

# Flower of Fire: A New Shinobi Appears

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*A new Chunin Exam final has arrived. Find out what happens to the young son of a merchant family after Hinata receives an unusual fortune.*

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# 1. The Chunin Exam

Late evening. The village hidden in the leaves was bustling more than usual for this time of night, all because of the upcoming festivities. Merchants, traders, and tourists from across the world had been pouring into the village for the past week. This was going to be the biggest Chunin Exam final since that fateful attack more than three years ago, and word of it had spread like wildfire through the land of fire and all of its allies. What was more, it would be the first Chunin Exam that represented three of the Great Shinobi Nations, with Kumogakure and the Land of Lightning joining in alliance with Konohagakure and Sunagakure.

For fifteen year old chunin, Hinata Hyuga, who only a month earlier had served as an assistant proctor during the first and second exams, the upcoming finals merely meant that all of the extra trouble would be over with, and Konoha would resume its normal, more peaceful routine. Ever since the teams had begun to arrive for the first exam, she and her friends had been busier than ever, for on top of their duties in relation with exams, they still had to perform missions for the village as well. She hoped that would all be over soon.

For now, Hinata was enjoying a short, three day break, her first in the past six weeks. As she had learned from her friend Kiba, who had received a break two days before her, she wore simple, common clothes. In this way, she avoided the constant questions and pestering that Kiba had received on his first day, from all of the visitors and traders who had no earthly idea what was going on or how to find anything. She had even used a jutsu to hide her grey, pupil-less eyes, so that no one would connect her with the famous Hyuga Clan of shinobi.

As she made her way through the market square, not one person took a second glance at her, or at least none suspected that she was a ninja. She walked past stall after stall of merchandise, erected by the traveling merchants that had come to sell their goods to such a large gathering of people. Some sold, clothing and exotic fabrics, some sold a wide variety of culinary goods and wares, and still others were tailored to the shinobi themselves, selling weapons and tools of many shapes and sizes. Even the owners of these last makeshift shops, who had trained their eyes to spot their elusive clients, gave no hint or sign of recognition. She was free to do as she pleased, unbothered by the tumultuous events of Konoha's nightlife.

Her first objective was to locate a place to eat, something different from the norm in the Leaf Village. This search brought her to the northern end of the square, where one of the village parks had been virtually surrounded by a variety of temporary establishments, including a few outdoor restaurants, which were set up around large chuck wagons that held supplies. From her patrol duties around the village, she knew that this area was being used by the Kajihana Clan, a clan of traveling merchants native to the Land of Fire. They were a smaller clan but were relatively well known because they hand crafted most of their goods, and their craftsmanship and service were considered high quality. The aroma of fresh cooked food permeated the air around the park, unrivaled by any of the other establishments around the market.

As she approached one of the wagons and the tables set up around it, she observed that it was a sort of soup kitchen, similar to Ichiraku Ramen Bar, which she was familiar with. There was a woman leaning over a large open cook fire, checking the contents of three individual cauldrons, and another woman, only a few years older than Hinata, carried a tray of soup bowls to the waiting customers. The place looked rather busy, but the cook and waitress appeared

unphased, as if this was common and they had much practice. When Hinata approached one of the tables, the young waitress, on her way to pick up more bowls of soup, spotted her and came over.

"Hello, my name is Izumi and I will be serving you this evening," she introduced herself. Though it was a common introduction for a waitress, Hinata was surprised by how personable it sounded. "What soup would you like?"

"Um, what kinds do you have?" asked Hinata in her polite but decidedly shy voice.

"Oh, is this your first time here?" asked Izumi, a look of surprise in her eyes. When Hinata nodded in response, she quickly apologized. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize you were a new customer. Please, pardon me." She bowed respectfully as she apologized, genuinely sorry for her mistake.

"Oh, it's not a problem," responded Hinata quickly.

"Well," Izumi continued relieved, "this is the Kajihana Soup Cafe, run by myself and my mother, Mina." She motioned with her arm toward the woman who was still hovering over the cook fire. "Our menu consists of only three items at a time but it changes from day to day. This evening we are serving Mango-Habanero Ramen with crisp green vegetables, Garlic Wonton Soup, and Butter Corn Chowder. Each is served in snack, meal, couple, and family sizes for here or to go, and comes with fortune cookies in relation to the size of the order. The prices are 5, 10, 15, and 20 ryo, respectively, regardless of variety. Do you need to know anything else?" Again the obviously well rehearsed speech left Hinata with the feeling that it was meant just for her, as if she were the first ever customer. She was momentarily taken aback by this.

"Oh no, that's fine," said Hinata, "thank you very much. I think I would like to try the Mango-Habanero Ramen, a meal size to go if that would be alright."

"Not a problem at all," said Izumi, a friendly smile covering her face, "that is one of our specials that my little brother came up with, and it's actually a big hit. One meal size order coming right up."

Twenty minutes later, Hinata had made her way to the Academy training grounds, well away from all of the hustle and bustle of the market square. She had paid the 10 ryo as Izumi handed her a beautifully wrapped, sealed bowl of hot soup. She had left with the soup in tow as she departed the park, and had gone straight there, to her favorite nighttime training spot. Once there, she had removed the embroidered napkin that had covered the bowl and set it and the single fortune cookie she had been given aside. Now, in the quiet of the dark training field, she enjoyed the sweet and spicy blend of noodles, juice, and vegetables that she felt rivaled even Ichiraku's famous soups. Her plan was to finish her meal and then follow it up with an easy run and some light training, something she had been too busy to do for a long while.

As she finished her soup she reached for the napkin. It was finely crafted of durable cotton, with a beautiful red lotus, the Kajihana Clan symbol, embroidered in silk, as much a memento as a cleaning device. She used it carefully, intending to take it with her if she ever went back, and folded it before placing it in her tunic pocket. She then grabbed the fortune cookie and cracked it open. As was her habit, she ate the cookie before looking at the little slip of paper inside it.

