Will Of Stone

by sadfascist

Summary

Timeskip: Sakura travels to the Earth Country to take the Iwa chuunin exam. Waiting for her there is a place of ancient wonder… violent trials… star-crossed love… and a conspiracy that threatens world peace itself. An epic novel. COMPLETE.
A Seething Heart

Sakura looked down through the infrared binoculars at the walls of the distant laboratory, bored to death.

She yawned.

"I knew I should've brought more cookies," Chouji complained from the tree next to her.

"You brought a whole damn backpack of cookies," laughed Sakura. "Did you finish it already?"

"Ino ate half of them."

"I did not," insisted Ino. "What time is it? I've been sitting on my ass in this tree all night."

"And you'll keep sitting on it," declared Sarutobi Asuma. "This is an official and totally serious C-rank mission!"

Asuma's admonition was rather undermined by the fact that he, himself, was busy smoking a cigarette. The Leaf jounin had gone through an entire pack of the finest tobacco product in the span of the last few hours. The rising smoke might have given away their position, if anyone was watching.

Nobody was.

It was the easiest mission that Sakura had ever been on in her life. She'd literally spent the entire night sitting in a tree and staring at the featureless metal walls of Konoha's Honjo Laboratory. They were supposed to keep track if anyone came in or out of the laboratory... but of course nobody had. At least chasing cats or cleaning streets required moving about. Ino went to pee three times just to stretch her legs and break up the monotony. Sometime past midnight Chouji fell asleep against a tree branch, before Asuma slapped him upside the head. Sakura could hardly blame him; she was half asleep herself.

As quiet as a graveyard.

She said as much to Asuma. "You could set up a video camera, you know, and get a better view. Why does Tsunade-sensei want us to spy on Konoha's own damn building, anyway?"

Asuma grinned. "Well, first of all, Sakura, you need to practice working together with your new teammates. The Iwa chuunin exam is only a month away, and I'd rather Team Asuma not... flunk out."

"Again, you mean."

"Right. Plus, the Hokage specifically requested you for this mission."

"Why?"

"I'm sure she'll tell you when the time is right."

That was interesting, though only mildly so. Honjo Laboratory was Konoha's most important scientific research facility. A number of secretive technologies were developed there, many of them quite dangerous—that was the reason it was based in the Forest of Death, instead of inside Konoha proper. But if Tsunade-sensei wants me to see Honjo Laboratory, why can't she give me a tour?
Sakura could not quite fathom the logic.

"I wish Tsunade-sensei would give me a real mission," Sakura complained. "I haven't been anywhere since I become her apprentice, you know that?"

That was four months ago, and Sakura had gotten far stronger under the Fifth Hokage's rigorous training. But still Tsunade-sensei refused to send her on any serious missions. No real fighting. No real danger. No real stakes. This very mission, in fact, was the furthest Sakura had been away from Konoha, and she'd gotten no further than the edge of the Forest of Death. How do I prove myself, if all I'm doing is chasing cats and looking through binoculars?

Asuma shrugged. "Tsunade wants to make sure you're ready."

"I am ready," she insisted.

Honjo Laboratory exploded.

The explosion was so large that Sakura did not need the binoculars to see it. A wreath of flame covered the Forest of Death, sending plumes of smoke billowing into the night sky. Only a burning crater remained where the metal building had once stood.

"What the fuck?" Ino screamed.

An accident, Sakura thought. But in the next heartbeat she knew that she was wrong. The explosion was too large, too directed to be unplanned. No... this is...

"Bad news," said Asuma.

Trench knives were in his hands, pulsing with deadly blue-white chakra; his cigarette forgotten.

"Look!" said Sakura. Through the binoculars, she could see three shadowy figures running toward the laboratory. She could see their cloaks. Swirling red clouds over black, flapping as they ran.

Akatsuki.

Akatsuki was breaking into Honjo Laboratory.

"Code Red!" Asuma was shouting into his radio. "I repeat, Code Red!"

He hardly needed to explain the situation to headquarters. Even from inside Konoha itself the huge explosion must have been visible. No doubt teams of reinforcements were mobilizing to Honjo Laboratory as they spoke. The only question was... would the reinforcements get there in time? Or would they be too far away? If they arrived too slowly, the Akatsuki terrorists would be able to escape.

