

Izumi, Phoenix Rising

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Back in Konoha, trouble is brewing. Flames of strife and prejudice wrack the Kajihana Clan. Will anything rise from the ashes?

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1. Back from the Dead

Kajihana Izumi awakened and, for a moment, did not know where she was. The last thing she remembered was the hard stone table beneath her and the cold steel of the chains that had bound her arms and legs. Now she was in a brightly lit room, lying on a soft bed and wrapped in a warm blanket. It was not until she noticed the IV in her arm that she realized she was in a hospital.

"Izumi?" said a voice to her left and Izumi turned only to find herself wrapped in her older brother's arms. "You're finally awake," he said as he released her and backed away. Izumi could see the tears forming in his eyes.

"Where are we?" Izumi asked as she pushed herself up into a better sitting position and looked about at the room. It was rather Spartan, with only a pair of landscape paintings on the wall and a vase of wilting flowers on the end table next to her bed. The only other things in the room were a few chairs, one of which was covered in a recently used blanket. Looking at Mikon's face and seeing how tired he was, she realized that he must not have left her side. Then she added, "And how long have I been here?"

"This is the Konoha Shinobi Hospital," Mikon replied, "it's where the leaf shinobi come after missions and such, and they have some of the best medical care in the world. When Akai and the rescue team found you, you were brought here as quickly as possible. The guy that brought you, I think they said his name is Lee, literally almost killed himself to get you here as fast as possible. He's recovering in the room next door. You've both been bedridden for the past two days." Izumi was stunned.

"What happened to me that a shinobi had to get me here that quickly?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"I can answer that," said a female voice from the doorway, and both Izumi and Mikon turned to see Haruno Sakura walk into the room, carrying a bundle of flowers. She bowed respectfully to Izumi and added, "I am Haruno Sakura, and I'm one of the medic-nin that tended your wounds and I've been keeping watch over you since. Mikon here was helping me with that," she added, indicating Mikon. She then walked over to the table next to Izumi and replaced the wilting flowers with the ones she had brought.

"To put it simply," Sakura continued as she now walked over to the window and threw it open, letting in a cool morning breeze, "the reason Lee almost killed himself getting you here was because you would not have made it if he hadn't. He had been ordered to open only his third chakra gate, which even though it would seriously injure him was the only way to safely get you here in time, to the senior medic-nin who would be able to help you. But Lee being who he is, when he noticed you starting to slip closer to the edge, he opened all the way up to his fifth gate, causing him massive damage, but giving him even greater speed. Even then he barely got you here in time."

"How?" Izumi asked, "what happened to me?"

"Well," interrupted Mikon, "Akai told me that he found you just before one of the Akatsuki agents, the men that attacked the caravan, stabbed you in the stomach. He also said that he wasn't able to tend to you until he had taken care of the Akatsuki, so you were in pretty bad shape before he and the other shinobi could get you out of there." Izumi looked horrified. Then she remembered the black-robed man that had stood over her with a knife, and Akai's face only moments after she had been stabbed, filled with guilt and tears.

"It was worse than that," added Sakura suddenly, causing the two siblings to turn and face her again. "What we didn't discover until you got back here was that the knife you had been stabbed with had been coated in Karnum Poison." Even Mikon was shocked by this, but it was Izumi who realized the true meaning of the statement. She had read about Karnum Poison in her study of herbs.

"But that's not possible, Karnum Poison kills in under a minute!," she said to Sakura.

"That's true," Sakura replied, "but it was pumping through your veins for at least ten minutes before Lee even started bringing you back here. Even Lady Tsunade can't explain how you lasted that long, let alone how you lasted the hour it took for Lee to get you here. But what we do know is that once we extracted the poison from your system, you immediately started a rapid recovery. Under normal circumstances, you should still be unconscious for at least another week after the kind of stress your body went through." Izumi was silent, stunned by what she was hearing. How had she survived? She had a sneaking suspicion, but she hoped it wasn't true, so she did not voice it, deciding to change the subject instead.

"Where are Mom, Dad, and Akai?" she asked Mikon after a moment. Mikon glanced at Sakura with a worried look on his face before turning to his sister.

"Mom and Dad are with the rest of the clan," he told her, "and Akai went to go see them. Everybody has been asking him about his time here, and he decided that it was about time to tell everyone, since you were still out of it." He tried to sound normal, but Izumi thought his voice was a bit on edge, like he wasn't telling the whole truth.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, concerned for her brother. Before Mikon could respond, however, another person came running into the room. He was wearing an orange and black jacket and Izumi noticed what looked like whiskers on his cheeks. He was breathing hard, as if he had just run a long distance. Sakura turned to face him as soon as he entered the room.

"What is it, Naruto?" she asked, a worried look crossing her face. Naruto leaned up against the doorpost to catch his breath before responding.

"Trouble," he said shortly, followed by another gasp for breath. He noticed Izumi sitting up in her bed a moment later and nodded. "Good, you might want to come, Miss Izumi, and you Mikon."

"What kind of trouble is it, Naruto?" asked Sakura.

