

Enemies and Friends Revealed

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Akai is now a genin and enjoying life in Konoha. But when a strange attack on his family ends with his sister's abduction, Akai will have to band together with new allies to find her.

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1 - Disturbing News: A Sister in Trouble

“You are going to have to be faster than that if you want to beat me,” said Rock Lee, as he leapt off the top of a ten foot wooden wall.

“Yeah, well we’ll just have to see about that,” replied Kiba as he reached the top of the same wall, with Akamaru right behind him, “right, Akamaru?” The large hound barked in agreement and the pair jumped from the wall, following Lee to the next obstacle, a thirty foot rope climb. Lee was already on his way up, but Kiba was quickly able close the gap once he arrived.

Akai stood a short distance away, watching the two test out the obstacle course that he and Iruka-sensei had designed and built. The two shinobi had remained neck and neck for most of the course, seeming to have little difficulty with any of the obstacles, though Akai had to admit that they were also physically far above the average ninja. Just because these two made the course look easy did not mean that everyone else would. He watched as the two reached the top of the ropes and each started their descent, Kiba moving faster than Lee to begin with and also dropping for the last fifteen feet, creating the largest gap between them yet as they moved to the final obstacle.

It was an inverted ladder, leaning backward at a forty-five degree angle, which the two would have to climb up on the bottom side and then down on the top side, not an easy feat. Kiba reached it first and immediately started his ascent, having only minimal trouble hanging on to the wooden bars. Lee had more difficulty when he arrived, having never done anything similar, he was unsure of what to do. But after a few failed attempts, he finally found a method that worked for him and started scaling the ladder at great speed.

“Now look who’s going to win, Lee!” shouted Kiba as he reached the ground again and Lee had just reached the top of the ladder. He smiled broadly as he took off toward the finish line where Akai was waiting. Lee continued his way down the ladder and did a back flip off of the last bar to land running on his feet.

“We will see about that!” he shouted as he took off sprinting after Kiba. When Kiba heard this and glanced back to see Lee gaining on him, his smile was gone and he refocused on running for the finish. Akai could tell that it was gonna be a close one. The two chunin approached side by side, but Kiba’s lead after the inverted ladder paid off, he ran past Akai just a moment before Lee.

“Kiba is the victor!” shouted Akai, as the two ran by. Upon hearing this, Kiba jumped up and howled in victory before turning and giving both Akai and Lee high fives.

“We did it, Akamaru!” he shouted with excitement, “we were the first to complete the new course!” Akamaru barked with equal excitement.

“Well done, Kiba,” said Lee, bowing shortly, “it was a good race. And now,” he added as he dropped into the leaning rest, “one hundred pushups for not winning. One and two and one and two...” In his signature style, he had challenged himself to either beat Kiba or do one hundred pushups for failing to

do so.

“Thanks for trying out the course guys,” said Akai as Lee continued with his pushups and Kiba finally started calming down, “what did you think?”

“It was splendid,” said Lee without stopping his ‘punishment’, “I can truly see that running through it regularly will certainly make for some excellent training.”

“I have to agree with Lee on that,” added Kiba, patting Akamaru on the neck, “it’s just challenging enough without being impossible, even for shinobi who aren’t as fit as we are.”

“I could not agree with Kiba more,” Lee continued as he stood up again, having completed his pushups.

“Thanks, guys,” Akai replied, “it took Iruka and me a while to finish it, so I’m glad that someone will use it. Do you guys want to head over to Ichiraku’s and grab something to eat? My treat.”

“Sure,” said Kiba, “that would be awesome. Let’s get going.”

“Hang on a minute,” said Lee, suddenly reaching up to his left ear, where he had an earpiece and microphone. “Yes, Guy-sensei? Yes, I am with Akai right now.” He listened for a moment and a look of concern crossed his face. “Yes, sir, I will tell him.” He switched off the microphone and lowered his hand turning to look at Akai with a worried look on his face.

“Lady Hokage wants you to meet her at the south gate immediately.”

“Why?” asked Kiba.

“Apparently the Kajihana Clan is approaching the village, but something does not seem right. There are Sand shinobi with them, and the caravan appears to have recently been through a fight,” he explained, keeping his eyes on Akai. Akai’s face filled with shock.

“Then let’s go,” suggested Kiba, realizing what the clan being attacked could mean for Akai. The trio took off, using the roof tops as a highway as they steered toward the south gate.

As they approached the gate, they could all see the Kajihana caravan wagons coming into the village. Some were missing their tops, others had chunks of wood missing, and still others were covered in scorch marks. Some of the clan members were walking and several were sporting cuts and bruises. It certainly looked like they had been through a battle, and, sure enough, there were sand ninjas among the group as well. The three saw Lady Tsunade and Iruka speaking to one of them, a blond woman with a large iron fan folded up on her back.

“Hey, it’s Temari,” said Kiba recognizing her as they approached over the roof tops, “the sand ninja must be from one of her liaison missions, traveling with her to carry messages between us and Sunagakure.” Akai listened but was not interested in identifying the shinobi present. His main concern was locating his family. He finally spotted them coming through the gate as he, Kiba, and Lee leapt down from the roof top and landed near Tsunade, Iruka, and Temari. As the two chunin with him ran to meet with the older shinobi and find out what was happening, Akai ran to see his parents and brother.

“Mikon, Mom, Dad,” he called as he came up to them and gave each of them a hug. They were all stunned, especially Mikon and Toramaru, by the headband that Akai had been wearing for two weeks now. Akai was so glad to see them all safe that, for a moment, he didn’t realize he had left someone out. When he did realize it, he looked about for his sister, but did not see her anywhere. “Where is Izumi?”

At the mention of their daughter’s name, Mina and Toramaru looked down in despair, leaving Mikon to answer his younger brother’s question.

“She was captured,” he said slowly, too stunned by his own words to even form tears. Akai didn’t understand.

“Captured? What do you mean?” he asked forcefully, unintentionally causing his brother to recoil in fear, “Captured by who?”

“The Akatsuki,” said a voice behind him, causing him to turn around and see Temari standing behind him. She and the others had come running over after seeing Akai rush to see his family. “Not the actually Akatsuki, but some of their agents. My group found them attacking this caravan on the road and stepped in to intervene. They fled quickly, leaving only a few casualties, but it wasn’t until after we had tended the wounded and logged the dead that we realized they had taken ten captives.”