The only backup in the area was Team Asuma itself.

Asuma had come to the same conclusion. "They're going for the Annihilation Heart," he whispered, almost to himself. "Shit!" He spun to look at the genin. "Stay back, all three of you!"

"But—" started Sakura.

"Stay back! That's an order!"

Asuma leaped from their tree, running into the Forest of Death, toward the smoking laboratory. The Akatsuki terrorists had already disappeared inside. Fire from the explosion was spreading
everywhere. Wild tongues of flame leapt from trunk to trunk, lighting up trees like chandeliers in the dark.

"What the hell's happening?" cried Chouji, holding his hands to his face.

More explosions came from the lab—from below the surface. From what Sakura knew about Honjo Laboratory, most of the facility was actually underground, with only a small portion visible above. Sakura watched with wide eyes, with tense muscles and a pounding heart. The easiest mission of her life had suddenly turned into something very different. If only she could see what was happening— but Asuma had ordered her to stay back. Honjo Laboratory was one of the most secure facilities in Konoha, with strong defenses and guards. If Akatsuki was successfully breaking into the lab, they must have carefully planned their strike.

And they must be very strong.

Suddenly the young kunoichi was conscious of the weight of the forehead protector she wore, and all that it represented: the symbol of her hidden ninja village, the swirling leaf of Konoha. The cold metal of the headplate pressed her skin through the cloth. This is it, she thought. This is my chance to prove my strength to Tsunade-sensei.

"Look!" said Chouji. "There's a… thing."

It was a most apt description. The thing was rising slowly from the ground in front of Honjo Laboratory.

"What the hell is that?" asked Ino.

The top of the thing cracked apart, splitting down the center, and the two halves opened up like the jaws of a gigantic Venus flytrap. Inside the jaws Sakura saw the grinning head and upper chest of a man. The man-thing's body was split down the middle, half black and half white, grotesquely misshapen. Then the rest of the thing surfaced, relatively normal—with arms and legs—wrapped in the black and red cloak of Akatsuki.

Some kind of Akatsuki freak, thought Sakura.

The thing grinned.

And began to walk toward the laboratory entrance.

"Damnit!" cursed Sakura.

Asuma had already gone inside the lab to chase the three Akatsuki terrorists they'd spied before. There was no way to warn him about the fourth terrorist, this strange plant-thing that was stalking him from behind. If things went badly Asuma would be ambushed from two sides, like meat in a sandwich, and probably finished. But what could Sakura do to help? I trained for this, she thought. I am the apprentice of Senju Tsunade the Fifth Hokage, the student of Hatake Kakashi the Perfect Ninja, the daughter of Haruno Arashi the Demonslayer.

I am a kunoichi of Konoha.

For the rest of her life, Sakura would never forget the decision she made then. It would haunt her every day for as long as she lived... and yet, for all that, it happened in a single heartbeat. And she didn't hesitate.

She leaped off the tree.
"Sakura!" cried Ino. "Asuma-sensei ordered us to stay back!"

"We've got to fight, dammit! We can't do nothing!"

She ran into the Forest of Death. Behind her Ino made a noise of disgust, but followed anyway. As did Chouji. The three genin plunged into the smoke and fire, heading toward the ruins of Honjo Laboratory.

Honjo Laboratory was a wreck of twisted metal. Through the flames and the pouring smoke, Sakura spotted dozens of dead corpses. Scientists, staff, shinobi, their bodies sprawled in pools of blood. They had been murdered by Akatsuki either in the initial explosion or afterwards, as the three Akatsuki terrorists fought their way inside. Sakura didn't know how many levels Honjo Laboratory had, but the underground complex must have been vast. The sounds of fierce fighting were still coming from below. Which way had Asuma gone? She didn't know, and there was no time to look for him. Only the Akatsuki plant-thing before them mattered, his body a dark shadow against the burning flames. She needed to distract him.

Sakura threw a clutch of kunai at the Akatsuki creature.

They sank deep into his back, like thunking into wood.

He turned, and laughed.

"Oh, my god," whispered Ino.

The thing had not even noticed her attack. "Pretty leaf-nin girl," he hissed. "So you're the one… I sssmelled…"

"Who the hell are you?" Sakura demanded.