When she did unfold it, it read:

The friends you meet and keep shape your life  
Just as you shape theirs.

Take care in judging those you meet

As destiny may have plans for you and them.

Also included on the slip was another red lotus and the characters representing wind, change, and journey. She was surprised by the rather direct nature of the words, considering she knew

fortunes to be rather enigmatic, and the nature of the three characters was also unfamiliar to her. The only part of it that she understood was the red lotus, a trademark of the Kajihana Clan, as the makers of the fortune cookie. Unable to interpret what it could all mean, she placed it in her pocket as well. Now she had another reason to go back tomorrow.

"Well, Hinata," she said quietly to herself, "I guess now is as good a time as any to get started." She stood and took the now empty bowl and chopsticks and threw them in one of the field's three trash cans before walking over to the dirt path that served as a jogging path for training shinobi. She wasn't wearing her usual training outfit, but the simple tunic and trousers would be fine for what she wanted to do. She started with a few simple stretches and, to get in the mood for training, activated her byakugan.

Looking back towards the market square she could now see a very different Konoha. Through the trees, she could see a bright mass of swirling lights, the heat and energy radiating throughout the village, through every living thing in her nearly 360 degree field of view. She could see her fellow shinobi, with their chakra reserves far higher than any civilian's, like bright spotlights through the glowing cityscape, many of them flitting about on patrols. But what caught her attention almost immediately was an equally bright spotlight behind her.

## 2. Kajihana Akai: A Boy with a Dream

Sensing the possibility of danger, Hinata quickly turned around, moving into an easy fighting stance. As she did, she saw a young man, no more than seventeen years old, throw up his arms quickly to show he meant no harm.

"I am sorry," he said, "I did not mean to startle you." Hinata could see now that he was no shinobi, as he carried no weapons, and his clothes were those of a simple civilian. He wore plain brown trousers and a khaki work tunic, and had apparently just gotten off from a busy evening of work. The wood shavings all over him suggested to Hinata that it was some kind of carpentry work, as did the protective boots on his feet. But more than anything else about him, it was the red lotus on the front of his tunic that caused Hinata to relax a bit.

"Why are you here?" asked Hinata, keeping her voice firm and her hands at the ready, "this is academy property." She kept her byakugan trained on the young stranger to watch his response and look for any sign of treachery, as she had been trained to do. She would not allow an instinct to relax to take her off guard.

"Probably for the same reason you are," the stranger responded, "to get away from the crowds. After six hours of working on your feet, one of the only things you want is some fresh air." Like Izumi, this Kajihana left Hinata with an impression of calm and poise. The clan obviously prided itself on being courteous and kind. "If I am trespassing, I will gladly leave," he added, motioning with his right arm toward the gate in the distance.

"No, that's alright," Hinata said back to him, "the academy is open to everyone, it's just not often that any non-shinobi come here, especially after dark." Now she was willing to relax and even deactivate her byakugan. She didn't think there was anything to worry about. Besides, if anything did happen, she would be able to handle it. "What is your name?" she asked.

"Kajihana Akai, second son of Toramaru and Mina of the Kajihana Clan." His response was quick and to the point, but Hinata could tell that he had also relaxed after she lowered her hands. "And you?"

"Hyuga Hinata, heir to the Hyuga clan main branch."

"Hyuga? So you are a shinobi," said Akai, excited. "I thought you might be."

"Yes, I am," she told him, surprisingly comfortable with answering his questions. "I am a chunin, and I specialize in tracking and defensive taijutsu." She gave a proud smile as she said this. Then, curious, she asked, "What do you do with the Kajihana Clan, Akai?"

"Well," he began slowly, "my older brother, Mikon, and my father run a woodworking business and my mother and sister, Izumi, run a soup shop. I usually help in either place when I am needed." Sounding rather embarrassed to have said all of this to a ninja, he motioned toward his clothes to indicate the still clinging wood shavings. It was obvious where he had been that day.

"Do you mean," asked Hinata quickly, realizing something, "that your family runs the Kajihana Soup Caf&eacute;?"

"Yes, my mother and older sister do," Akai replied, confused. "Why, have you heard of it?"

"Actually, I was there just a while ago," she informed him. "That's where I got this," she added, reaching into her pocket and pulling out the embroidered cotton napkin. As she did, her fortune slipped out as well and started to flutter toward the ground until Akai caught it.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Hinata when she realized she had dropped it.

"That is fine," he said back, "we often have people who hang on to their napkins, but not many

keep their fortunes. Is there any particular reason why?" he asked as he handed the slip of paper back to her.

"Well, actually, I was rather confused by the fortune, now that you mention it. It's not a style I have ever seen." She handed it back to him and showed him what she meant.

"That's not surprising actually, Izumi came up with this style herself." He held it up and showed her as he explained. "The fortune itself is supposed to be simple advice, wise words that it would be prudent to follow at any time, rather than some enigmatic parable that is supposed to apply to your near future. The three characters are symbolic of things that might, and I repeat, might affect you in the near future."

"They are not meant to be absolute glimpses into what is to come," he continued as he handed it back to her for the last time, "though customers have told me that they are occasionally quite accurate, believe it or not."

"That's very cool," Hinata replied as she placed it and the napkin back in her pocket. "Your family is very nice, Akai. Your sister was very kind to me and you have been as well, politely asking your questions but also answering mine. Thank you."

"Don't worry about it, Hinata," he said calmly, "you were nicer to me than I was to you, and I have not even asked everything I would like to yet." He fell awkwardly silent for a moment as if waiting for permission to continue.

"Go ahead, then," Hinata said, a happy smile on her face, "ask."

"What is it like being a shinobi?" He once again had that embarrassed tone in his voice, as if he felt the question was too childish. Even Hinata was surprised by the unusual question.

"What do you mean?" she asked in return.