"The argument has reached a head," he replied, causing Sakura and Mikon to glance quickly at

Izumi, who had no idea what argument he was talking about. "Grandma Tsunade wants representatives from the ninja clans to meet at the South Gate." Now Mikon was as confused as his sister, but Sakura, who knew exactly what that meant, only gasped. And she wasn't the only one.

Everyone turned to see Hinata, who had been visiting Lee in his room, and Lee himself, with the aid of a crutch under his right arm, standing in the doorway behind Naruto. They had heard the blond haired ninja come running down the hall and had come to see what the rush was about. Now both were standing there with looks of shock on their faces.

"You don't mean," started Hinata, but she stopped when Naruto answered her unasked question with a look.

"No," said Lee softly.

2. Reunion in Flames

Several minutes later, the group was making its way down one of Konoha's main streets toward the South Gate. Naruto and Sakura had gone to notify the other clans, but Hinata and Lee had decided to accompany Mikon and Izumi to the meeting place. Due to Lee's crutch and the bad limp in his right leg, the group was making slow progress, but they were moving none the less. After several more minutes, the village's southern wall, and its massive open gate, came into view and Izumi was able to see that a large crowd had gathered there.

As they came closer, Izumi stopped in her tracks. The single large crowd could now be seen as two distinct groups, facing off in the small square. Her own Kajihana Clan was on one side, with its many wagons and carts fully loaded and Mina and Toramaru standing at the front. On the other side was a mixed gathering of many shinobi, apparently the representatives that Naruto had mentioned, since he and Sakura were also among their number. What surprised Izumi the most however, was who was in front of this group of shinobi, facing off against her parents. It was none other than her younger brother, Akai, standing right next to Lady Tsunade herself.

"Izumi?" asked Mikon after a moment, having stopped the group when he noticed his sister had paused. The sound of his voice snapped Izumi out of her shock and the group continued forward into the square. Izumi could not help but think that she had something to do with this confrontation.

Her fears were confirmed when everyone in the square turned and looked at her when she, Mikon, Hinata, and Lee came into view. Though one of the last to notice, Akai quickly ran over and wrapped his sister in an embrace.

"Oh, Izumi," he said, tears in his eyes as he backed off, "thank you. When I first found you and watched that Akatsuki stab you, I thought that was it." He wrapped her in another tight hug and she returned it to him, tears coming to her eyes as well. Then he released her and took a few steps back, allowing a young girl, about ten years old, to run up and basically tackle Izumi.

"Hana?" asked Izumi after a few moments, realizing that it was her little cousin who was hugging her. When Hana nodded, Izumi wrapped her in tight hug. The last time she had seen Hana was back in the caves where the Akatsuki had kept them, just before being taken to the chamber with the stone table. She had thought Hana might be dead. After a few moments, Hana also released her and Izumi looked up to see the two other people that had been left in the cave, Hana's parents.

"Uncle Meikou, Aunt Kawaii!" she said, before offering them each a considerably more respectful hug than the one she had given to Hana.

"Thank you, Izumi," said Kawaii as she released her niece from her hug, tears pouring down her cheeks, "if it hadn't been for you, I don't know what would have happened to my little Hana, thank you." Her words caused Izumi to remember how the Akatsuki had come

into the cave and grabbed Hana, prepared to take her like they had taken Roan and Matsu. She remembered how she had stood up to them and told them to take her instead, how the Akatsuki had seemed to be in a hurry, and how the Akatsuki had agreed to take her instead rather than have a struggle with Meikou, who had risen to fight them off of his daughter. She bowed to her aunt to show her that the gratitude was acknowledged.

"Do you know what happened to Roan and Matsu?" Izumi asked next. Kawaii looked as if she wanted to respond, but she was unable to do so. Izumi looked down when she realized what that likely meant.

"The Akatsuki sealed demons inside them," replied Akai sternly when Meikou also couldn't bring himself to answer, to which Izumi gasped. "They attacked me and the others on the rescue team, and we had already taken them out before I recognized them." Izumi could tell from the anger in Akai's voice that he had beaten himself up over that. Roan and Matsu had been two of his closest friends in the clan.

"Don't worry about it, Akai," said Meikou as he laid a hand on his nephew's shoulder, "they would be glad that you survived. They would not have wanted to go on living possessed." Akai slumped his shoulders at his uncle's words, and Izumi walked over and hugged her brother again.

"You see!" shouted an angry voice from the crowd around them and Izumi looked up, shocked to realize that it was her father, Toramaru, that had shouted. He was glaring at Lady Tsunade, but then suddenly turned to glare angrily at Izumi. "How else would she already moving about? You yourself said that she should be out for at least a week!" he added as he turned back to face the Hokage.

"Just because she recovered quickly does not make her a demon-host!" replied Tsunade angrily, "There could be many other factors involved." Even though it sounded like the Hokage was defending her, Izumi was filled with a sense of dread at Tsunade's words. She was suddenly back inside one of her memories, staring at a figure of pure, sage colored energy as it swirled over her where she was chained to the stone table. Thinking of what she now knew had happened to Roan and Matsu, she stared into this swirling creature's eyes, eyes that had been full of anger, fear, and power all at once. She fell to her knees and stared at the ground, somehow knowing that what the Hokage denied was true.