“Izumi was one of them,” added Mikon when Temari had finished. Akai’s heart sank. His own sister? A prisoner of the Akatsuki? “I saw them take her,” continued Mikon, his face downtrodden, “but I couldn’t stop them. They fled before I could get to her.” Now, even as his little brother watched, Mikon did fall to tears, ashamed of having not been able to protect his sister. Akai, struggling to contain his own tears for his sister, placed a hand on his big brother’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “we’ll find her.” Then he turned around and faced Lady Tsunade. “Lady Hokage, I request permission to leave the village on a mission to locate these Akatsuki agents and rescue my sister and fellow clan members.”

“When you became a Leaf genin, the Kajihana Clan became a member of this village,” Tsunade replied, “of course I grant you permission, but I will make a few stipulations.” She looked at the other shinobi around her to see that they were listening, then addressed each of them, “Iruka, Kiba, Lee, would all of you be willing to go on this rescue mission?”

“Of course, Lady Hokage,” replied Lee, “I can not sit by while friends of the Leaf Village are held prisoner, it will not stand.” He offered his salute, usually reserved for Guy-sensei alone, as a sign of his acceptance.

“Surely, Lady Tsunade,” said Iruka, “you don’t think I would just stand here when one of my student’s family members is in enemy hands. You can count on me.”

“You can sure count me and Akamaru in too,” added Kiba, “especially since we’ll have to track down these Akatsuki.” Akamaru howled in agreement.

“Good,” said Tsunade again, before turning to Temari, “Temari, would you be willing to at least show them where the attack happened?”

“I can do more than that, Lady Hokage,” the sand shinobi replied, a smirk on her face. “My apprentice, Areno Taka, is currently tracking the Akatsuki agents. Tracking is her specialty and I asked her to do it just in case you wanted to send a team. To be honest, I would have gone myself if I didn’t have to oversee the clan’s arrival here.”

“That’s perfect,” said Tsunade with a nod, turning to the group in general, “the five of you will depart immediately and locate Temari’s apprentice, who has hopefully located the Akatsuki’s base of operations by now. Gather some intel and move in if you are able. Since the Akatsuki are involved, I will mobilize the Neju Shotai and they will follow you shortly. They will back you up.”

“Understood,” said Temari and Iruka, while the three younger shinobi nodded. The team then turned around and headed for the south gate. Mikon watched them leave, his brother in particular. He could not help noticing how much his brother had changed in the past two and a half months.

“Good luck, little brother. Please bring our sister back safely.”

2 - Areno Taka: Eyes in the Sky

As the team leapt into the trees beyond the village's South Gate, Iruka wasted no time in establishing some order.

"Kiba, you and Akamaru move to the front," he called, "keep both of your noses and eyes peeled for enemy activity or traps."

"Right away, Iruka-sensei," replied Kiba as he and his partner leapt to the front of the group.

"Temari." He turned and met the jonin's eyes before continuing. "You need to be right behind them. You know where this attack happened and which way your apprentice departed, so you'll have to guide us there."

"Of course, Iruka," she called back, also moving to the front of the pack, "and Lee should move to the back. His speed will allow him to occasionally check behind us for ambushes and still be able to keep up."

"I agree," Iruka responded, before turning to glance back at Lee, "you've got the rear handsome devil."

"Understood, Iruka-sensei," Lee called with a nod as he paused for a moment to make sure all of the others passed him. Iruka watched until Lee started moving again before turning to Akai.

"Akai, you and I will stay in the center. That way we can quickly react to anything in front or behind."

"Got it, Iruka-sensei," replied Akai resentfully as he moved to his place in the formation. He couldn't help but think that the real reason Iruka wanted him in the center was to keep him from breaking ranks and rushing ahead to look for Izumi. But he respected his teacher enough to stay with the team as they moved on southward, toward the site of the attack

After three hours of nonstop travel, the team arrived at what Akai instantly realized must have been the site of the ambush. There were scorch marks all over the ground and several craters that could only have been made by paper bombs. There were two decimated wagons still smoking in the middle of the road and a pile of discarded merchandise that had apparently been moved to make room for wounded. But, what caught Akai's attention the most was the large area of leveled trees that looked as if they had been blown over by the wind. A glanced over at Temari and didn't have to imagine what the giant fan on her back was for.

"The scent of people is strong here," Kiba said suddenly, turning to face the rest of the group, "how long was the clan stopped here?" He looked at Temari as he asked this.

"I'm not sure, but Toramaru told me that the Akatsuki had only wanted to talk at first. Apparently they spent at least ten minutes trying to convince the clan to give up some of its members before actually

attacking, claiming that the many would be spared for the sacrifice of the few.”

“That is strange,” commented Lee, “if that was the case, then how could the Kajihana Clan not have known that the Akatsuki would try to take captives? They should have realized that people were missing right away.”

“The Kajihana Clan is a trusting one,” Akai said in response so that all eyes were on him, “the only people we will not trust are demon-hosts. If the clan felt that the skirmish was ended quickly enough after Temari and the sand shinobi arrived, they will have believed there was no way the Akatsuki could have taken anyone.”

“That sounds about right,” said a voice from the behind the group. Akai turned around quickly to see a young kunoichi, no more than fifteen or sixteen, standing there by the edge of the road. She wore a long rust-colored over shirt with black trousers, and her shirt was decorated with strings of glass beads and what appeared to be feathers of some kind. She wore a red headband that contrasted with her long black hair and hazel eyes, but the metal plate of the hitae-ate was worn instead as a belt buckle. The symbol on it was the hourglass of Sunagakure. “Greetings, Temari-sensei.”

“Ah, Taka,” said Temari in recognition, before turning to the leaf shinobi, “no worries everyone. This is Areno Taka, my apprentice. Taka, this is Umino Iruka, Rock Lee, Inuzu...”

“I thought your apprentice was tracking the Akatsuki!?” interrupted Akai suddenly before glaring at Taka, “what is she doing here?” He was angered that the person he had been expecting to be searching for Izumi was now standing in front of him rather than racing threw the forest to find her.

“Akai,” scolded Iruka, surprised that his student was being so rude, “show some respect, you don’t know the whole situation.”

“The scolding isn’t necessary Iruka-sensei,” said Taka respectfully as Iruka finished, before turning and glancing at Akai, with an indignant expression rivaling the glare he had given her. “If he doesn’t show respect he simply wont receive it.” She then turned away from him without a second thought.

“Taka,” scolded Temari sharply, “now is not the time for that.” She paused for a moment until Taka nodded. “Why are you back here?”

“Simple,” replied Taka matter-of-factly, “I lost the trail and decided to come back here and meet you for orders. I saw you arrive as I approached and came up as quickly as I could.” Her smug attitude was getting on Akai’s nerves, which were already on edge since they were standing here talking while Izumi was being taken farther and farther away. He could not keep quiet any longer.

