefore defenseless against my next attack." He leapt forward and charged toward Akai, who was still on his knees. Hishin, on the edge of the field, made like he was going to try and intercept him, but Waizuten blocked the younger wolf's path.

"This is his test. Let us see what he does."

As Tenma ran across the field toward Akai, the young shinobi made no attempt to move. Or he at least made no attempt to move out of the way. What Tenma and the others failed to notice, though, were his rapidly moving hands. As Tenma made his final leap that would land him on his target, Akai stopped his hands on the sign of torii, the bird, and thrust it forward.

"Wind Style: Desert Stream Jutsu!" As Akai thrust his hands forward, a massive blast of hot air slammed into the leaping Tenma's chest. The alpha wolf was sent flying back to the other side of the grove, as winded as Akai had been a few moments before. Hishin was impressed.

"That was almost as powerful as Tenma's own attack!" he said to Waizuten. The tawny wolf looked

back at him and nodded.

“And he timed its use well, but it took a lot of his chakra.” He indicated with a toss of his head how Akai had now gotten to his feet but was breathing heavily. “I think this will be over soon.” Tenma had the same thought in mind, though in a different way.

“You insolent little,” the wolf started, too enraged to finish his statement. “You will pay for that.” Then he disappeared, only to reappear a moment later directly behind Akai. “Now die.”

How did he, thought Akai, only just realizing that Tenma was behind him. He tried to move away but Tenma quickly clamped his jaws around his left arm. The pain that ripped through his arm immobilized him even more than the grip. He screamed as Tenma bit down harder.

Once again, Hishin tried to step in and stop the fight, but Waizuten again prevented him. Hishin then tried to push past the older wolf, only to receive a paw across the face.

“If this keeps up much longer, Tenma is going to seriously hurt him!” the fire furred wolf exclaimed frantically. He again tried to push past Waizuten and again was prevented.

“As a shinobi, he must be able to take it,” the older wolf replied harshly, “you do him no favors by sheltering him from it now.” As Hishin backed down once again, watching Akai struggle with Tenma’s death grip on his arm, Waizuten also returned to observing the fight, but he did so with a worried look in his eye.

Back in the fight, Akai was doing everything he could but was unable to dislodge the giant wolf’s fangs. He was left with a single option. Reaching into his right boot with his free right hand, he removed a single small slip of paper. Focusing through the pain that continued to shoot up his arm, he used his chakra to light it and then held it in front of Tenma’s face, in plain view. At the sight of the quickly burning, ANBU level paper bomb, he quickly released his grip on Akai’s arm and immediately flickered away leaving Akai with only a few seconds to escape the blast. His arm shattered, he managed to flicker over to his bokuto and grab it, turning his back to the bomb he had left behind just as it exploded. The shockwave sent him sprawling and all of the wolves moving further back, for their own safety.

Landing on his mangled left arm, Akai screamed again in pain, if only for a moment. Then realizing that he was still in a fight, he pushed himself onto his knees using his uninjured right hand. He was almost to his feet again when a fresh wave of pain started at the bite and worked its way up his entire left arm. He collapsed to his knees, but this time managed to stifle his scream. This pain was different.

“How do you like my parting gift?” asked Tenma as he slowly walked up to Akai, laughing. Akai thought he detected a hint of mania in the silver wolf’s voice, but the thought was driven from his mind by a fresh wave of pain in his arm. “I think it likes you,” he added, seeing the look of anguish on Akai’s face. This strange comment prompted Akai to look at his mangled and broken arm. To his shock and fear, he realized that a number of small, black, fang-like marks had traveled from his wound up to his shoulder, each of them appearing to pulsate with his own rapid heart beat.

A curse mark!?!

“Now die,” said the now obviously crazed wolf as he lowered his head to take a bite out of Akai’s throat.

Suddenly, a combined blast of fire and lightning comes out of nowhere and strikes Tenma’s flank, launching him through the air once again. Akai looks up to see four shapes leap between himself and Tenma. Four of the other wolves. Akai watched as Hishin, Waizuten, and another wolf, this one blue-grey in color and slightly larger than Hishin, moved to surround Tenma, while the fourth, the white colored female he had seen with two of the pups earlier, came over to inspect his wounded arm. After a single look and sniff, she immediately turned toward Tenma and started to growl. Akai doubled over with another wave of pain.