"Izumi!" shouted both Akai and Mikon, and both were instantly at her side, kneeling beside her.

"There!" shouted Toramaru, pointing at the three siblings, Izumi in particular, "it's the shame of knowing what she is!" He glared at Izumi with a look that those around could only describe as disgust.

"I'm telling you," rebuked Tsunade, "the Akatsuki would not seal a demon inside her only to try and kill her!"

"Well, we're not willing to take the chance," shouted someone behind Toramaru, and the entirety of the Kajihana Clan erupted into cheers of assent. Akai and Mikon glared at their clan with a look that rivaled Toramaru's gaze on Izumi, and Izumi simply stared at the clan with her mouth hanging open, stunned at the thought of what she knew they were about to do.

Toramaru glared into Izumi's face.

"Izumi," he said loudly, "as acting leader of the Kajihana Clan, I hereby banish you, on the grounds that you are believed to be a demon-host." He and the rest of the clan turned away from her as he finished, refusing to acknowledge her existence any longer.

"No!" she shouted in despair as she ran up to Toramaru and fell to the ground at his feet and grabbed the hem of his formal robe, "Father, you can't do this to me!" Tears waterfalled down her face as Toramaru pulled his hem out of her grasp.

"Get away from me, scum," he shouted as he raised his hand and made to slap Izumi across the face. Almost immediately, Akai and several of the other shinobi present, including Iruka, Kakashi, Temari, and Taka, were at Izumi's side, ready to defend her. But before any of them could react, however, a tree root leapt up from the ground and blocked Toramaru's hand. Toramaru stared at it with fear in his eyes for only a moment before recoiling and quickly backing away, as did the other members of the Kajihana Clan that were around him. Akai knelt next to his sister as Mikon, Meikou, Kawaii, and Hana came running up as well.

"You see!" shouted Mina as she wrapped an arm around her husband, "she is a demon! There's no denying it now." She turned to the clan assembled behind her and added, "The banishment stands!" The clan erupted in agreement, many jeering at Izumi and others merely chanting Mina's words.

"Then you will have to banish me as well!" shouted Mikon as he stepped in front of his sister in an attempt to shield her from the jeering.

"And me," added Akai, as he stood and stepped up next to his brother, allowing Hana to kneel next to Izumi and place a hand on her cousin's shoulder.

"And my family as well," added Meikou, his arm wrapped around his wife, "we would not be here if not for Izumi. We won't abandon her." Izumi, still staring wild-eyed at the root that had leapt out of the ground to defend her, said nothing.

"Then banished you all are," said Toramaru after he regained his composure, "if you would rather side with a demon than with your own kin, then we have no need of you."

"That's enough!" shouted Lady Tsunade, silencing all those present. She turned and stared at Toramaru. "I was hoping I wouldn't have to do this, but you if you would so cruelly abandon your own clansmen, then I have no choice." She then turned and addressed the gathered shinobi behind her.

"You all know of what I speak," she said to them, "to do it I must have the approval of the village's shinobi clans. Do I have your approval?" As she finished, Shikamaru stepped forward, glancing at his father who then nodded.

"I speak for the entirety of the Nara Clan," he said, addressing Tsunade, "you have our approval."

"Hyuga gives its approval as well," added Neji, standing in front of Lord Hiashi.

"And Aburame," added Shino, surrounded by his family.

"And Inuzuka," shouted Kiba, standing between his mother and sister.

"Hatake," said Kakashi softly.

"Haruno," added Sakura.

"Akamichi."

"Sarutobi."

"Yamanaka."

"Umino."

"Morino."

"Yuhi."

"Areno," shouted Taka, to which Tsunade just smiled. Temari placed a hand on her student's shoulder. This wasn't their issue.

"Uzumaki!" shouted Naruto.

Several others started to shout the name of their clan but Tsunade held up a hand to stop them.

"That is enough," she shouted to the gathering of ninja. Then she smiled as she turned and faced Toramaru and the rest of the Kajihana Clan once again. "The village has spoken! As Hokage, I hereby banish the Kajihana clan from the Village Hidden in the Leaves!"

"Very well," said Toramaru, "if you would harbor a demon-host, with no concern for your own people, then the Kajihana Clan will have nothing to do with you. Move out!" he added to his clansmen as he turned around.

Izumi, finally taking her eyes off of the tree root, just stared as her clan, her entire world, filed out the village gate without a second thought, abandoning her.

3. A New Clan from the Ashes

As Izumi watched her world abandon her, she felt a hand fall on her shoulder. She turned to see Hana, tears rushing from her eyes, and held out her arms. Hana embraced her, and the two held each other for some time. Izumi tried to give her little cousin some comforting words, but she couldn't find any even for herself. She was too stunned by how easily her life had just fallen apart. After several minutes of silent embrace, Hana looked up at Izumi's face and used the back of her wrist to wipe some of the water from her own eyes.

"What's going to happen to us?" she asked as more tears started to form. Izumi didn't have an answer, but she couldn't let her little cousin continue to cry.

"I don't know, Hana," she said in return, "but we'll think of something." Hana bowed her head and cried into Izumi's shoulder, and Izumi looked up at her brothers. She was just as confused and worried as Hana, even though she didn't show it. The two brothers knelt down next to their sister and cousin, Mikon laying his hand on Hana's shoulder.