“Well you sure took your time letting us know you were here,” he blurted out angrily, “you couldn’t have been that far off if you saw us arrive. And what’s this about losing the trail? I thought tracking was your specialty?”

“Akai, that is enough!” interjected Lee as he stepped in front of Akai and between him and Taka, “the Akatsuki are known for being difficult to track. Even jonin have difficulty doing it. You are judging far too harshly.”

“And another thing,” added Temari as she placed a hand on Taka’s shoulder and looked Akai in the face, “Taka has vision that rivals Kiba here’s sense of smell. She likely spotted us from over a kilometer away.” Akai, stunned, looked again at Taka. The anger in his eyes quickly left when he realized that her breathing was slightly elevated, meaning that she had indeed rushed to meet them. Though no one could have seen it since he then lowered his head and stared at the ground, a look of guilt now crossed his face.

“Forgive me,” he said dejectedly, feeling that he should apologize, “I am worried about my sister and I allowed that to cloud my thinking. I meant no disrespect.”

“Your sister?” asked Taka suddenly as if surprised, though she still kept her head turned away from Akai.

“Indeed,” answered Lee, “Izumi, his older sister, is one of the captives who was taken by the Akatsuki.” A moment of silence followed this statement, during which Iruka noticed that Taka seemed to soften up a bit. Temari meanwhile was noticing that something was missing.

“Taka, where is Washime?” she asked, looking up at the now darkening sky and glancing about.

“I sent her flying ahead before I turned to come back,” Taka said as she looked at her teacher before also looking skyward, “I hoped that she would be able to find some hint of the Akatsuki, so we would have some kind of lead.”

“Who’s Washime?” asked Kiba as he also looked up, “some kind of bird?” He laid a hand on Akamaru as the two sniffed the wind.

“She is my partner,” Taka replied, looking past Akai at Kiba and Akamaru, “something like the two of you, I would assume. And yes, she is a bird, an aesthir to be exact.”

“An aesthir?” asked Kiba as he turned and looked at her, but it was Iruka that responded.

“A rare desert falcon,” he said in explanation, “particularly notable as it is known to be able to hunt night or day. Correct?” he added to Taka, who nodded.

“That explains why you sent her out earlier when it was bright out,” commented Lee, “even though you knew it would likely be dark before you found each other again.” Again Taka nodded.

“Then I suggest we start moving in that general direction until we hear from her,” said Temari as she turned to face East, but Akai, who had been standing solemnly nearest to the tree line in that direction, suddenly perked up along with Akamaru.

“Did anyone else hear that?” he asked the group as Akamaru let out a bark. A moment later, the sound of wings beating could clearly be heard over the rising din of the crickets in the woods. Taka raced over to where Akai was standing and peered into the woods. After a moment, a beautiful tan colored falcon came and landed on the kunoichi’s outstretched arm, then suddenly began issuing a series of squawks and cries that Taka listened to intently. A look of excitement crossed her face as she turned and faced

the group, careful to not look directly at Akai but also not excluding him.

“Washime says she may have found the Akatsuki’s hideout,” she said as she threw up her arm and allowed the aesthir to take off. She then turned to face the woods and shouted, “Follow me!”

3 - Splitting Up: Balance at a Risk

Midnight. The moon high in the sky with few clouds to obscure it and a chill wind blowing out of the south. Akai and the other members of the rescue team have followed Washime to the edge of a large crater valley, deep in the forests of the Land of Fire. The team stops for a moment to rest and plan their next course of action.

“This valley is huge!” exclaimed Kiba as he examined the crater from the cliff top, “it must be at least twice as big as the Valley of the Bikochu!”

“Well, I estimate that it’s about twenty kilometers in diameter,” agreed Iruka, “the same size as the 44th Battle Training Zone back in Konoha.” He turned to face Taka. “Are you sure this is where they are hiding?”

“Washime followed their trail here before losing it in the valley,” Taka confirmed with a quick glance at Washime, who was circling in the dark sky above, “then she circled the valley and found no signs of them having left by a different path.” She paused for a moment as Washime let out a piercing cry, after which Taka nodded. “She says that the edges of the valley are still undisturbed, they have not left yet.” After hearing this Akai looked down over the valley below him. His sister was somewhere down there.

“So now we must decide if we are to wait for the Neju Shotai or not,” stated Lee, looking around at the gathered shinobi. His eyes stopped when they reached Temari, because as a jonin she was the highest ranked person there. Temari stayed silent for a moment, assessing the situation in her head.

“We do not wait,” she said finally, standing and facing the ninja gathered around her, “we still do not know the exact location of the Akatsuki, only a possible area. Since we have two trackers,” she paused and motioned toward Kiba and Taka, “we will split into two three-man squads. Iruka, you will take Kiba and Lee and search the southern part of the valley, while I take Taka and Akai to search the northern half.” She looked at Iruka as she said this, who was suddenly skeptical.

“Are you sure you don’t want to take Lee and I will take Akai?” he asked glancing at both Taka and Akai, “Taka and Akai have not gotten along very well since we started this mission.” Indeed, for the duration of the trip from the ambush site to here, Akai had been too guilt ridden to speak to Taka, who in turn had been too proud to speak to Akai. A lack of communication would not be good for the squad.

“I realize that, Iruka, but I want our teams to be balanced and they will have to get over it soon enough anyways so they might as well get started now.” She turned and faced the two genin, leaving Iruka with a still skeptical look on his face. “Look, can you two agree to cooperate at least for the sake of this mission and the innocent people involved?” Taka and Akai turned and stared each other in the face.

“Like I said before,” Akai said, “I am sorry for being rude, whether you accept that apology or not. But I would like your help in finding my sister,” he added, and Taka stunned momentarily by the intensity that had returned to his eyes.

“I will help you,” she replied to him calmly, “for your sister’s sake. You will still have to earn my respect after this.” She looked him in the eye to gauge his response

“I thank you for that, and I pledge to do what I can to regain your respect after this mission has been completed.” As Iruka watched this exchange he relaxed a bit. He could see that the two genin were very different in many ways, but also that they were a lot alike. He knew he could count on the two to keep their word that they would cooperate.

“Well let’s get to it, then,” shouted Kiba. A moment later the six shinobi leapt from the cliff to the valley floor below.

4 - Familiar Faces: Rise of an Avenger

As the six shinobi plummeted down to the valley floor, all of them were actively scanning the area with their senses, none of them wanted to walk into an ambush. By the time they reached the ground though, it seemed as if there was nothing to worry about, even Kiba's nose and Taka's eyes could find no sign of trouble.