“Kazeshin, what is it?” called Hishin, without taking his eyes off of Tenma.

“You were right. It’s a forbidden art,” the white wolf responded, also without taking her eyes off of the silver wolf, “the Cursed Fang of Hunger. He’s feeding on the boy’s chakra.”

“I thought as much,” Hishin said upon hearing this, and he then turned to the tawny wolf. “Waizuten, go help Kazeshin try and heal him. Mizubuke and I will handle this scoundrel.” He turned to the blue-grey wolf beside him, “Ready, brother?”

“You know I am, little brother,” the blue wolf replied. With that said, Hishin then turned his attention to Tenma, who was now rising to his feet, chakra swirling around the rapidly healing burn on his side. As Akai felt another wave of pain, the chakra around the silver wolf’s wound flashed, leaving no doubt whose chakra he was using to heal. Hishin and Tenma locked eyes once more before Hishin spoke.

“Tenma, by the authority granted to me as Beta, due to your dishonorable action of only a moment ago and numerous lesser offenses in the past, I declare you unfit to be Alpha. I hereby vow to remove you from leadership, by force!”

4 - The Battle Rages: Death and Rebirth

As Hishin and the blue wolf, Mizubuke, started to slowly circle around Tenma, Waizuten ran over to where Akai was now sprawled on the ground. Kazeshin, the snow-white female wolf, was already starting to tend to Akai's mangled arm, placing her paw on the bite wound as it started to glow with her chakra. The other female, the brown one that Akai still did not know the name of, had taken the four pups and brought them to the other side of the grove, away from danger. Akai shuddered with a fresh wave of pain as the curse mark on his injured arm started to move down his back. Tenma laughed as he watched Waizuten examine the marks on Akai's arm.

"Not even you can remove it once it's active now, old one. I've perfected it," he gloated with a demonic gleam in his eye. "It won't recede until it has drained every last bit of his chakra. When that happens he will be beyond any help, since he'll be dead." He threw back his head and laughed again, apparently forgetting the two wolves who were circling him, looking for an opening. Hishin and Mizubuke both rammed into Tenma's right flank, startling him and pinning him to a tree trunk.

"Your curse can't kill him if we kill you first," Hishin said to Tenma's face. Strangely, this statement only seemed to amuse Tenma even more, as he started laughing again, all traces of sanity now long gone. He then twisted and shoved the two smaller wolves away, continuing to laugh maniacally. The chakra swirling around him flashed once again, and Akai released another cry of pain, his eyes watering from the sheer intensity.

"Quickly, Hishin," called Waizuten frantically, "his body can't take much more of this!" With that, the old wolf bowed his head towards Akai's arm and chakra began to flow from a point on his forehead, he was trying to suppress the curse, though he knew he would not be able to for long. Hishin and Mizubuke would have to finish Tenma fast, or all the healing he and Kazeshin could ever do would not be able to help Akai. Once the last of his chakra was gone, his body would simply shut down and cease to function, killing him.

"Your efforts are futile," Tenma announced to the pack as a whole, more demonic looking than ever in the moonlight, "even if you were all twice as strong as you are now, none of you would stand a chance against me." He glanced across the grove to where the pups stood cowering behind the adult female. He then turned back to the two wolves fighting him. "Allow me to prove it," he said with a wicked grin, just before disappearing.

He reappeared beside the brown wolf and the pups, and before the others had even realized what happened, slammed the female into a nearby tree. The effect this had on Mizubuke has almost immediate.

"Seishouchi!" he called, bolting to where the other wolf had fallen, motionless.

"Wait, brother!" called Hishin, "that's just what he wants!" Sure enough, before Mizubuke had even reached the wolf called Seishouchi, a concussive wind blast fired by Tenma slammed into the blue wolf, crashing him into another tree. At the sight of his brother falling to the ground unconscious, Hishin

reacted much as Mizubuke had. He charged at Tenma, with every intent of throttling the silver wolf, but Tenma reacted by grabbing one of the pups, the brown one from earlier, as the four tried to run away.