"I mean, I know you perform missions for your village. I know you protect your village and anyone that you are assigned to protect. I know you spend much of your free time training and getting better, but what is that like? How does it feel to be a ninja?" The energy in his voice was hard to miss and even without the perceptive powers of her byakugan, Hinata could hardly fail to see his passion for the issue.

"It's a good life, I guess," she told, slightly confused herself. "Why do you want to know?" He almost looked ashamed to answer.

"Because ever since I was six years old, that has been my dream. My entire clan is content to be merchants and craftsmen and travelers, and even I know the value of doing that and doing it well, but I have always wanted to be a shinobi." The passion in his eyes was unmistakable as he said this, and was nearing the point of tears, but he stood tall none the less. "I am proud of my clan and what we do for everyone we meet. I am proud of the dedication we have for doing the best we can do, but that has not stopped me from learning everything I can about the ninja and their ways. That has not stopped me from doing research on tactics, spending hours a day talking to any traveling shinobi we meet on the road, asking them the same kinds of questions I would like to ask you. Questions that are becoming more and more difficult to ask as time goes by." As he finished he turned away from Hinata, too proud to let her see his tears.

Hinata felt she understood what he was feeling. There had been times in the past when she had felt she didn't want to be a shinobi, but being from a noble family with a long history in that field, she had had little choice. Akai's situation was almost the opposite. Being from a traveling merchant family, with no ties to any shinobi village, he was the bird in the snowstorm looking into a warm house, where as she had been the caged bird looking out the window towards a distant freedom. Yes, she had eventually grown to enjoy the warmth but she could still understand how Akai was still cold. She wanted to help him, but the problem was that she didn't know of any way she could. She placed a hand on his shoulder and he visibly shuddered before standing even taller and raising his hand to wipe away the tears that Hinata knew were likely there. When he turned around to face her again, there was little sign of his

emotion.

"I am sorry, Hinata," he said with only a mild quiver in his voice, "I did not mean to worry you with my troubles. It is just that the dream is still strong, even though I know I am far too old for it." He paused for a moment to keep his composure. "Thank you for listening, though. I appreciate it." He bowed to respectfully show his gratitude before turning and walking away. Hinata stood silently for a moment, herself bordering tears for the kind young man as he walked away.

After a few steps, though, Akai stopped. Hinata looked up to see as he turned around. A thoughtful look had appeared across his face, the furrowed brow clearly visible since his dark brown hair was rather close cut.

"If you are willing to follow me back to the market place, I have something I would like to give you." The offer of a gift caught Hinata by surprise and she could not even think of refusing.

"Okay," she said as she walked over to him, "what kind of gift?" She imagined that since his father and brother were carpenters it would be some kind of wooden trinket, but what he said next surprised her.

"I was thinking about making a jutsu for you."

### 3. A History Unfolds: The Dream with a Chance

Twenty minutes later, Akai and Hinata were approaching the park where the Kajihana Clan had set up its vending stalls and makeshift shops. The area was as busy as ever, especially the restaurants, now that it was even later in the night. The Kajihana Soup Caf<sup>e</sup> was doing exceptionally well as the two new friends approached it. When they came nearer, Izumi, still carrying her tray of soup bowls, spotted Akai through the crowd.

"Hey, Akai," she called out, "Mom and Dad are waiting for you." She motioned with her free arm towards the large cook fire where Akai's mother was still tending the three cauldrons of soup and his father, having apparently closed the woodshop early for the day, was busy filling bowls. Akai also spotted his older brother weaving amongst the customers with a tray.

"Okay, sis, thanks," he shouted back to Izumi. "I'm headed there now," he added as his sister turned to continue her work.

"This should only take a few minutes," he said apologetically to Hinata as the two began weaving their way through the crowd.

"That's okay," she replied, "I don't have anything else to do." When the two came closer to the fire, however, Hinata recognized someone who was seated at a nearby table and appeared to be talking to Akai's father.

"Good evening, Iruka-sensei," she said as she and Akai reached the fire, "I'm surprised to see you here." Her former teacher, equally surprised, turned from his conversation with Mr. Kajihana to greet her.

"Oh, Hinata, imagine running into you here," the older shinobi said. Then, to explain his presence, he added, "I am on a meal break right now, but I couldn't go back on duty without at least giving my compliments to the chef."

"Well, if you only wanted the chef," interjected Akai's mother as she came over from checking the soups, "you could have left already with how many compliments you have given to me. But it was Akai, here, that came up with the recipe." She motioned toward her son as he stood next to Hinata.

"Thanks, Mom," he responded, visibly blushing despite the orange glow of the fire.

"So you are Akai," said Iruka, an interested look on his face, "the one I've been hearing so much about."

"Yes, sir, Kajihana Akai, at your service." The respectful tone that he had used to introduce himself to Hinata was once again apparent, and he gave a slight bow as well.

"Well I guess I owe you my compliments then, Akai," Iruka said in response, with the same friendly voice that was well practiced on his students. "Your Mango-Habanero Ramen is really top notch." He then glanced at his pocket-watch and stood as if to leave.

"Well, Mr. and Mrs. Kajihana," he said as he picked up his vest and slid it over his shoulders, "thank you for your hospitality and good food, but I need to get back on patrol. I will be back to see what you have tomorrow, though, if the final exams allow."

"Not a problem, Mr. Umino," said Toramaru, Akai's father.

"And we'll be expecting you tomorrow," added Mina kindly as she went back to her work.

"And where would you happen to be going, Hinata?" Iruka asked, reminding both her and Akai of why they had come back to the market in the first place.

"That's right," she said suddenly, looking at Akai, "Akai was going to show me some jutsu he made."

"Jutsu?" asked Iruka quickly, surprised. He looked at Akai with renewed interest. "You develop jutsu?"

"Indeed he does," interrupted Toramaru, who had been listening to his son's conversation, "and pretty good ones if you ask the shinobi he sells them to on the road." He reached out and patted his son on the back, a proud smile on his face.