"Well it seems as if our arrival went unnoticed," commented Temari in a low voice, "that can only be a good thing." She glanced around at the other five, particularly Iruka. "You all remember your jobs right? Iruka, Kiba, and Lee will search the southern half of the valley and the rest of us will search the north. Get ready. We split up on my mark." The two teams turned to face in their respective directions, backs to each other. "Ready, set, m..." A panicked cry from Washime somewhere above caused Temari to stop as Taka listened closely and grabbed the thin flutelike whistle that hung around her neck.

"She says that something is coming, and fast," she told the group after a moment. The look on her face was sufficient to tell Akai that Washime did not normally distinguish between 'coming' and 'coming fast'. He instinctively reached up and grabbed the hilt of his bokuto.

"How fast and from where?" asked Iruka quickly, thinking like Akai and removing a kunai from the pouch on his leg. Even as he asked, Taka raised the whistle to her lips. As she let loose the first note, Akamaru's ears perked up, as if he could hear something the others couldn't and was surprised by it. Akai realized this quickly and knew that something was wrong. Akamaru had heard Taka use the whistle numerous times to check up with Washime during the trip here, so why was he reacting this time. Kiba noticed this as well and quickly turned his back to the valley wall behind them so he was facing the tree line.

"Incoming!" he shouted, but he was too late.

Before she could even start the second note of her question to Washime, something slammed into Taka at tremendous speed, knocking the wind out of her and sending her flying toward the rock wall behind them. Akai jumped in her path to keep her from impacting the wall, but the force of the attack was enough to also send him flying backwards. His back slammed hard into the rock, but he didn't hear any breaking bone, which he knew he would have if Taka had hit the hard stone. The force of the attack had already knocked the kunoichi unconscious and dislocated her left shoulder. Akai looked up to see what had attacked her, but there was nothing there and the other shinobi were all scanning the surrounding area.

"What happened?" called Akai to the others as he gently laid Taka down on the grassy floor of the valley and knelt beside her to do what healing he could.

"An attack of some kind," shouted Kiba, using his nose to scour the air, "that's what Akamaru heard, but it was too fast for even me to react." A half puzzled half amazed look crossed his face as he stopped sniffing. "That's impossible!"

“What is it, Kiba?” asked Iruka, who had stopped searching when he heard Kiba’s remark, “is something wrong?”

“The speed this guy must have used,” replied Kiba, staring at his former teacher in amazement, “I can’t even find a scent trail!” Akamaru barked in agreement, to the shock of all those present.

“How can that be?” pondered Iruka, “that kind of speed is…” Washime let loose another cry just before Iruka was hit and sent flying toward the wall. This time it took Lee’s speed and strength to stop him. Iruka, having realized another attack was coming thanks to Washime, had braced himself for it and been able to remain conscious. He was winded, but after a moment he was able to speak again.

“There are two of them!” he shouted to the rest of the group, causing even Akai to look up from trying to reset Taka’s shoulder. “They’re attacking at once to take us out individually.” A moment later, laughter was heard from the trees ahead of them, deep and demonic sounding. Akai, as he started to gather chakra in his right palm for the Mystic Palm Healing Jutsu, realized what that kind of attack could mean.

“Guys!” he shouted to the rest of the group, “that kind of attack means they are probably weak on the defensive. If we can slow them down enough to hit them, one good attack should take them out!” He waited until Temari nodded before going back to working with Taka’s injury. With a quick shift of his glowing hands, he snapped her shoulder back in place. Despite the fact that the Mystic Palms should have deadened the pain, Taka’s entire body shook as if on impulse and she started to stir. After a moment, she opened her eyes and looked up at Akai, who was kneeling over her. For a moment, Akai thought he saw a flash of gratitude in her eyes, the first since the two had met and Akai had been so overly rude. It was gone quickly however, the group heard another cry from Washime, this one not as panicked, and Akai and Taka both looked up at the scene of battle.

Temari had removed her fan and now had it fully open and resting behind her back, ready for her to swing forward at a seconds notice. Remembering the leveled trees from earlier, Akai had a pretty good idea of what she was planning. Iruka was standing on his own close to the wall and clutching his right shoulder, and Kiba, Akamaru, and Lee were all standing ready just behind Temari, who Akai and Taka could now see appeared to be waiting for something. A few seconds later, Akamaru let out a loud growl and raised his ears, the signal Temari was waiting for. With out stopping to think, the jonin swung her massive fan forward, releasing an equally massive blast of wind.

“Kiba, Lee, now!” she shouted as two figures suddenly appeared in the middle of the wind stream. The momentum they had been moving with caused them to remain suspended there for a short moment, just long enough for Kiba and Lee to move into action. And just long enough for a Akai to recognize the two.

“No, wait!” he shouted, leaping up and running toward the fight, but it was too late and Lee and Kiba were already moving too quickly to hear him. Kiba was charging forward and going into a spin, using the less powerful but still damaging Tunneling Fang since he and Akamaru had been too rushed to use Man-Beast Clones to prepare for Fang Over Fang. Lee dropped low in front of the second figure and kicked him skyward before using Shadow of the Dancing Leaf to execute the Primary Lotus. By the time the attacks were finished, Akai knew it was too late, they were already dead, but he ran towards them anyway. He stopped next to the first figure, and Iruka was the first to realize that something was wrong when he saw a tear drop from Akai’s face.

The figure was just a little kid, no more than eleven years old, and he wore the traditional work tunic, emblazoned with the Red Lotus symbol, of the Kajihana Clan. Akai fell to his knees when he saw the shocked look frozen on the boy's face from when he had been caught by Temari's surprise attack. Akai looked over at the other body, and seeing that it was identical to the first, hung his head. It was all he could do to keep from screaming in agony, even as Iruka told Kiba and Lee to search the surrounding area for other enemies. It seemed like forever before someone laid a hand on Akai's shoulder.

"Who were they?" asked Taka's voice softly as she knelt down beside Akai. It took a moment for Akai to answer as something seemed to be lodged in his throat.

"Roan and Matsu, my twin cousins," he replied slowly, tears still threatening to pour out of his eyes. All he could think about was that day ten weeks earlier, when Lady Tsunade had offered that he stay in the village and train to become a shinobi. Roan and Matsu had been the first to congratulate him after the his parents and siblings. He had promised them that they would be the first to see everything he had learned when the clan returned to the village. "How could this have happened?" Akai asked to no one in particular, to the darkness of the night.

"They were possessed," replied Iruka from a short distance away, where he and Temari were examining Roan's body. This response prompted the tears to stop forming in Akai's eyes and he was at Iruka's side almost immediately.

"What do you mean?"