Hishin brought himself to a halt as Tenma placed one of his massive paws on the pup's head and held it to the ground. This action on Tenma's part did not escape Waizuten's notice and the old wolf reluctantly stopped suppressing the curse mark. For Akai this meant an even more intense wave of pain than before, and he cried out again. He could not even think because the pain was so strong. The curse mark had now spread across his entire back and chest, despite Waizuten and Kazeshin's best efforts.

"All of you," shouted Tenma, his paw still on the little pup's head, "cease this foolishness. If you don't, the little one here is going to have one splitting headache." He pushed down on the pup's head until he whimpered loudly, struggling to break free. The silver wolf then looked at Kazeshin, who had taken up Waizuten's task of trying to suppress the curse once the elder had stopped. "That includes you, Kazeshin, it's foolish to try and save him. He's already as good as dead." For a moment, it seemed like Kazeshin was going to listen, first looking at the struggling pup then the demonic Tenma, doubt filling her eyes. But when she saw the memorial stone behind her former leader, the doubt left her eyes and she went back to suppressing the curse.

"So be it," said Tenma upon seeing this, slipping further into insanity. He lifted his leg for just a moment in preparation for crushing the pup's head.....and received a lightning bolt to the chest. A moment later, Waizuten fell to his knees. After everything he had done to help Akai, the chakra that his attack had required had tasked him greatly, leaving him exhausted. But Tenma had been blown backward for a moment, giving the pup its chance to escape and Hishin an opening to attack. He charged forward and pinned the now weakened Tenma to the ground.

Kazeshin watched this altercation as she tended to Akai, until the young shinobi started to shake again with another wave of pain. She refocused on suppressing the curse mark, but something was wrong. Rather than crying out, Akai had gone limp, his eyes rolling into the top of his head. She frantically tried to shake and rouse him, but it was no use. After a few moments, the fang shaped marks stopped pulsating to Akai's heartbeat and started to recede, meaning that Akai's chakra had been completely drained. Shocked, Kazeshin, could do nothing except watch as the last of the marks coalesced at the point on Akai's arm where Tenma had bitten him before rising like a frond of smoke and dissipating on the wind.

Waizuten and Hishin had not failed to notice Kazeshin's distress, and they too watched as the curse mark removed itself from his lifeless body. Then, with the same kind of fury he had shown when Mizubuke had been struck down, Hishin locked his jaws around Tenma's neck, leaving the exhausted Waizuten to watch in shock. The problem was that the last of Akai's chakra was still swirling around the giant silver wolf, healing him. After only a moment in what should have been a death grip, Tenma stood, lifting Hishin off of the ground, and shook violently until his fire furred quarry was thrown from his back and sent flying into the memorial stone.

Stunned by Tenma's ability to continue, and still exhausted, Waizuten could do nothing when the silver wolf appeared behind him now, also ramming him into the stone. Injured and desperate, Hishin and Waizuten stared into the eyes of their former leader, just as he did to theirs, only his were filled with a demonic insanity that defied description. Only Kazeshin, still having not moved, seemed to notice the glow that was starting to emanate from Akai's torso.

“Now you will all die!” shouted Tenma into the night. Then, turning to face Hishin, who had broken his leg upon colliding with the memorial, he leapt forward in an attack just as Akai’s eyes opened.

A moment later, Tenma was knocked from the air. Something had slammed into his flank with the full speed of a body flicker jutsu, shattering a few of the wolf’s ribs on impact. Tenma managed to land on his feet, but was stunned when he realized it was Akai, who had ‘died’ only a moment earlier, that had struck him. The young shinobi held his bokuto at the ready and stared down the giant wolf, standing directly between him and the two injured wolves behind him.

“How did you?” started Tenma. With a shake of his head though, he added, “It doesn’t matter, you still wont beat me.” Then, quick as the wind, he leapt at Akai. Reacting instinctively, with the one weapon he had that would have any chance of stopping the crazed wolf, Akai willed a portion of his chakra into the blade of his bokuto and simultaneously willed some more to change form. In a matter of moments, he had pure wind chakra running up the edge of his blade. Realizing this as he neared Akai, Tenma used his own chakra to erect a wind barrier that would not only protect him from the shinobi’s blade but that would also serve as a battering ram, allowing him to crush the three that stood before him in one fell swoop.