"It's just a hobby," Akai explained to the understandably skeptical sensei, "but I will occasionally sell them to shinobi when they express interest." He stood tall as he said this, taking pride in his hobby.

"Well, then," said Iruka, doubts hardly eased by Toramaru's words, "it's highly unusual for a non-shinobi, especially one so young, to have any skill at developing jutsu, but I have standing orders as an instructor to investigate any claims like this. More than one person has tried to sell defective jutsu scrolls to ill effect." He was serious, and even Hinata could tell that might not be a good thing. "Will you allow me to examine these jutsu?"

"I have nothing to hide," said Akai, now taking a more serious tone but still doing well to stay personable. "I would be more than willing to show you." With that, he left the caf e; for the inn where his family was staying to gather his jutsu scrolls.

About ten minutes later, Akai returned to the caf e; with his satchel and a whicker basket full of scrolls. Hinata and Iruka had taken a table near the fire with Toramaru and Mikon, and Izumi and Mina were closing down the caf e; early so the group could have some peace while looking over Akai's work. Both Iruka and Hinata were surprised by the number of scrolls that the young man's hobby had produced.

"Are all of these completed jutsu?" asked Iruka with some amazement as he pulled a few of the scrolls from the basket.

"All of the scrolls in the basket are completed," confirmed Akai as he removed his satchel and laid it on the table. "The ones in here are still in development." To ensure that Iruka understood him, he opened the flap of his satchel to reveal five more scrolls and an assortment of writing utensils.

"How many of these will you have to examine?" asked Toramaru, with a worried glance at his son.

"Yes," added Mina as she came to sit at the table as well, "after all, he is always making more."

"Well, normally during these investigations I would have to examine every scroll," the sensei replied, "but I have honestly never seen anything like this. Usually an investigation only reveals a few scrolls that are being sold to make some quick cash. I have never seen anyone with this many scrolls and every intention of actually making more."

"Well the entire clan is behind Akai on this," said Mikon, "he is the only one in the clan that has ever even attempted anything like this, and we are all willing to support him." He smiled at his little brother as he said this.

"Yeah," added Izumi, "it's what he is good at and likes to do."

"I understand that," replied Iruka apologetically, "but I have my orders."

"Can you just take a look at them first and then decide what to do?" asked Akai suddenly, with an air of confidence that surprised even his siblings. "I don't want to give up making these, but I have been doing something wrong I will gladly take correction." The entire table was stunned into silence by this diplomatic statement. It was as if Akai was unconcerned about what Iruka's assessment might be. It was Hinata who broke the silence.

"We would be glad to help, Akai," she said as she opened one of the scrolls.

The group spent the next hour or so pouring over Akai's scrolls. Akai started with the most basic scrolls, answering Iruka and Hinata's questions as he went, and continued

on to more and more advanced level scrolls. He was grateful for his family's support, though Iruka seemed to need little extra encouragement. After a while, he stopped asking questions and allowed Akai to simply present each scroll and explain the purpose of the depicted jutsu and the inspiration that had led him to it. On several occasions, he appeared excited by something, but every time he refrained from saying anything and appeared to be waiting until Akai had finished presenting.

When Akai placed the last scroll back into the basket and reached to remove one of the incomplete ones from his satchel, Iruka reached out and stopped him.

"That will not be necessary," he said as pulled back his hand. He gave Akai a slight smile.

"Well?" asked Akai's father, "what is your assessment Mr. Umino?"

"I have a few questions for Akai first," Iruka told him, "and I will give my assessment when they have been answered." He looked at Akai as if asking for permission.

"Then fire away."

"First, I would like to know how you learned about chakra manipulation," his serious expression revealed nothing of his thoughts, "and when you learned about it."

"When I was six," Akai began with as much seriousness as Iruka, "the clan was traveling in what was then the Land of Snow. In the small village of Ryuken, in the northern part of that region, the clan was joined in our travels by a traveling shinobi who we only knew as Grey-Wolf.

We had no idea where he came from, but he had helped me escape an incident with a group of local brigands and had offered to teach me. It was that offer that first got me interested in the shinobi, actually," he added, with a glance toward Hinata. "So for the next three months he traveled with the clan, teaching me the basics of chakra manipulation and chakra control, as well as teaching me about the shinobi and their ways. He even taught me three jutsu during that time: the tree-climbing jutsu, the water-walking jutsu, and the Mystic Palm Healing Jutsu."

"What happened after the three months?" was Iruka's second question.

"Grey-Wolf just disappeared," said Izumi, answering for Akai. Iruka did not seem to mind.

"He was there one night and come the next morning, he was nowhere to be found," added Mikon, "and all he left was a package containing 10,000 ryo and a note thanking the clan for its hospitality."

"At the time we thought that might be the last thing Akai ever did involving the shinobi," continued Akai's mother, "but we were all surprised some time later when he offered to sell jutsu to a traveling team of ninja that we ran into in the Land of Wind. We were even more surprised when the sensei in the group agreed to purchase one of his scrolls, claiming that it was one of the most ingenious jutsu he had ever seen."

"That was the Water Clone Death-Touch Jutsu," stated Akai, as if recalling some recent memory, "which was one of the first scrolls I showed you. I have improved it since then."

"Okay," said Hinata, "but why did you continue after Grey-Wolf left? I mean, he was your sensei and he basically abandoned you. Why didn't you just give up?" After she asked this question, Iruka looked like he was going to correct her for asking such a personal question, but Akai raised his hand to stop him.

"Because that package of money wasn't the only thing he left." At this, even Akai's family showed surprise. They had had no knowledge of the strange shinobi having left anything else. "That morning I found another package and another separate note lying next to my bed. The note was only one sentence long, but I still know it by heart. It read as follows 'True power cannot be taught or given, a person must find it on their own.'" An awkward moment of silence followed, which was broken by Iruka.