"This," he said, pointing to where Kiba's tunneling fang had impacted with the boy's stomach and shredded his tunic. There, Akai could see an ornate circular pattern that was branded into Roan's skin. He did not recognize the pattern, but he instantly knew its purpose.

"A sealing jutsu?" he asked, stunned by what that could mean, "they had demon's sealed inside them?" He examined the seal again and this time realized that it was very poorly done. He knew from his own studies of sealing jutsu that whatever this seal had been meant to contain could have easily broken out, which lent credence to Iruka's claim of possession. "How?"

"It can only have been the Akatsuki," said Taka from behind Akai, causing him to turn around, "that would explain why they wanted live prisoners."

"Just to make demon-hosts?" questioned Iruka, "Why?"

"Think about it, Iruka," interrupted Temari, bringing all eyes on her, "who all do you know of that is a demon-host?" It took only a moment for Iruka to respond.

"Naruto and your brother, Gaara, the Fifth Kazekage," he said still confused, before a look of realization crossed his face, "No."

"Exactly. Naruto and Gaara are two of the most powerful shinobi in either of our villages, in part because of the demons sealed inside them. I think the Akatsuki might be experimenting with creating more demon-hosts that they can use for their cause."

“Like turning people into demon powered weapon’s?” asked Taka as her sensei finished. Taka looked appalled when Temari nodded. “How could anyone do that?” She looked at Akai, who had suddenly gone stiff as he listened to Temari’s theory. When he looked up, Taka saw a gleam in his eyes that she did not recognize, a kind of determination that would not be easily stopped, like a river that just broke through its dam.

“Are you all saying that the Akatsuki kidnapped my clansmen just so they could turn them into weapons for their own goals?” The anger in Akai’s voice was controlled but only just, even as he looked down at the mark on Roan’s body. Before anyone could answer him, Kiba and Lee returned, both excited, with Akamaru close behind them.

“Akai, we found something!” shouted Kiba, and the enthusiasm in his voice caused the intensity in Akai’s eyes to relax for a moment, “Akamaru and I might have found a scent trail!”

“How do you know?” asked Temari as she stood from examining Roan’s body.

“The scent of perfume. We caught the smell of honeysuckle and jasmine, neither of which are plants native to this area,” he replied as he came to a stop. Akai was suddenly ecstatic.

“That’s the perfume that that Izumi uses!” he shouted, turning to face Iruka and Temari.

“Then let’s go. Lead the way, Kiba!” said Iruka.

The team moved into action instantly, everyone following Kiba’s nose. But when everyone leapt into the canopy to head deeper into the valley, Akai stopped. He turned around and faced Roan and Matsu’s bodies, where they were lying on the ground. He stood there silently for a moment, that same determined look in his eyes once again, before speaking aloud into the night.

“I vow that I will do everything in my power to keep this from happening to anyone else. The ones responsible will pay.” Then, to Roan and Matsu, he added, “I don’t know if you can hear me, but I want to thank you. Your attacking us here, even if it was not your intent, told us what we are dealing with. I swear as a leaf shinobi and as your cousin that your deaths here will not be in vain.” With that he turned around and stared into the forest, but he did not leave. Instead, he knelt on one knee and bit each of his thumbs, wiping the blood off on the opposite hands before performing a chain of hand signs.

“Ninja Art: Dual Summoning Jutsu!” He slammed his hands on the ground and a column of white smoke erupted from each spot. When the smoke cleared, the two wolf brothers, Hishin and Mizubuke, were each standing there facing him. The two quickly noticed the solemn look on Akai’s face.

“Akai, what’s wrong?” asked the flame colored Hishin, concerned.

“Nothing,” replied Akai before turning his head over his shoulder to indicate the two figures behind him. When the two wolves saw the children lying there, they each bowed their heads and Akai spoke again. “I have to go on and help rescue others. I would like you two to bring them back to Konoha,” he said indicating his cousins once again, “can you do that?”

“Of course we can, Akai,” replied Hishin, and Mizubuke nodded in agreement.

“Thank you,” Akai said as he stood and faced the forest once again, “I’ll see you back in Konoha.” The wolves moved to go and pick up Roan and Matsu as Akai leapt into the canopy, eyes like a roaring river. Taka, who had stopped in the trees after Akai had fallen back from the group, watched on, realizing what those eyes were.

Those are the eyes of an Avenger, she thought as she turned and followed Akai.

5 - Fleeting Reunion and Timely Arrival

As Hishin and Mizubuke started to scale the cliff with Roan and Matsu, Akai was racing through the canopy, searching for a sign of where Kiba had led the others. It did not take long for him to locate an arrow carved into the bark of a tree, which he knew must have been left by Iruka. He followed that direction for about two hundred meters and then found another one, which he then followed. After the fifth arrow, Akai ran into a massive tree in the center of a large clearing. A single kunai was stabbed into one of the tree's roots, telling Akai that this was the place. He made his way over to the kunai and found that there was a cave hidden underneath the root, so he grabbed the small weapon and took it with him as he entered.

As his eyes adjusted to the dark, he found himself in a long stone tunnel and there was yet another arrow scratched into the wall. *Iruka-sensei and the others must have gone on ahead,* Akai thought to himself as he started walking briskly, careful to watch his footing, *I should be able to catch up quickly enough.*

After several minutes of this, Akai found a split in the tunnel, with one branch going off to the right and the other continuing on straight ahead. Akai looked about for another sign from Iruka but found none, and the stone floor of the tunnel yielded no footprints. For a moment, he stood there and debated which path the others might have taken or if they might have even split up. His debate was ended however by a sudden piercing scream, panicked but recognizable, which radiated from the right hand tunnel.

"Izumi!" he shouted as he recognized his missing sister's voice, and he tore off down the branch tunnel without a second thought. "I'm coming, sis, hold on!" Using the rock-climbing jutsu to help secure his footing, Akai raced down the tunnel at full speed, unconcerned about the potential hazards or traps. At one point, he triggered a trap door in the tunnel floor, but since he was running all out was able to run right past it with little difficulty. He continued running for several more minutes, prompted to greater speed every time he heard Izumi scream in pain, before he noticed the glow of a lit room up ahead. He ran up the steep rise that led to it, noticing the sudden drop in temperature, and emerged into a large circular chamber lit by torches all around the walls. The chamber was just below the earth's surface, apparent due to the large open skylight in the roof thirty feet above, through which poured the light of the moon and stars outside.