"Listen, Hana," the eldest sibling whispered, causing the ten year old to momentarily stop crying and look up at him, "we're going to be all right. At least we are all here for each other."

"Yeah," added Akai, patting the little girl's shoulder, "and your mom and dad, too. We'll find some way to get by."

"Come on," Mikon said, and he took Hana's hand as he stood up, bringing her up with him, "let's go see your parents." He walked with her over to where Meikou and Kawaii were waiting. Akai staid kneeling next to Izumi.

"Will you be alright, sis?" he asked. Izumi glanced at the root that was still jutting out of the ground before saying anything.

"I don't know," she replied, looking down at the ground. "I don't know if I'll be alright. I don't even know what's happened to me."

"Don't worry about it," said another voice, and both Akai and Izumi looked up as Taka knelt down next to them.

"About what?" asked Izumi half-heartedly. Taka leaned forward and grasped the base of the root.

"About this," she said, snapping the root out of the ground with a twist of her wrist, "I don't know you very well, but I can already tell that you're strong of heart. The way you comforted little Hana over there, even in the midst of realizing what you've become, that takes real character." She stared into Izumi's eyes as Izumi met her gaze.

"And I know personally that if a person is strong of character, it doesn't matter what kind of inner demons they have. You can handle this. It's not going to kill you and that can

only make you stronger." The two girls stared at each other a few moments longer, and Izumi smiled. Something inside her told her that Taka was right.

"Thank you," she said to Taka, leaning over and wrapping her arms around her, "I needed that." Taka was surprised by the sudden embrace, but she did nothing to resist. After a moment Izumi let go of Taka and wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Come on," said Akai, rising to his feet and offering a hand to his sister and to Taka, "let's go speak with Lady Hokage, maybe she can help us decide what to do." Each of the girls took his hand and he helped them both to their feet. Then they all turned and walked over to Lady Tsunade, who was still staring out the gate, as if her gaze alone would be enough to set the Kajihana Clan's wagons on fire. Mikon noticed them and followed with Meikou and his family.

"Lady Hokage," Akai said respectfully with a slight bow.

"Yeah, what is it?" replied Tsunade before taking her eyes off of the gate. When she turned and realized that it was Akai who had spoken and that the others were with him, she added, "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't realize it was you all." She bowed respectfully to the group, but mostly toward Izumi and Hana. "I'm very sorry that I couldn't do more. The Leaf Village has never banished an entire clan before, but I could not allow them to remain any longer after what they did to you all."

"We understand, Lady Hokage," replied Akai, "but that is not why we wish to speak to you."

"You aren't sure where to go from here, are you?" Tsunade asked, a look of understanding on her face.

"That is right," replied Akai, and the others with him all nodded.

"That is not true!" shouted another voice, and everyone turned to see Lee making his way towards them on his crutches. He stopped and offered a clumsy but respectful bow to Lady Tsunade. "Lady Tsunade, if I may be so bold to say so, I believe that after everything they just did, Akai and his family deserve the right to be called true citizens of Konoha. They belong here in the village."

"Yeah, bushy-brows is right!" added Naruto as he and Sakura walked up behind Lady Tsunade, "the other Kajihanas might be a bunch of dirt bags, but Akai here is a great guy, as are his siblings and his cousin, aunt, and uncle."

"I agree, Tsunade-sensei," said Sakura, "we need more people like them here in the village."

"Well," said Lady Tsunade as she turned back to Akai and the others, "it seems as if some of our number want you to stay here in the village." She pondered silently for a moment before continuing. "The only problem is that you are now no longer part of a recognized clan."

"Oh, come on now, Tsunade, you know there's a simple way around that," said a mocking voice from somewhere nearby. Tsunade instantly recognized the voice and looked about to find the speaker but it was Naruto who spotted him first.

"Pervy Sage!" he shouted, staring up at a nearby rooftop, "when did you get back?"

"Not long ago," Jiriya replied, "I realized something was going on so I came over. Right about when you guys approved expelling the Kajihana Clan, I think." He leapt down from the rooftop and approached Tsunade, who actually looked rather annoyed. She was about to ask him something, but he raised his hand to stop her. "We can discuss my mission in private after this matter has been taken care of." Tsunade, apparently not used to having others tell her what to do, became even more annoyed, but she reluctantly agreed.

"Very well then, Jiriya" she replied reluctantly, "how do you propose we get around the village laws that state only clans recognized by the Land of Fire can be admitted as members?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Jiriya replied, which only annoyed Tsunade even more. Even Akai was confused as to what Jiriya could be getting at. It was Shikamaru, stepping up from behind Naruto and Sakura, that gave them the answer.

"It's kinda simple," he said slowly, "you just have to found a new clan. All you technically have to do is come up with a name for the clan and make a formal declaration of establishment. If you want, you could also have recognized clans sponsor the new one, making it more agreeable to the village council." He shook his head, apparently disappointed that no one else had thought of that course of action. Tsunade, after a moment of annoyance for not realizing it herself, turned to Akai and his family.