"Well, whoever this Grey-Wolf was, he would have made an excellent Leaf shinobi. That advice follows, almost word for word, one of our core principles here in Konohagakure."

"What was the package he left for you though, little brother," asked Izumi, as confused by all of

this as the rest were.

"See for yourself," said Akai as he reached into another pocket of his satchel and removed a square package made of brown paper that had clearly been opened on many occasions. He handed it to his sister and she opened it. Inside was a pair of gloves, a pair of black trousers, and what looked like a light armor shirt that was black and grey in color. None of Akai's family could identify what it all was, but the two shinobi at the table recognized it almost immediately.

"That's a Leaf Village ANBU uniform!" exclaimed Hinata, outright shock filling her eyes. Iruka was no less stunned and Toramaru, Mina, Izumi, and Mikon all had to do a double take.

"I know," said Akai calmly as he held out a piece of paper to Iruka, "and this was with it." Iruka took the paper from him and read it aloud.

These garments make up the uniform of the elite ANBU Corps of Konohagakure. This uniform is worn by only the most skilled and dedicated of shinobi, who are handpicked by the Hokage. If you wish to find me again, become worthy of wearing this uniform. If you do this, you will have what you need to find me again, and will have fulfilled my hopes for you. I hope you find the true power that I know you can.

This prompted the longest silence yet, during which Hinata just stared at Akai. Now she knew why his dream meant so much to him, and why it was still so strong.

"Wow," said Toramaru, finally breaking the quiet, "and to think I once called him a worthless scumbag for abandoning my boy." He smiled at the thought. "And all the while, he thought you were capable of that, of becoming an ANBU of all things."

"Whether this Grey-Wolf, who I am now certain was a missing-nin from Konoha, thought he was capable of it or not is irrelevant." Said Iruka rather bluntly.

"Now hold on a moment," started Toramaru, "are you trying to say that--"

"What I am trying to say is that it doesn't matter if his former sensei thought he might be able to become not only a shinobi, but an ANBU, because Akai's actions since that time have, by my reckoning, proven that he is capable of it." The chunin said this with enough force to instantly quiet Akai's indignant father, and his words surprised even Akai himself.

"Allow me to explain," he said calmly, turning to Akai and reaching into the nearly forgotten basket. He removed the scroll that was marked Water Clone Death Touch. "This jutsu, which you say you developed at only six years old, is at least a B-rank jutsu." This announcement came as a shock to Akai.

"There is no way," he said in disbelief, "that is one of my simpler jutsu."

"I won't deny that, it is simple in concept. But the understanding of physics and chemistry, not to mention chakra control, that would be required for this jutsu, which uses chakra to force water molecules to change their arrangement, marks it as a B, possibly A-rank jutsu. I doubt even I could use it effectively without a good deal of practice." The entire table was speechless, so Iruka decided to continue. "Combine that with the fact that this is one of the jutsu you have tested, and that tells me you not only have remarkable intelligence but also a precision chakra control that rivals some jonin."

"That's not possible," responded Akai, still stunned by everything the chunin had said.

"Believe me when I say it is," said Iruka in return, "and almost all of your other jutsu are B-rank or better as well, for the same or similar reasons. What's more, some of those jutsu you showed us, like the Wind Style: Dicing Desert Stream, involve using elemental chakra, which is a master rank skill. That kind of consistency with such high level skills is rare even among shinobi jutsu makers." As he finished he looked at Akai, who had fallen speechless for the first time all night.

"What does this mean for Akai?" Izumi asked finally, as she herself recovered from the shock. Turning to look at her and the rest of Akai's family, the chunin decided it would be best to be honest.

"I really don't know. If it were up to me, I'd give him a hite-ate and call him a genin ninja right here and now, but the authority to do that lies with the Hokage. To be honest, there isn't much I can do, but I can assure you that no one in Konoha will ever question his work again. In fact, don't be surprised if you receive a lot of customers coming and asking for it by tomorrow." Upon hearing this, Toramaru, Mina, and Miko breathed a sigh of relief. Their son and brother would not be forced to give up this thing he enjoyed. Izumi, on the other hand, laid a hand on her little brother's shoulder, and looked again at Iruka and Hinata.

"Is there anything you can do for him concerning Grey-Wolf's challenge?" When she said this, Akai looked up at her, grateful for her concern. "Is there any way that he could become a ninja?"

"The problem," Iruka responded, "is that he isn't connected to any shinobi village. That fact means that only the Hokage has the authority to allow him to become a leaf shinobi, and Lady Tsunade is not known for making exceptions." When he said this, Akai hung his head. That was one more nail in the coffin of his dream.

"But we can approach the Hokage with this," added Hinata, and Akai looked up, hopeful once again, "and leave it to her to decide. She may yet approve, even if it is a long shot."

"Certainly," agreed Iruka, "that much we can do." He then looked at Akai, with his sister's hand still on his shoulder. "It is a long shot, but if you can stay strong like you have for the past ten years, you may have a chance. Lady Tsunade admires that kind of strength." After he said this, Akai stood from his seat and responded with only the smallest of quivers in his voice.

"Thank you, Mr. Umino. Thank you, Hinata. I would greatly appreciate it."

As Hinata walked away from the Kajihana Soup Caf e, on her way with Iruka to speak with Lady Tsunade, she turned back and looked at the kind young man whose dream might be realized that night. Then, looking at the red lotus banner on the wagon behind him, she remembered the small slip of paper in her pocket. She wondered if it was destiny that had determined how she judged her new friend earlier that night, and shuddered when she thought of what might have happened if she had judged him differently. Hopefully destiny would work out for both of them after this night.