As Akai ran into the room, a large stone door shut behind him and sealed itself in place, but he took no notice. He was more concerned with the circular stone table, in the center of the room directly beneath the skylight, where Izumi was lying with her hands and feet tied to the table, struggling to get free. Standing above her and holding a long black knife was a tall figure, whose robe depicted the blue clouds of the Akatsuki servants. As Izumi turned and looked at Akai where he stood in the doorway, a look of relief on her face, the Akatsuki agent plunged the knife into her stomach, causing the longest scream of pain yet. Akai reacted instinctively and was moving before he even realized it. The agent was suddenly thrown off the table and against the chamber wall by the force of Akai's flicker kick. Akai turned and knelt next to his sister, who having stopped screaming was looking up at him, tears forming in her eyes.

"I knew you would find me, brother," she said weakly, and Akai could see that her strength was fading

fast. Akai leaned over and hugged his older sister with tears in his own eyes.

“Don’t leave me, Izumi,” he said to her, “not now!”

“I never will, little brother,” she said finally, and Akai watched as the last of her strength gave way and her eyes closed as she stopped breathing. Akai was too stunned to do anything but look at her face, tears flowing unchecked now. His sister was dead.

“Oh, come on,” said a voice behind him, “you’re gonna get this emotional over some worthless girl?” The Akatsuki had stood from his ‘meeting’ with the wall and was now taunting Akai, and as Akai stood and turned to face him, he recognized the red lotus on the shoulder of Akai’s jacket. “Oh,” he added in amusement, “you must be the brother that she kept yammering on about, the brother that would come and save her.” He glanced at Izumi’s lifeless form on the table. “A bit late, don’t you think?”

“Shut up!” Akai shouted at the agent, the tears gone from his now focused eyes and his hands balling into fists, “if you say one more thing about her, I swear I’ll...”

“You’ll what?” the agent snapped back with a laugh, “hit me with that blunt stick on your back?” He laughed again before another look of recognition crossed his face. “Hey, you wouldn’t happen to be related to those two runts, too? They kept talking about a ninja cousin with a bokuto coming to make me pay, until I sealed those two demons inside of them. They weren’t talking about you, were they?”

“Leave them out of this!” replied Akai, glaring at the robed ninja, “Don’t say another word about my family!”

“So it was you,” the Akatsuki replied with a chuckle before looking Akai in the face, “well you better run along now. If your family was expecting you to be able to do anything, they were even more stupid than I thought.” That had done it. Akai grabbed and unsheathed his bokuto and flickered toward his opponent.

The robed agent blocked the attack by simply raising his arm, since he had a metal tonfa grasped in his hand that absorbed the impact. He looked Akai in the face with out a single hint of amusement.

“I thought I made it clear that you can’t do anything to me, especially with this blunt stick,” he said, glancing down at Akai’s battered weapon.

“And I’m making it clear right now that I will never let you see the light of day again for everything you have said about my family,” Akai replied, his eyes more intense than ever.

“Well if that is your intent, as a jonin, I will show you first hand how that is done,” said the agent as his free left hand started to move at blinding speed, “Earth Style: Strong-arm Jutsu!” Even as his fist became covered in rock, he planted it in Akai’s stomach, winding him and launching him threw the air. He barely managed to hang on to his bokuto as he smashed into the wall.

Damn, Akai thought to himself, dazed by the impact, *this isn’t good. If only Iruka-sensei and the others were here.* He glanced toward the tunnel he had arrived from only to see the stone door that had sealed itself in place. *I guess it’s just me then, time to step it up.* He dropped to his knees and set his bokuto down in front of him as the Akatsuki started slowly walking towards him, playing with him.

“Surrendering?” the agent asked with a chuckle, “what happened to never letting me see the light of day again?” He laughed again as he continued to walk towards Akai, stopping only when he was standing right in front of him. “This is too easy,” he said as he removed another long black knife from a sheath on his belt and raised it over his head, ready to plunge into Akai’s bowed head, “you are even more worthless than your sister. Time to die.” He brought the knife down towards Akai’s skull just as Akai moved his hands to his own stomach, spreading his fingers to form a circle with eight points.

“Eight Trigrams Suppression Seal: Release!” The sudden surge of chakra in Akai’s system caused a massive pulse of energy to radiate out from him, forcing the Akatsuki agent backwards several feet, but Akai wasn’t finished yet. He reached forward and grabbed his bokuto as he leapt to his feet. “Shadow Clone Jutsu, Delta Formation! He and two shadow clones moved in on his still dazed opponent and each simultaneously landed a chakra enhanced blow to the agent’s chest, sending him sprawling to the ground twenty feet away.

“So you have a few good tricks,” said a voice behind Akai, causing him to turn. Something solid smashed into his forehead and sent him flying backwards. “But you’ll have to do better than that to beat me.”

Akai rolled to his feet, his bokuto in hand. If he hadn’t been wearing his hitae-ate, which had taken the brunt of the attack, he would likely have been killed. He glanced at where the agent’s body had landed, only to see a mere rock lying there. His actual opponent was standing several feet away, having just smashed him in the temple with the metal tonfa. *A substitution jutsu?* Akai was too dazed to realize that the agent’s hands were already moving again.

“Paralysis Jutsu!” the Akatsuki cried, and Akai realized too late that he was the jutsu’s target. He tried to move his arms and legs but it had no effect, his body wouldn’t move. “Now you are mine!” cried the Akatsuki agent, eyes filled with anger, “no one tries to pull a fast one on me!” Then he took the black knife and threw it at Akai’s heart.

I’m sorry, everyone, I’ve failed, was the only thought that passed through Akai’s mind as he closed his eyes, not wanting to watch the knife sail towards him.

A piercing whistle suddenly caused Akai to open his eyes again, just in time to see the long knife be knocked to the ground by a massive shuriken. The Akatsuki agent, as stunned as Akai, turned to see where the shuriken had come from, but he could see nothing through the shadows in the cavern. Another whistle sounded from behind him, but all he saw when he turned around was another shuriken coming right at him, which he dodged easily enough.

“Enough games,” the agent shouted into the shadows, clearly unnerved by the elusive enemy, “stop hiding and face me!” All he got in response was yet another whistle from behind and a third shuriken, which came considerably closer to its mark this time but was still evaded. A fourth came flying from his right, accompanied by another whistle, and Akai could see that the jonin was getting jumpy. He obviously wasn’t used to enemies being able to hide from him.

Suddenly a similar, but different, sound emanated from the skylight above, and both the agent and Akai looked up to see a bird of some kind diving into the cavern and heading directly for the robed jonin,

apparently on a collision course. The bird veered away as it entered the cave, but it didn't quit the attack. The Akatsuki saw a flash of light from the bird's talons and side stepped just before a kunai landed where he had been standing.