"Well, would you be willing?" Akai, not wanting to speak for everyone, turned to face Meikou, Kawaii, Hana, Izumi, and Mikon. Though none said a word to each other, they could each see in the others' eyes what they all wanted. This time, it was Mikon who turned and addressed Tsunade.

"Indeed, we would be, Lady Hokage," he said, "we will be sticking together no matter what, so it might as well be as a new clan." Lady Tsunade nodded and smiled at this response, then turned around and addressed the shinobi who were still gathered in the square.

"I need three clans that are willing to sponsor Akai and his family, in order to recognize the founding of a new clan." When Tsunade finished, she was surprised when Hinata was the first person to step forward.

"If it is all right with my father," she said with a glance back at Lord Hiashi, who nodded, "then the Hyuga Clan will sponsor them."

"The Nara Clan as well," added Shikamaru. Tsunade looked about for a third, and it was Kakashi that stepped forward.

"The Hatake Clan will also sponsor," he said with his smile hidden by his mask, "it's about time we had some new faces around here."

"Very well," Tsunade continued, turning back to Mikon, "now all we need is a name and a formal declaration from whoever you choose to be your leader." At this, Mikon and Akai turned back to their kin, to decide who that leader would be. It was Meikou who spoke up first.

"I might be the oldest among us, but I have never been a leader," he said as he looked at the two brothers, "I think one of you two should be the head of the clan." When he said this, Kawaii, Hana, and Izumi all nodded in agreement. Akai and Mikon turned to each other, and Akai was the first to speak.

"I don't want to lead the clan," he told his brother, shaking his head, "at least not the day to day affairs. If anything comes up involving the shinobi I would be glad to step up, but you're the one that always dreamed of leading the clan. This is your chance." For a moment, Mikon seemed taken aback by this display of faith, but he quickly got over it.

"I would be honored," he said as he bowed to the others, "and I think I know the perfect name for this new clan." He turned and faced Lady Tsunade and the gathered shinobi.

"Lady Hokage. Honorable shinobi of the Leaf Village. I, Mikon, and my kin, Akai, Izumi, Meikou, Kawaii, and Hana, hereby found a new clan. A clan based in the principles of character and heart, on the spirit of the individual working with the spirit of the group. I hereby declare the formation of the Seishou Clan!"

Later that night, after most of the village was asleep, a lone figure snuck out onto the southern wall. Wrapped in a heavy brown cloak to shield against the nighttime chill, the figure made her way to the very top of the South Gate, where she turned and stared off toward the south. A tear slid down her cheek as she thought about the world she had lost and the world she had gained. The wind blew her hood off and Izumi shuddered, not from the cold, but from not knowing what lay ahead.

4. Flames of Renewal

"Hana," called Kawaii from where she knelt on the wooden floor, a rag in hand and washing the away several years worth of dust, "bring me a new bucket of water."

"Already coming, Mother," the ten year old called back as she walked around the corner of the hall, using both hands to carry a large wooden bucket. She walked over and set the bucket down next to Kawaii, then grabbed the nearly empty one that Kawaii had been using.

"Thank you, dear. How are things going downstairs?"

"Iruka says we're nearly finished. We only have a few more rooms to clean then we'll be moving up here," Hana said with a proud smile.

"Wow, you all are moving quickly," said Kawaii, "I'll have to pick up the pace."

"No, mom, don't worry," Hana said quickly, "the only reason we're going so fast is because some of the ninja from here in the village have come by to help." She smiled at the thought. "You should see Lee and his teacher scrubbing floors while walking on their hands, it's a funny sight."

"Oh, is that it," replied Kawaii.

"Yeah, and don't worry, Sakura, Hinata, and Tenten are getting ready to come up and help you up here."

"Hey, Hana," called Iruka's voice from downstairs, "come here, I have something to show you."

"Coming, Mr. Iruka," Hana called down, before turning back to her mother, "well, got to go, I'll be back up here in a little while, Mom." And with that, she turned and headed back towards the stairs, humming as she went. Kawaii smiled.

So the leaf ninja not only helped us find this inn, they're helping us clean it up so we can get back on our feet, she thought happily to herself. *And I'll bet that some of the others are helping Meikou and Mikon at the shop as well. Meikou can't wait to get back to his glass-blowing and now that Mikon is going to be working with him and they have a permanent workshop, their work can only get better.* She smiled to herself again, thankful for the warm welcome they were receiving in Konoha.

"How is everything going, Aunt Kawaii?" Kawaii looked up as Akai came around the corner that Hana had just left around. "I just finished checking in with Lady Hokage and she told me to stay and help around here today. Apparently we don't have any missions for unteamed shinobi right now."

"We are making progress," Kawaii replied, "it's still early, and if we keep up the pace, we

could have this place open by tomorrow."

"I thought as much. I checked at the shop on my way here. Taka, Kiba, Shikamaru, Choji, and Naruto are all over there with Mikon and Uncle Meikou, so they're actually almost ready to open."

"That's good," replied Kawaii, excited by the good news, "but what about Izumi? Wasn't she there as well?" Akai gave his aunt a puzzled look.

"No, she wasn't, they told me she was here," he said, getting worried.