## 4. Thoughts in Motion: A Stranger Finds Help

"The soups are ready," Akai called to his mother, as he gently replaced the lid on the last pot. It was the day of the Chunin Exam finals, and Akai's entire family had risen early to set up for the breakfast rush. Since the finals would be starting at promptly 10:00 AM, many people were going to be grabbing breakfast in town while on their way to meet up with friends and get good seats, and Mina and Toramaru were not going to miss that chance for some extra revenue. The plan was that the family would all work the cafe; until about 8:30, at which time Akai, Izumi, and Mikon would leave to find good seats at the stadium while Mina and Toramaru would remain at the cafe; until about 9:30. The two parents would then go join their kids for the big event.

"Good," said his mom, as she came running to check the pots herself, "it's about 5:30 now, so we have a good three hours before you all leave for the stadium. Customers should start arriving soon, so be ready when they do." With that she leaned over to check the soups and Akai knew he was dismissed, so he made his way through the surrounding tables to where his siblings were waiting.

"So, Akai, ready for the big event?" asked Mikon, as his little brother approached. He, like Akai and Izumi, wasn't wearing his usual working clothes. Since, it was a special occasion, Mina and Toramaru had agreed that they could wear normal street clothes, and he had opted for a t-shirt, jacket, and jeans.

"I sure am," Akai responded, as he looked over his own clothes. He had selected a pair of loose denim trousers and a black v-neck shirt. Along with them he had a sage colored over shirt, which he left unbuttoned, and his brown leather satchel. "I have my satchel, my info cards, my scrolls and writing utensils, and a water flask. I think I am set."

"Likewise," added Izumi. Being the most traditional of the siblings, she had chosen a simple green kimono with the red lotus of the Kajihana Clan pictured on the shoulders and back. It suited her very well.

"Well, now we just have to wait a few hours, then we can go down to the arena," said Mikon, who was obviously the most excited. He could hardly keep his hands still.

"Excuse me," said a rather gruff voice behind Mikon. The three siblings turned around, surprised to see a young woman, probably twenty-six or so, who had come up to them unnoticed. "Is this the Kajihana Soup Cafe;?" she asked. Izumi was the quickest to respond.

"Yes ma'am, it is indeed." The woman looked about for a moment then nodded her head, as if approving of the simple cafe;.

"A friend of mine told me this would be a good place to get a bite to eat before the finals," she said, running a hand through her shoulder length blond hair to remove a bit from her face, "I wanna know what you have." Akai beat his sister to the punch this time.

"We serve three soups all the time, though the selection changes from day to day," he told her politely. "This morning we are serving two kinds of ramen, Tonkotsu and Mango-Habanero, as well as Egg-Drop Soup. The available sizes are Snack, Meal, Couple, and Family Size."

"I'm rather fond of the Tonkotsu Ramen, myself," the woman decided as she slid onto a seat at the nearest table, "and I think a snack size will do for now. And a bottle of sake if you have any."

"One snack-size Tonkotsu and one Sake, coming right up," said Izumi happily as she turned to go and give the order to their mother. When she left, the two brothers remained silent, so it was

this customer that started to try and make friendly conversation.

"So," she said slowly, eyeing the two of them, "are you all going to see the exam finals today?" At this open invitation to converse, Mikon jumped for the chance, having never been one for sitting around doing nothing.

"Indeed we are," he said, the excitement in his voice clearly noticeable, "it looks like there will be some good matches too, so I can hardly wait."

"Yeah," added Akai, now that his brother had blazed a trail for the conversation to follow, "there are some pretty tough shinobi that are competing too. I would not be surprised if several of them make chunin."

"You two sound like you know a lot," the woman noted, interested, "do you think you could help me out with a little problem I've got." Surprised, the two boys looked at each other and nodded.

"What kind of problem?" asked Akai as he slid into the seat opposite her.

"A friend of mine has challenged me to a bet," she said, "claiming that certain Genin will be promoted and others won't. My problem is that I know next to nothing about any of the Genin other than the ones from Konoha, so I'm not sure if I should take the bet or not."

"Well if you want to know anything about today's competitors," interrupted Izumi as she returned with a small bowl and a bottle of liquor, "Akai, here, is the one to ask." She set the bowl and bottle down on the table and motioned toward Akai.

"Really?" the woman asked, turning a curious eye toward the youngest sibling. Then, as if she had momentarily forgotten, she turned back to Izumi. "How much do I owe you?" She reached into a pocket in her green robe and removed a small money pouch as she asked.

"It will be 5 ryo for the soup and 10 for the Sake."

"Wow," the woman said as she handed a few bills to Izumi and put the pouch back into her pocket, "that's actually a really good price."

"Well, we do aim to please," Izumi replied as she turned to bring the money back to the wagon. Before she left though, she nudged Akai in the shoulder. "I'll tell Mom and Dad that you two are helping a customer so they don't get angry."

"Thanks, Izumi," said Mikon, who hadn't taken a seat yet for that very reason. As Izumi walked away, he slid into a seat next to Akai and turned to face their customer. "Now let's see how we can help you, ma'am. Akai, pull out your cards." Upon his brother's request, Akai reached into his satchel and pulled out the deck of ninja info cards he had acquired for this Chunin Exam.

"Let us see," Akai said to himself as he quickly thumbed through the cards to ensure they were in order. Then, to the woman he asked, "Are there any particular Genin you need to know about?"

"Well, the bet was that the Cloud Genin from Kumogakure would be more likely to be promoted than the Leaf Genin, so I guess I need to know about them." She looked interested in hearing what Akai could tell her, and leaned in closer when he removed five of the cards from the deck.

"These are the Cloud and Leaf Genin that have made it here to the finals," he said matter-of-factly as he laid the cards out on the table for the woman to see. "There are three from Konoha and two from Kumo, so at first glance it would seem like the Leaf Village has a better chance of having more be promoted."

"Right," the woman agreed, "they have an extra chance at getting a promotion because they have an extra person, I see that. But, I also can see from the stats shown here," she indicated the stat grids in the lower right corner of each card, "that the Cloud genin are more versatile, and therefore more likely to have the qualities that the judges are looking for, right."