"Some silly parlor trick?" he shouted into the shadows, "distract me then try to hit me from above?" He was angry now, but Akai noticed a hint of fear in his voice as well. Akai tried to move again but his body still didn't respond, and the jonin continued his rant at the seemingly empty chamber. "You will have to do better than..." He stopped as he noticed the slight hissing sound coming from near his feet. The kunai was attached to a lit paper bomb! The jonin leapt away a mere moment before it exploded, saving himself from the blast.

Akai, still struggling to make his body move, felt a suddenly blast of wind blow past his right side, which caused him to stop entirely. He watched as the blast of wind collided with the still airborne agent and sent him flying into the wall. The next thing he knew, he felt something tap him on the right shoulder and his muscles instantly relaxed. He could move again.

"I thought you might need some help," said a voice behind Akai, causing him to turn around. Standing before him was Taka, a smug smile on her face. The kunoichi held an open fan in her right hand another of the large shuriken in her left. "So, here I am."

6 - Sand and Leaf: Comrades in Arms

In the moonlight that came shining through the skylight, Akai and Taka looked at each other. Neither made any movement until Taka looked over at where Izumi was lying motionless on the stone table.

"I'm sorry, Akai," she said suddenly, looking down to avoid looking Akai in the face, "if I had not been so judgmental of you, we could have been here sooner. I know how you must feel right now." She hung her head as her shoulders dropped in shame. It was startlingly different to Akai from her normally very proud posture. Akai walked up to her and placed a hand on her shoulder, causing her to look up.

"Thank you," he said. Then, after a pause and glance at Izumi's lifeless form, he added slowly, "I wish you could have been here sooner, but you made it just in time and helped me out. I am grateful for that." He lowered his hand and looked over at the still blocked passage. "How did you get in here?"

"I stayed and watched when you summoned those two wolves," she said, "then I followed you into the woods but couldn't find where you and the others had gone." She then turned and raised her arm to indicate the opening above, "then Washime found this chasm and led me to it. I arrived just after you had started to fight and was able to sneak down here without being noticed."

"A sand ninja, huh?" came a familiar voice from the shadows, "and one of the Areno Clan none-the-less, given how you distracted me with that bloody pigeon. I should have known the brat wasn't alone." Akai looked about the room, but the Akatsuki agent was nowhere to be seen. He was too well hidden in the shadows. Taka, on the other hand, turned and stared off to Akai's left, at a particularly dark mass of shadows.

"Why don't you come out?" she said aloud, "the shadows only hinder you, since they can't hide you from my eyes."

"Huh, nice bluff, little girl," the jonin said, "Who says that the shadows hinder me? And what makes you think that I would believe your claim that you can see me through these shadows?" The amusement was obvious in his voice, but Akai could still pick out a hint of caution, possibly fear. Next moment, the jonin was thrown from the shadows by another gust of wind, though he managed to roll to his feet.

"First, you should have known that I can see through the shadows because I was able to distract and attack you from them before," Taka said as she started walking toward Akatsuki agent. "Second, I know that you are hindered by the shadows because if you weren't, you would have noticed my earth clone waiting behind you." Akai watched in amazement as an exact duplicate of Taka walked out of the shadows the jonin had just been blown from. He glanced back at the jonin, only to find that he had disappeared.

"Third," said the amused jonin as he reappeared directly behind Taka, a knife drawn to her throat, "you should never gloatingly reveal your methods to an enemy jonin, unless you want to have him kill you." He laughed when he saw Taka's stunned expression. "You brats have been fun to play with, but it ends now."

“Hey, you, Mr. Wants-Everyone-To-Know-He’s-A-Jonin,” shouted Akai. Angry at being mocked, the agent turned to face Akai.

“What did you call me?!” he shouted, only to realize that Akai was no longer there.

“Maybe you should learn to never focus on only one enemy at a time, even if all your opponents are just genin.” Akai’s voice seemed to come from everywhere at once, startling the agent and making him decide to go ahead and slit Taka’s throat, but just before the blade touched her neck, Akai appeared as if from nowhere, using the speed of his flicker to deflect the blade. The jonin was quick, however, and rather than lose the weapon from the force of the deflection, guided it right into Akai’s chest. Akai staggered in pain for a moment before disappearing in a burst of smoke.

A Shadow Clone! thought the jonin, startled. He then shifted his arm to make another attempt at Taka’s throat, but Akai flickered in front of him once again. This time, though, instead of blocking the blade, Akai grabbed Taka and flickered away, taking her with him. *What the...* before the jonin could react any further, he was blown backwards by a flicker kick to the stomach. Before he even landed, he was hit yet again, this time by Akai’s fist coming out of a flicker. After the agent had crashed to the floor and managed to pick himself up on his hands and knees, he looked up to see three Akai’s standing around the room, two in a ready stance and the other standing next to Taka. *More clones!*

“No one threatens my comrades and gets away with it,” said the three Akai’s in sync, but the jonin’s eyes were locked on the one next to Taka, the one whose eyes were now cutting into him. He was so focused on what he knew must be the real Akai that he did not even realize that Taka had disappeared until he heard a piercing whistle behind him. He barely managed to dodge it, his panic rising.

“What are you brats?” he shouted, looking around only to realize that even Akai and his shadow clones had disappeared now. “You must be demons or something!” When he heard two whistles this time, one on either side of him, he started spinning around frantically, trying to find his foes. Another pair of whistles, and the jonin stopped moving. “Show yourselves, you cowards! I’m not afraid of you!”

The cavern fell completely silent. Not a sound was heard, at this seemed to unnerve the jonin even more than the whistles had. After a moment he started to shake uncontrollably. Only then did Taka make her move.

“Hauringu Shikaze, Howling Four Winds!” From North, South, East, and West, four massive blasts of wind converged on the panicked jonin, smashing into him simultaneously. He remained standing, in spite of the attack, if only due to shock, and was suddenly grabbed on each arm by Akai’s shadow clones, while Akai himself appeared in front of him, his bokuto in hand and his head bowed.

“Agent of the Akatsuki,” he said as he looked up, showing the jonin the roaring rivers that were his eyes, “for everything that you have done to my family and comrades, you are the only demon I see here.” He grasped his wooden sword with both hands and raised it over his shoulder, causing the jonin to scream in manic fear.

“Suraisu Kazeken, Slicing Wind Blade!” Akai brought the bokuto in a downward arc and smashed it into the agent’s chest with the force of a small train, sending him flying into the rock wall behind him. As the

dust settled, the jonin shuddered for a moment in the crater created by his impact before totally collapsing.

7 - Reinforcements: Reunion and Rebirth?