"I haven't seen her all morning," replied Kawaii, also worried, "I thought she left early with Meikou and Mikon."

"I'm going find her," said Akai quickly, turning around to head back downstairs. Hinata, Sakura, and Tenten were standing there.

"You don't have to worry," said Sakura, having overheard Akai and his aunt, "she's out in the courtyard. I found her there when I arrived and she said she wanted some time to think, so she was going to clean it up so she could plant a garden."

"Okay," replied Akai, relieved, "I guess gardening is her favorite hobby. I still think I'm going to go check on her." He made to continue on down the hall toward the stairs, but Tenten put out a hand to stop him.

"I don't think that's such a good idea. I think you should just give her some time to herself, let her think things through." Akai glanced at the stairs, apparently still wanting to go check on his sister.

"I guess you're right," he said reluctantly, "I'm just worried about her. I hope she's alright."

Outside in the courtyard, Izumi was pulling weeds from around the base of a cherry blossom tree. She was on her knees, grasping the individual plants and pulling hard at the base until the roots came out of the moist ground. Then she would place the weeds in a basket she had beside her, so she could dice them up later and use them to fertilize the yard as mulch.

As she placed the last weed in the basket, she stood up and looked about at her work. Without stopping once, other than the short breaks to have some water, she had transformed the large courtyard from a dense thicket of weeds and untrimmed trees into a presentable escape. The large pond, previously hidden by the tall weeds, was now visible again, and the small dock on it was still in good shape, despite its years of disuse. The two cherry blossom trees had been trimmed of their overly long branches and now offered gentle shade from the early morning sun.

Izumi had taken the yard from wild and untamed to neat and serene in only two hours, all because she didn't want to think.

Now that the work was done, the thoughts that Izumi had tried to keep herself from thinking surfaced, as unavoidable as thunder in a storm. She thought about how the Leaf Village had been able to help her family. In the three days since the Seishou Clan was founded, they had

helped Kawaii and Hana find an inn to run, something the two had dreamed of for years but were never able to because of the Kajihana Clan's travels. They had helped Meikou find a shop for his glass blowing, a permanent setup in a place where glass items often had to be traded for from other places. Mikon had taken apprenticeship under Meikou and would be helping him in the shop, aside from being the new clan's leader. It seemed as though the village had been able to help everyone except her achieve their dream. Even Akai's dream of being a shinobi had been granted by Konoha, but she had nothing.

She couldn't help but think that being a demon-host might have something to do with it. She didn't want to think that the people of Konoha, who had so far been very kind, could be like her old clan in that way, but she could think of no other reason. It seemed like she was being left out.

No, that's not it, she thought to herself, *if that was the case, they would not even be allowing me to be here right now. There must be some other reason.* She struggled with her thoughts, trying to find some meaning to her worry, her concern, her fear. *Is it just because all I've ever done was work in the cafe with Mina? Do they think I have no potential for anything else?* The more she thought about it, the more she came to believe that this was likely the truth. She closed her eyes with grief. *Am I really that worthless?*

No, you are not.

Izumi opened her eyes at the sound of the different voice, the thoughts that were not hers but that were in her head none the less. When she did, however, she was no longer in the courtyard, but rather in a completely dark abyss, something she could only equate with empty space. She stared into the darkness before her, but she saw no one. It was not until she turned in fear that she noticed a verdant green light radiating from behind her. She turned around and let out a gasp of awe as she laid eyes on the source of the light.

Standing on a large pool of water that was surrounded by many flowers and trees, was a kirin, a mythical creature that Izumi knew was supposed to be spiritually connected with nature and the attribute of luck. Its body resembled that of a deer, but covered in sage green scales rather than fur. It had a horse like mane running down the back of its neck, sky blue in color, and a matching ribbon like tail that extended at least six feet. There was a single horn-like antler in the middle of its forehead and a glowing green dot on the outside of each eye. But it was the creature's eyes that captured Izumi's gaze. They were filled with anger, fear, sympathy, concern, and power all at once, and Izumi knew immediately where she had seen them before, in the midst of a swirling mass of energy that had hovered above her in that moonlit cave five days earlier. She fell to her knees, her heart pounding from a combination of fear and awe.

"Y-You're the demon inside of me, aren't you?" she said fearfully, eyes wide. The kirin's eyes flashed as if in anger, and Izumi flinched involuntarily.

"I am no demon!" the kirin replied angrily, stomping a hoof on the surface of the pool. Izumi did not hear the words as much as feel them in her head, like she had before. The kirin's anger was felt through every fiber of her being, and she bowed her head low in fear, shaking all over. After a moment, though, the feeling of anger was gone, replaced by one that Izumi could only describe as regret. Still shaking, she looked up to the kirin still standing there, only this

time the light radiating from it was not so bright, and its head was lowered as if in apology. When it looked up at Izumi's face again, some of the light returned, but it was nowhere near its previous intensity. "Indeed I am inside you," said the kirin, far more gently than before, leading to Izumi to realize that it was a girl and probably no older than she was, "but I am no demon."

"Then may I ask what are you?" asked Izumi politely, still somewhat fearful.

"I am Morijittai, a guardian spirit of the forest."