Akai knew then that his jutsu, would not work. He didn’t have enough chakra to make it penetrate Tenma’s barrier. But just as he was about to give up, he felt what he could only describe as more chakra pouring into him. He looked and realized that, in spite of his broken leg, Hishin was standing tall next to him, loaning him some of his chakra. Akai turned back to Tenma as he came within Akai’s striking distance. He had one thing to say to the demon wolf.

“Suraisu Kazeken, Slicing Wind-Blade!” he shouted, swinging his bokuto forward to meet the attack. As he did, a massive blast of wind slammed into Tenma head on, shattering his wind defense and allowing Akai to make contact with his chakra sharpened blade. The force of the impact sent Tenma flying backwards, a look of absolute shock in his eyes, with a massive gash running the length of his torso. Before he even hit the ground, he disappeared in a burst of white smoke.

5 - Secret Revealed: A Headband is Earned

As the smoke from Tenma's unsummoning dissipated on the wind, Akai and the remainder of the pack remained still. The wolves and even Akai himself could not believe what had just happened. Just when it had seemed hopeless, that the crazed Tenma had won, they had somehow turned it around. Akai stared blankly ahead, still holding his final stance, at the place where the silver wolf had been only a moment before, mere inches from his face. His breathing was starting to slow down now, as was Hishin's, who still stood next to him.

"Nice job," panted Hishin, without looking at Akai. He cringed for a moment as his hind left foot touched the ground. The leg was obviously badly broken.

"Thanks," Akai replied, eyes still facing forward. Hishin thought his voice seemed somewhat distant, and looked up just in time to see Akai's eyes roll into the back of his head. As the shinobi started to fall forward, Hishin, in spite of his leg, quickly maneuvered around to catch him. Waizuten and Kazeshin were there almost immediately, concern on both of their faces.

"He's still alive," Hishin informed them with an effort, "I can feel him breathing. He's just unconscious." He shifted Akai on his back so that most of the shinobi's weight was away from his injured leg. "Check on Mizubuke, Seishouchi, and the pups. Akai will be fine."

"Sure," replied Kazeshin, who was realistically the only one who could offer any help to anyone at this time. She turned to go check on her pack mates but stopped when she and the other two heard something moving in the trees nearby. Hishin cringed as he looked in that direction.

"What now?"

When Akai came to, he at first didn't realize where he was. He was lying on his back with a canopy of leaves above him, and he could feel a gentle breeze. He could also see sunlight pouring through the trees. He tried to get up, but when he went to move he found that his muscles were stiff. Since they were sore as well, he knew he wasn't paralyzed, but he also knew he wasn't going to be moving very much for a while.

"So you're awake already, huh?" Akai recognized the voice and, despite his aching muscles, turned to his left to see Lady Tsunade, a bottle of sake in hand, seated on a small log. Seated beside her was Iruka sensei, and Waizuten was there as well.

"Lady Hokage," started Akai, instinctively trying to rise so that he could bow. He winced once again though, and then found a brick-colored paw on his shoulder, pushing him back down. Hishin was standing on his other side, with Kazeshin, Mizubuke, and Seishouchi a small distance away, playing with the four pups.

"Rest," Hishin said to Akai, "you need it."

“He’s right Akai,” added Iruka, coming over and kneeling next to his student, a note of concern in his voice, “by all rights, you should, at least, still be out cold.”

“Why?” Akai asked in return, “other than being sore all over, I feel fine.”

“Why? Because people who have all of their chakra drained by a curse mark don’t normally even survive,” said Lady Tsunade, still sipping her sake, “yet according to Hishin and Waizuten here, you not only survived but were also able to jump up and start fighting again. That being said, some jonin I know would not even be close to conscious yet, but here we are, having this conversation.” She gave a smug smile, as if her own sarcasm amused her. Akai was confused.

“But I can’t have had all of my chakra absorbed, I’d be dead. Are you sure Tenma’s curse mark wasn’t defective?” He turned to Waizuten as he asked this.