After the dust had settled and the Akatsuki agent had collapsed, Akai and Taka each relaxed. Akai's shadow clones burst into smoke and Taka's earth clones, some of which were still hidden in the shadows, turned into rubble and fell to pieces. Silence again filled the chamber as the two shinobi turned towards each other and smiled. The two of them had just bested a jonin. The joy was short lived however, when Akai looked back at the stone table where Izumi was still lying. Not having an enemy to deal with, the fact that his sister was gone was starting to finally hit him, and he started walking over to her.

"Don't turn your back on me, you demon!" Akai turned around once again to see the Akatsuki agent staggering to his feet, clutching his side with his right arm. The other arm hung limp at his side, apparently broken. "You haven't beaten me yet!" he added as he withdrew a kunai from somewhere in his robes. He leaned forward as if to charge, and Akai had his bokuto up instantly.

Before the jonin could move an inch, however, a tall young shinobi in a green jumpsuit appeared next to him and grabbed his arm, twisting it back and threatening to break it until the kunai fell to the ground. Akai and Taka watched as Lee then gave the jonin a quick strike on the neck, which caused his eyes to roll into the back of his head and he fell over, unconscious. Lee caught him before he hit the ground, and laid him down gently as Temari, Iruka, and Kiba leapt down through the skylight. They were then followed by three others: Kakashi, Sakura, and Naruto.

"Ah," said Kakashi calmly as he laid eyes on the unconscious ninja at Lee's feet, "at least we have one prisoner to interrogate." He then looked at Akai and Taka and noticed the confused looks on their faces. He smiled as he said, "Oh, my apologies. Lady Hokage was going to send some members of the Neju Shotai, but she ran into us first and we volunteered. We heard some unusually whistling and shouting coming from down here so we decided to investigate."

"Are there any other Akatsuki down here?" Sakura asked the two ninja, to which they both shook their heads. Sakura nodded and continued to look around. It was only a few seconds before she noticed the stone table where Izumi was. "Casualty?" she asked before turning back to Akai and seeing him lower his face before nodding.

"No," said Iruka softly once he walked over to the table and recognized the person on it. He looked over at his student. "I'm very sorry, Akai." Once all of the others realized what had happened, there was an uneasy silence in the chamber.

"Damn it, if only Grandma Tsunade had found us sooner," blurted Naruto as he kicked a rock on the floor, "we could have been here."

"Drop it, Naruto," said Sakura, glaring at her teammate.

"Don't worry about it, guys," said Akai, looking up with an obviously forced smile on his face. The others all fell silent once again, as Akai turned to Iruka. "What happened to all of you after we got split

up?”

“We found a prison chamber,” Iruka told him, “but only three of your clansmen were there. Apparently the others were taken when the Akatsuki fled.”

“Who did you find?” asked Akai when he remembered that Izumi had not been the Akatsuki’s only captive.

“They gave their names as Meikou, Kawaii, and Han,” replied Temari, and Akai’s heart sank, “do you know them?” It took Akai a moment to respond.

“Meikou and Kawaii are my uncle and aunt, Roan and Matsu’s parents,” he said slowly, “and Han was their little sister.” Temari, Iruka, Kiba and Lee all fell silent.

“Roan and Matsu, were they the two that were being carried back to the village by Hishin and Mizubuke?” asked Kakashi. Though surprised that the jonin knew the wolves’ names, Akai nodded.

“Are they all okay?” asked Akai after a moment.

“They are all fine, Akai,” Lee responded, “they are all waiting up there with Hinata.” He motioned toward the skylight as he said this.

“Hinata is here, too?” asked Akai.

“Yeah,” replied Naruto, “she was with Grandma Tsunade when she found us, so she came along as well.” After this was said, there seemed to be nothing else left to say, so the chamber fell silent again. Akai looked at Izumi again and shuddered. Taka came up behind him and laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Well, time to get moving,” said Kakashi suddenly, before disappearing and reappearing next to Izumi, “I’ll take her.” He reached down and picked up Izumi’s limp form, at which point Akai had to turn his face.

“Let’s go, Akai,” Taka said to him a moment later, and the two followed the other shinobi up out of the cavern through the skylight and through the forest to the valley wall. Hinata and the three rescues were waiting for them on top of the cliff. Hinata was standing lookout with her byakugan. When everyone was gathered, Meikou, Kawaii, and Han all rushed over and hugged Akai, while Kakashi carried Izumi over to where Hinata stood.

“One casualty,” he told her, to which Hinata gave a bewildered look. She then looked more closely at Izumi and then nodded, as if confirming something in her mind.

“Umm, Kakashi-sensei,” she said slowly and quietly so that only the grey haired jonin could hear, “she’s not dead.” This prompted a skeptical look to appear in Kakashi’s single visible eye.

“What do you mean, Hinata?” he asked her, “I don’t feel her heartbeat.”

“But I can see her chakra still flowing,” Hinata replied persistently, catching the attention of the entire

group and causing everyone to fall silent.

“That’s not possible, Hinata,” replied Kakashi with a smile, “I know you knew her and want her to still be alive, but I’m telling you she isn’t.”

“Actually, Kakashi-sensei,” interrupted Sakura, “some medical jutsu place the target in a deathlike state to accelerate the healing process by focusing all of the body’s on healing, so it could be possible that she’s alive without an apparent heartbeat.”

“I’m pretty sure she’s actually dead, Sakura,” he said before holding Izumi’s lifeless body out for her to examine, “but you can check her if you like.” Sakura walked over to take a closer look at Izumi. Then she looked more closely at the knife that was still in her stomach.

“Well, usually those jutsu are ended by removing senbon that were placed in the target’s body at the start of the jutsu, so…” She grabbed the handle of the knife and slowly started to pull it out. A look of shock suddenly crossed Kakashi’s face.

“Stop that, right now!”

“What, I’m only trying to…” Sakura stopped when she realized that Kakashi was not looking at her. He had locked eyes with Akai instead.

“Come here and tell me what you think, Akai,” he said, catching everyone by surprise. Akai hurried over to him. “Check her pulse.” Akai placed his index finger on the vein in Izumi’s neck, and a moment later, his eyes widened in shock. Seeing this reaction, Kakashi turned to address Lee.

“Lee, I am giving you permission to open up to the third gate,” he said. Lee eyes went wide with surprise.

“W-W-Why, Kakashi-Sensei?” he stuttered.

“Because that’s the only way we can get Izumi here to Lady Tsunade in time,” he said calmly. Everyone present was confused.

“What do you mean, Kakashi?” asked Iruka. It was Taka, with her chakra enhanced eyes gazing right at the vein Akai had just touched, that answered his question.

“She has a heartbeat.”