5. Spirit of Fire: The Phoenix Takes Wing

"A forest guardian?" asked Izumi, confused, "why would the Akatsuki want a forest guardian to fight for them?"

"They didn't and they don't," replied Morijittai, drawing Izumi's attention, "they simply didn't want Konohagakure to have me either."

"What do you mean?" Izumi asked, more confused than before.

"I was the guardian spirit for the forest immediately surrounding Konoha," responded the kirin, "and the Akatsuki apparently do not want there to be a guardian in that forest, so they tried to kill me the only way they knew how. By sealing me inside a host then subsequently killing that host. If they had succeeded, my forest would now be without a guardian for at least the next decade."

"How is that?"

"When a guardian spirit is killed," continued Morijittai, "the other spirits in the spirit world instinctively know it has happened but not how it happened. They will remain away from the spirit's post for a long time, for fear of whatever killed the spirit, leaving the responsibilities of that spirit unfulfilled."

"But since you didn't die, you're still the guardian, right?" As soon as she asked the question, a sense of grief filled Izumi, and she knew it was Morijittai's grief. "What's wrong, Morijittai?" The kirin paused a moment before responding.

"When a spirit leaves its post for any reason other than death," she said, "the other spirits take it as an act of desertion, of the spirit choosing to become a rogue demon rather than fulfill its duties. Since I am sealed inside you, I can no longer fulfill my duties as a guardian spirit; and since I did not die, I have been branded a deserter. Another spirit has taken my place and I have been exiled from the spirit world. I will never be able to go back even if I were not bound to you now." She hung her head as she finished, staring at the water that was so symbolic of her situation. It existed here in this dark realm, but it served no purpose other than the nourishment of the surrounding plants. It could not move about, could not flow elsewhere, could not escape. Izumi, despite the waves of grief she was feeling from Morijittai, could not help but feel sympathy for the trapped kirin. Morijittai looked up, as if the exchange of emotion worked both ways and she could feel Izumi's sympathy for her.

"Do not feel sorry for me," she said to Izumi, "I chose this. I could have allowed myself to die and not be in this situation. You on the other hand were forced into this. I felt it was my responsibility to at least keep you from dying for something you had no hand in or understanding of. You are the one who deserves the sympathy."

"That is not true," replied Izumi forcefully, catching the kirin by surprise, "it's not your fault that the Akatsuki wanted to remove you from your duties. It is not your fault that the other

spirits branded you a traitor for simply saving me, for being the guardian you're supposed to be. We both lost our old lives thanks to the Akatsuki, not just me. You deserve just as much sympathy as I do." Izumi could tell that her words had gotten through to Morijittai, as she felt waves of what could only be described as disbelief pouring from the kirin.

"You truly believe that?" asked Morijittai, stunned by Izumi's words.

"I do. I don't think I'm any more special than anyone else." Izumi stood tall as she said this, and the kirin could feel the truth of her words. She remained silent, still too stunned to speak. Izumi could feel after a few moments that Morijittai was starting to believe her. A new feeling sprang up between the two of them, and each knew instantly what it was: trust.

"If you would be willing to work with me," said Izumi suddenly, catching Morijittai's attention, "I think I have finally realized a purpose that the two of us can fulfill together." Morijittai could feel Izumi's excitement at the idea.

"If it is something that both of us can do," she replied, though she already knew it was, "then I would be more than happy to work with you, Izumi." Then the kirin gave a slight smile when Izumi felt something tap her on the shoulder. Izumi turned around, but she found nothing there. She felt another tap on the shoulder, more forceful this time, but again there was no one there when she looked.

"What's going on?" she asked in shock as she felt a sensation like she was being roughly shaken.

"Izumi, relax," said Morijittai with a slight chuckle, "right now we're inside your mind. What you're feeling right now is your brother, Akai, trying to wake you up. To him you appear to be unconscious." The kirin felt a wave of relief pour from Izumi, and she let out another chuckle. "Just relax and close your eyes." Izumi closed her eyes and tried to relax, but something stopped her and she opened her eyes again.

"Will I be able to speak to you again?" she asked Morijittai, who just smiled.

"Now that you know I'm here, you should be able to speak to me whenever you like."

"Okay, thanks, Morijittai." With that she closed her eyes and relaxed. She felt as if she was falling asleep.

"Come on, Izumi, wake up!" Akai practically shouted as he shook his unconscious sister's shoulder. He had left Izumi to her self for several hours, and had come out to check on her only to find her sleeping under one of the cherry-blossom trees. He had been trying to wake her for several minutes.

"Let me see," said Sakura as she knelt down on the ground next to him and placed a hand on Izumi's neck. She had come with Akai to check on Izumi. "Her pulse is strong. I'm not sure what the problem is." She pulled off her right glove and gathered chakra to her right hand for the Mystic Palm Jutsu, but before she could even place it on Izumi's forehead, the girl started to stir. After a moment she opened her eyes and stared at Akai,

blinking away the bright light.

"Oh, Izumi," said Akai as he wrapped her in a hug, "don't scare me like that. I thought you were dying." He held her tight for a moment before releasing her and letting her sit up.