"True, they are more versatile," admitted Akai, "but since the judges are also looking at specialization and the specialist's ability to adapt, versatility is not necessarily an

advantage."

"So are you saying that it would actually be smarter to go with Konoha just because of its numbers?" She seemed skeptical about that decision. "That doesn't seem right."

"Believe me or not," Akai replied confidently, "but that is the smarter decision if you are only considering numbers and stats as factors." This carefully worded comment caught the woman's attention once again, and she set down the bottle which she had been about to take another swig from.

"What other factors would you consider, then?"

"The order of the matches," Akai stated calmly, reaching into his satchel for something else.

"How so?"

"Well, if you look at these," he said, laying out another three info cards and a printout of the match arrangements, "you can see that two of the Leaf genin will be facing considerably weaker opponents, statistically. That means that they will be less likely to get the chance to show their best, while both of the Cloud genin are relatively well matched to their opponents, meaning their fights will be good and they have a good chance to show what they are made of. This, when you consider that the Cloud and Leaf genin have statistically about the same chances of being promoted while they are at their best, means that the Cloud Village comes out ahead in the long run, since their genin have a better chance of showing their skills." As Akai finished, the woman continued to stare at the data displayed on the table, as if she were tallying up everything the young man had said. After a few minutes of this, she looked up at him and smiled.

"You know, I never would have thought of that," she said happily, "but it makes complete sense."

"Yep, that's Akai for you, ma'am," said Mikon as he threw an arm around his brother, "he has a knack for seeing what others don't."

"I can tell. Thank you very much, young man," she added, looking at Akai as she stood from the table. "Now I know how I can counter the Raikage's bet."

"Not a problem, ma'am," said Mikon for Akai, when he didn't respond immediately, "we were glad to help." He then looked at his brother who had suddenly gasped as if in surprise. "You okay, Akai?" As soon as he finished asking, the three heard what they all recognized as Iruka's voice.

"I thought I might find you here, Lady Tsunade." Upon hearing those words, Akai immediately stood and bowed low, catching Mikon by surprise.

"Hey, what's that about?" the older brother asked, not knowing why Akai had suddenly decided to bow to the woman he had just helped. What Akai said to the woman next caught him by complete surprise.

"Please forgive me for not recognizing you, Lady Hokage

## 5. The Impressed Leader: A Dream Achieved

"Why should you have recognized me?" asked Tsunade, unphased by Akai's apology, "it's not like Konoha requires visitors to always bow upon seeing the Hokage." Then, as if that was the end of the issue, she turned to face Iruka, who had walked up behind her carrying the traditional red and white robes of the Hokage. "Is it time already to go to this meeting you talked me into, Iruka?" she asked rather dejectedly as she took the robe from him and slid it on over her own robe.

"Yes, Lady Hokage," he responded quickly, a confused look on his face as he glanced over at Akai and his brother, "but..."

"Well stop wasting time then," she interrupted with a snap, turning to head back onto the village street, "where are we going for this meeting, anyways?"

"Umm, we are already here, Lady Tsunade," he tells her slowly, looking once again at Akai, who returns the chunin's confused glance.

"Excuse me?" Tsunade asks slowly as she turns back around, confusion also quite evident in her expression, "what do you m..." She stopped suddenly upon seeing Akai, and a look of realization crossed her face. "You?" she asked him, a puzzled look in her eyes.

"I can only assume so, Lady Hokage," he replied, a questioning look passing between him and Iruka. Iruka nodded his way and Akai now took the time to regain his composure.

"Yes, Lady Hokage," Iruka confirmed, realizing what must have happened, that Tsunade had not even realized who she had been speaking with, "Akai, here, is the individual Hinata and I spoke to you about last night, and the one I requested that you meet."

The Hokage was now looking at Akai in an entirely new way, as if she were seeing him for the first time. The analytical stare she now gave him had reduced even chunin to jitters on previous occasions, but Akai stood tall and steady, realizing that she was testing him and his nerves. It was at about this time that Izumi returned from the wagon, expecting nothing more than a quiet conversation between her brothers and a needy customer. When she recognized the Hokage robes that Tsunade had donned, however, she almost stopped dead in her tracks. Thankfully years of practice had instilled her with an instinctive courteousness that won out over her shock.

"Lady Hokage," she said as she walked up behind Akai, "Mr. Umino, what an honor it is to have you both here." Then, looking at Tsunade, she added, "I am most sorry for the confusion, Lady Hokage, we did not realize that Mr. Umino had arranged a meeting." She bowed to the shinobi leader as she made her apology.

"There is nothing to apologize for," Tsunade said, finally taking her eyes off of Akai, "even I did not recognize that I was supposed to be meeting with Akai, here." An awkward silence followed this, as no one seemed sure of what to do next. Thankfully, Iruka had an idea.

"How about we all take seats and conduct this like an interview?" he suggested, glancing around at the group.

"Sounds good to me," Tsunade said quickly, as she dropped back into her seat. She now seemed like a somewhat arrogant businesswoman, who thought most of what was going on was beneath her. This change surprised Akai, when he compared her to the friendly customer she had been only moments before.

"Good," said Iruka, a note of relief in his voice, "now, Izumi, could you kindly go and get your parents and let them know we are here." He looked at her as she said this. "I think it would be best if they were here too."

"Certainly," she replied, almost happy for the opportunity to move away for a moment. Then

she turned to her brothers. "Mikon, Akai, please see about setting up the closed signs."

"Right away, sis," Mikon replied, equally as happy, as he bolted for the wagon to retrieve the signs. Akai followed him but with considerably more restraint. As they departed, Izumi also turned to go about her task.

"And another bottle of sake, Ms. Izumi?" said Tsunade as the sister started walking.

"I shall, Lady Hokage," Izumi replied as she continued walking.