“With as powerful as that curse mark was,” the old tawny wolf responded, “there was no way it couldn’t have drained all of your chakra. I expended most of mine trying to suppress it, trying to keep it from killing you while Hishin and Mizubuke fought Tenma.” He shook his head in amazement. “I had never expected you to rise again after the curse mark removed itself, which could have only meant that it had drained the last of your chakra.” None of this made sense to Akai.

“But how can that be?” he asked, still just as confused as the rest of them.

“We were hoping you could tell us,” Tsunade replied, finally setting the bottle down. “Kazeshin tells us that she saw some kind of pattern on your stomach glowing for a moment, like a sealing jutsu releasing itself. Do you know anything about that?” With all eyes on Akai, he looked down for a moment to think. After a few minutes, a look of realization suddenly appeared on his face.

“No, it couldn’t have been,” he said quietly, as if to himself. Iruka, still next to him, heard this.

“What is it, Akai?”

“I’m not sure, but I think I know what might have happened,” Akai said to his teacher before turning to Tsunade. “Lady Hokage, you have some knowledge of sealing jutsu, right?”

“Well, yes. I’ve developed several of my own,” she answered, a little surprised by the question. She raised an inquisitive eyebrow in curiosity. “Why?”

“If some of a person’s chakra was sealed away by a jutsu, would that chakra be accessible to a curse mark?” This question struck the Hokage as even more odd, and she had to think about it for a moment.

“I’m not sure, but I guess that’s possible.” When Tsunade had finished, Akai sat quiet for a moment, thinking.

“All right, then is it possible for a sealing jutsu to have no visible signs but still be in effect?” he asked after a moment. It was Iruka that answered this one.

“Actually,” the chunin said, remembering what he had learned about the seal that kept the Nine-Tailed Fox inside Naruto, “certain kinds of seals are completely invisible unless it becomes stressed and

threatens to break.” Hearing this, Akai went back to thinking. Iruka noticed this and asked, “does that mean something?”

“Well, about six years ago,” started Akai, “I was studying sealing jutsu, particularly those developed by leaf shinobi. I think some of the ones I studied were created by the Fourth Hokage, actually.”

“Why were you studying that?” asked Hishin, still next to Akai.

“I was trying to develop one,” Akai responded, before suddenly sitting up and looking around for his satchel, a fact that did not escape the notice of the others. He found it lying next to his jacket, which had been folded and laid nicely nearby, and started to rummage through it. “I think I actually still carry the scroll with me, since I never really finished it.”

“What was this sealing jutsu supposed to do?” Iruka asked, now just as curious as Tsunade. “Knowing the kind of jutsu you usually make, it can’t have been all that simple.”

“It was supposed to be a partial chakra seal, but I never got past the primary testing phase with it,” Akai replied, still digging through his leather bag. Then, he stopped and pulled out a scroll with an ornate brass case. “Here it is.” He handed the case to Iruka, who then opened it and the scroll inside and started to examine it.

“My theory at the time was that if you limit the amount of chakra a person has available to use, that person has to work harder with the chakra he or she still has, which would mean an acceleration in the growth of the person’s chakra network, similar to the way resistance training works to promote muscle growth,” Akai explained to the group. As Iruka passed the scroll to Tsunade, he added, “It was just a theory though.” The group remained silent while the Hokage took a moment to examine the scroll herself. When she had finished, she rolled it up and handed it back to Iruka, who slid it back in the case. Akai could read nothing from either of their faces.

“You said that you never made it past the testing phase with this jutsu,” Tsunade asked after a moment, “does that mean you did actually test it?”

“Yes, Lady Hokage, on myself,” Akai replied. When he saw Waizuten and Hishin’s shocked reactions to this statement, he continued, “I wasn’t going to test it on anyone else in case something went wrong.”

“And let me guess,” interrupted Iruka, “you stopped after you tested it the first time and saw that there was no visible sign.”

“Yeah, that’s why I asked about invisible seals.” After Akai said this, Tsunade snapped her fingers together, turning all eyes on her. She looked at the group with a smile as she reached for her bottle of sake again.