"I'm fine, Akai," Izumi said, "I'm sorry for scaring you. I was just out here thinking and I guess I fell asleep." She glanced over at the pool in the courtyard, remembering what had actually happened, but she wasn't ready to mention that yet. She looked back at Akai and noticed the skeptical look on his face. "I'm fine, really."

"Okay," Akai replied, "if you say so." He looked up at the sky, where the sun was approaching its zenith, before speaking again. "How about we all head inside. Kawaii's preparing lunch and it's getting hot out here." He stood and offered a hand to each of the girls. Sakura accepted it and he helped her stand up, but Izumi decided to get up on her own, catching Akai by surprise. She swayed a bit when she got to her feet, but held out a hand to stop Akai when he tried to help her.

"Don't worry," she told him, "I just got up too fast."

"Is there anything we can do for you?" asked Sakura with a concerned look on her face, "get you some water or something?" Izumi glanced at her and a look of excitement suddenly crossed her face.

"No, I don't need anything," she said, staring at Sakura, "but you can help me with something else." Sakura was confused by this.

"Why me, specifically?" she asked Izumi.

"I want to go speak with the Hokage," she replied, surprising both Akai and Sakura.

"Why?" Akai asked.

"I know this might sound crazy," Izumi said in return, a smile on her face, "but I want to ask her if I can become a shinobi." Akai and Sakura were both stunned by this announcement.

"What?" asked Akai, "You've never wanted to be a ninja before! Why the sudden change?"

"I'm not sure," Izumi replied, "but I feel like that's what I want to do now. I'm really considering being a medic-nin, since I'm already knowledgeable with herbal medicine. I feel like that's what I have that I can do for the village, and I have to do something." She stood tall as she said this, and Sakura and Akai exchanged stunned glances.

"Well, I can take you to see Lady Tsunade," said Sakura, still shocked, "she has been worried about you ever since the Kajihana Clan left. She very well might give you a chance like she gave Akai."

"Really?" asked Izumi, excitement in her eyes once again.

"Yeah," replied Sakura, "but she's busy right now, so we'll have to wait until this afternoon."

"Okay, I can handle that," said Izumi with a smile on her face. She then turned to head back into the inn and Akai and Sakura followed.

"You're sure this is what you want, sis?" asked Akai as they approached the doorway.

"Yes, Akai, I'm sure."

"Well, if that's really what you want, then go for it," Akai said back, "who knows, maybe the Seishou Clan will become a clan of shinobi after all."

"The day that happens will truly be a great day for Konoha," said a nearby voice, and the trio turned to see Lee walking toward them on his hands. Izumi laughed at the sight, her first real laugh since before the Akatsuki attack. "What is so funny?" Lee asked as he did a back flip onto his feet, wincing as he landed on his still injured leg.

"Nothing, Lee," Izumi replied, wiping tears from her eyes and clutching her chest from laughing so hard. Then she took a deep breath to calm herself down and reached into one of her pockets, pulling out a small glass case that was divided into three individual sections, each containing a sage-colored pill. "But thanks anyways for the laugh, I needed it. Here, I wanted to give you these." She held the case out to Lee.

"What are they?" he asked as he accepted the case.

"They're Morichiyu Pills," answered Akai, who recognized the little green orbs, "they're an herbal pill that stimulate the body's immune system, accelerating the natural healing process." He looked up at Izumi in surprise. "They're a medicine Izumi developed when we were still part of the Kajihana Clan, and she's never given them to anyone other than clan members."

"I wanted to repay you for getting me back here to Konoha in time," Izumi said to Lee with a slight bow, "and since the injuries you incurred doing so have still yet to fully heal, I decided this would be a good way to do that." Lee looked at Izumi for a moment before giving her a deep bow.

"My actions were nothing, I would repeat them over and over again if I had to. But I am honored that you would present me with such a gift." He stood up straight and met Izumi's gaze. "Thank you."

"So you developed the Morichiyu Pills?" asked Sakura, impressed. "I'd heard rumors about the Kajihana Clan's secret healing treatment, but I didn't think it could have been developed by a non-shinobi." She then glanced over at Akai. "First Akai shows up with scrolls for A-rank jutsu that he made, and now you're saying that you developed a highly effective, ninja level medicine? It seems the Seishou Clan has some pretty special individuals."

"My thoughts exactly," agreed Lee.

"Stop it, guys," said Akai with mock embarrassment.

"Yeah, we're not that special," added Izumi, remembering what she had told Morijittai, "we're just like everyone else."

"Lunch is ready, everyone!" called Izumi from the kitchen, "come and get it!"

"Yes!" shouted Lee as he flipped back onto his hands and turned to look up at the others, "anyone want to race?"

"You're on!" shouted Akai and the four took off down the hall toward the kitchen, laughing as they went.

Though sealed inside of Izumi, Morijittai remained aware of her surroundings and had watched Izumi since waking up in the courtyard.

You might not think you're very special, Izumi, the kirin thought to herself, *but you are. Not many people could have had their whole world taken from them so suddenly and then be able to laugh with others so easily afterward. Even fewer can say that they would ever become friends with a spirit that was sealed inside them, in the face of such prejudice as you have seen. But here you are, your heart and spirit burning more brightly than it ever has before. You are more special than you know.*