Alone with the Hokage now as the three siblings were busy, Iruka now turned to his leader, with every intent of asking her for her opinion thus far. He stopped though when he saw her face. She was watching Akai once again, but this time it was less of a precision analysis and more of a contemplative gaze, a look that saw him but also past him, to what his future might be. "That's how she looks at Naruto," he thought to himself as he waited.

Five minutes later, the siblings had returned, Izumi accompanied by Toramaru and Mina and carrying another small bottle of liquor in her hands. She walked up to Tsunade with her parents right behind her.

"Lady Hokage," she said as she handed Tsunade the bottle, "may I introduce our parents, Kajihana Toramaru and Mina." The two parents bowed momentarily before the Hokage before Tsunade motioned that everyone should take a seat. She then went right to business.

"As you may or may not be aware," she said to the Kajihana family, "I am here at the request of Umino Iruka and Hyuga Hinata, to assess a one Kajihana Akai and determine if he has the potential to become a Leaf shinobi." She looked at Akai as she said this. "I will ask you several questions and may also require a demonstration of your current skill level. You must respond honestly, is this understood?"

"Yes, it is, Lady Hokage," Akai replied, meeting her gaze. The two looked into each others' eyes for a moment before Tsunade continued.

"Good, now I have already been informed of some of your history, so I won't be asking anything about that. Most of what I will be asking is in the nature of skills assessment."

"Understood, ma'am."

The Hokage paused for a moment and looked about the group before moving to her first question.

"Of the jutsu you have created and tested, some of which I was shown by Iruka last night, how many and which ones do you use on a regular basis?" When Tsunade finished asking this, Akai paused in thought for a moment.

"There are three which I use with any regularity, ma'am. These include the water-walking and tree-climbing jutsu, as well as the Shadow Clone Jutsu." He stopped for a moment and noticed the quizzical stare that everyone but Tsunade was giving him. "I use that when the clan comes across a library. We never usually stay in any one place for too long so I use Shadow Clones to read as much about the shinobi as I can while we are there," he explained.

"Very well," said Tsunade, whose face seemed just as bored as before. She took a swig from the bottle of sake before continuing. "What about physical conditioning? Do you regularly do any kind of training for your body?"

"Yes, ma'am," Akai responded almost immediately, needing no pause to think about his response. "I make a point of working out daily for about 80 minutes, and I also run two miles every morning. That is actually when I use the other two jutsu the most, since they let me run in almost any conditions." Iruka looked impressed with that information, but Tsunade still seemed bored. Her bottle was already half empty, and Akai had a strange feeling that once it was done, that would be the end of the meeting.

"Interesting," Tsunade said, before turning to face each of Akai's family members, "can you all confirm this?"

"That we can," Izumi confirmed first, "I even join him for the running."

"Indeed. Well," she continued, turning back to Akai, "what about weapon skills, then?"

"That is where I am lacking," admitted Akai, "I have no experience at all with shuriken and other projectiles and I have only a basic grasp of other tools, like paper and smoke bombs. The one weapon I have practice with is my bokuto, but I am shaky even with that."

"A wooden sword, huh?" she commented, seemingly amused, "that's an unusual weapon for a shinobi. It's not very effective against other weapons."

"It is if you have good chakra control." At this Tsunade raised an inquisitive eyebrow, signaling Akai to explain. "It is made of wood, which conducts chakra more easily than metal. My theory is that with precise timing and chakra control, a skilled shinobi could reinforce the bokuto with chakra as he needed, making it far stronger and more durable. Doing that not only gives the shinobi an effective close-combat weapon, it also gives him an element of surprise when his opponent expects a fragile piece of wood." This explanation actually caused Tsunade's jaw to drop momentarily, and Iruka thought he knew why. Akai had just theorized a method of expanding Tsunade's own taijutsu style.

"You know, I'm beginning to like you more and more," she said after picking up her jaw. This caught Akai off guard, as he wasn't expecting Tsunade to suddenly become personable again. "I was impressed with you before I even knew who you were, what with your wit and willingness to help people." After she said this she stood and addressed the entire group. "I have reached my decision."

This surprised none more so than Iruka.

"So quickly, Lady Tsunade," he blurted out suddenly, "you've only interviewed him for ten minutes. Shouldn't you ask him to at least show you his skills, ask his family more questions, or something like that."

"I don't feel I need to, Iruka," she replied to him rather bluntly, "I trust that everything he has told me is true, and I think he has potential."

"Does that mean you are allowing him to become a shinobi?" asked Izumi, instinctively putting a hand on her little brother's shoulder as he fell silent.

"No, it does not." This response threatened to cause an outbreak from Toramaru and Mikon, but having predicted such, Tsunade silenced them with a raised hand. "What it does mean is that I am willing to give him a shot." Izumi's hand tightened on Akai's shoulder, as Tsunade turned to Iruka. "Iruka."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Are you willing to take on Akai as a special student?" Iruka glanced at Akai before responding.

"That I am, Lady Hokage."

"Good," she said, satisfied, before turning back to and addressing Akai. "I am granting you two months of special trainee status. You will train with Iruka during that time to learn the basic skills that you are still missing. If, after that time, you are able to pass an Academy sanctioned graduation exam and a Jonin given test, I will pronounce you a genin of Konohagakure. Is this acceptable?" Akai sat there stunned for a moment.

"Well, Akai?" asked Izumi calmly. She was quiet, but her voice got through to Akai and helped him break out of his stupor. He stood and faced Lady Tsunade.

"I do find it so," he said.

"Then report to the Academy first thing in the morning on the day after the finals. Iruka will begin your training then." With that she turned to leave. Akai remained standing, disbelieving. Izumi stood and wrapped her little brother in a hug, a silent congratulations on achieving the first step in his dream.

"Oh, and Akai," said Tsunade's voice, causing Akai to look up. The Hokage had stopped and turned to face him once again. "Don't let me down. I'm expecting

some great things from you." And with that, she slid the traditional hat of the Hokage on over her blond hair and walked away. Standing there, watching her walk away, Akai had only one thought.

"I will not."