“I think I know what happened last night,” she said, and everyone in the group watched her closely. “The jutsu depicted in that scroll appears to be effective. It takes the user’s chakra reserve and basically cuts it in two, sealing one half while leaving the other to be used. It would over time continue to add more chakra to the sealed half, maintaining an equilibrium with the rapidly growing unsealed half.”

After she said this she looked at Akai. "I believe that when you tested it and believed it had failed, it had actually worked, meaning that you have been carrying this seal for the past six years, greatly building your chakra reserve over time. The end result of this would be that you have only an average chakra reserve normally, but also have a back-up reserve of chakra equal in strength to your normal one."

"I still don't see how that allowed him to survive if this second reserve of chakra was sealed away," said Hishin, "wouldn't he have had to unlock the seal?"

"No," responded Iruka calmly, "a seal like that would require a small but constant flow of chakra to be maintained. Once the curse mark absorbed all of the unsealed chakra and started to recede, the seal would have had nothing to fuel it, causing it to unlock on its own."

"Then," continued Waizuten, catching on, "the formerly sealed chakra would have spread rapidly throughout the body, quickly restoring the chakra that had been stolen from the body's cells. That replenishing would explain how he survived, and how his chakra was so depleted once he was awake again. Almost all of it had gone to the cells, literally bringing him back to life." When he stopped, Akai was finally catching on to the idea.

"And without the seal," he said, rising to his feet and starting to pace, catching everyone by surprise, "my chakra reserves would come back very quickly after being depleted, which explains how I am already awake and moving about." He paused in his pacing for a moment. "Wow, and I thought the Eight Trigrams Chakra Suppression Jutsu was a failure." The group fell silent, all in agreement that this was the only way Akai had survived the battle with Tenma.

"Well, now that the matter of how you survived has been cleared up," Hishin said, breaking the silence, "I think it's time to tell you what is going to happen because you survived." He looked over at Waizuten and added, "Elder, if you would do the honors."

The tawny wolf stood tall now, taller than Akai had ever seen him stand during the previous night. It was then that he realized something seemed different about the old wolf.

"As the new Alpha of the Eihei Wolf Pack, due to Hishin's election to retain the position of Beta, I hereby grant my approval to Kajihana Akai." He looked Akai in the eyes before continuing, "You have passed your test. And as a reward..." he glanced at Hishin, who then grabbed something near Akai's feet and dropped it in his hand, "the Eihei Wolf Pack Summoning Contract, the gift that the Grey-One had wanted you to earn." It was the grey parchment scroll that had been part of the jutsu that summoned the wolves, the blank one that had hidden the ornate one.

"I'd say you earned it," added Hishin with a smile, "not many can come back from the dead and defeat the person that killed him." Akai smiled and looked at Waizuten.

"Thank you, I will do my best to use it wisely," he said as he bowed to the new Alpha.

"Good, but you should probably sign it first," responded Waizuten, "take a knee." After Akai had dropped to one knee and opened the scroll on the ground before him, the old wolf continued with a speech that it seemed like he had been preparing for some time. "Kajihana Akai, you have earned the Eihei Wolf Pack's respect, may this serve as a symbol of that accomplishment," the old wolf fired a

small bolt of electricity from his forehead which struck Akai in the temple, leaving a cut just above his eyebrow. "Use the blood to sign your name on the contract, and then allow the cut to heal on its own. The scar will remind you of the respect you have earned, and also that it can be lost if you are not careful."

Akai raised his left hand to his temple and wiped off the blood that had appeared, then he used it to sign his name on the grey parchment of the scroll.

"Done."

"Good," said Tsunade, standing up and facing him, "now that you have passed this test, and have proof to show for it, I pronounce you to be an official Leaf Village genin. We will worry about finding you a team later."

"I think now would be a good time to pull out that hite-ate I gave you, Akai," added Iruka, smiling at his student, "I think that means you can wear it now."

"Thanks, Iruka-sensei, Lady Hokage," Akai said as he reached into his satchel and pulled out the blue headband that Iruka had given him the previous morning. Resting the metal plate against his forehead, he tied the ends together behind his head. Once it was on, it felt right to Akai, like it was always meant to be there.

"Don't let it go to your head now," said Hishin, looking Akai in the eyes.

"I won't, Hishin, but thanks anyway."