"Don't be offended. You smelled very nisse." He licked his lips and laughed. His tongue was forked, like a snake's, and when he spread his arms, long, black thorns grew out from his palms. The thorn-swords were hideous in appearance, twisted and dripping smoking venom. The man-thing stalked toward them.

"Chouji, now!" Sakura shouted.

Akimichi Chouji leaped forward, his pudgy body spinning into his clan's Human Bullet Tank secret jutsu. Chouji had become a human-sized wrecking ball, using chakra to propel himself into a powerful and deadly spinning roll. At the same time, Sakura stretched out her palm toward the Akatsuki thing.

"Binding!" It was her best genjutsu, the strongest jutsu that Tsunade-sensei had taught her.

The thing froze in mid-step as his muscles locked up, immobilized by Sakura's illusion attack on his nervous system. He was helpless to dodge as the rolling Chouji hit him with enough force to break down a steel wall…

… except that he didn't.

Instead Chouji's Human Bullet Tank spun against the thing's body without any effect. Sakura was stunned. What kind of freak is this? In the next instant the Akatsuki shinobi had broken through Sakura's genjutsu and slashed at Chouji with his poisoned thorn sword. The force of the slash ripped through Chouji's chakra-expanded abdomen and sent him flying backwards, right into Ino and hurling them both against a burning tree.
"Shit!" Sakura cried, running over to her teammates' side. Chouji was moaning, holding his side, but Ino had been knocked unconscious. She was crumpled on the ground like a dead mouse.

"Let me introduce myself," the plant-thing laughed. "I am Zetsu, the second-in-command of Akatsuki. And you should not be out of your bed so late, little girl."

"You'll never get away with this!"

"Oh, but we already have."

It was not Zetsu's voice. Instead it was the voice of another man—a voice like a killer beast, predatory, vastly self-assured. The man was climbing out of the wreckage of Honjo Laboratory, two others following closely at his heels.

The original three Akatsuki terrorists. They wore the red and black cloaks of Akatsuki but, unexpectedly, they were also masked. Behind the black cloth that covered their faces Sakura could only see their eyes… slitted eyes glowing golden, like burning flames.

_Those eyes_, she recognized in shock. _Only one clan in the world has those eyes._

Could it be?

The man who had spoken to her was truly massive, at least two meters in height, and built like a freight train. In his hand he wielded a katana blade, unsheathed and white-hot with smoking heat. The two other masked shinobi flanked him on either side. One of them was holding a large metal suitcase, open on hinges. There was some sort of scrollwork along the inside of the case, and in the center, a very bright, glowing thing which shimmered and throbbed and pulsed. Like a seething heart. A crystal. Sakura had never seen anything like it in her life.

"Is that the Annihilation Heart?" asked Zetsu.

"Yes," said the masked leader. "We have upheld our end of the bargain with Akatsuki. Now you must uphold yours."

Zetsu laughed. "Of course."

The leader was staring at Sakura with his burning eyes. "I see you… Haruno Sakura."

She stepped back warily, gripping her kunai. "Do I know you?"

"You will." His voice changed; amused now, almost wicked. "I've heard so much about you, Sakura. You are just as beautiful as they said." The man shifted his stance, pointing the point of his smoking katana at her chest. His eyes were torches of burning gold. "But are you as strong?"

Behind him, the remains of Honjo Laboratory suddenly exploded outward, spraying rubble everywhere. A giant red-furred gorilla had burst onto the surface. And atop the shoulders of the gorilla stood a man holding two glowing trench knives.

Sarutobi Asuma grinned. "Why don't you pick on someone your own size, Sougon?"

The masked leader laughed. "Oh, did you guess my clan? And here I was wearing a mask." He shrugged. "Now I'll just have to kill you all."

Everything happened at once.

Asuma's gorilla roared and charged the four Akatsuki terrorists. The man-thing Zetsu leaped to meet
him, a maze of slicing black thorns growing from his body, engaging Asuma himself in hand-to-hand combat. The two masked shinobi behind the Sougon leader turned and ran away from the fighting, deeper into the forest, escaping. And the Sougon leader himself—

He charged at Sakura.

And swung his burning sword down on her head.

Sakura brought up her twin kunai to deflect the blow. The blade of the katana met the edges of her two kunai with a jarring ring, the sheer physical strength of the swing forcing her to skid backward. She stumbled backward, hitting the tree behind her.

"Too slow, Sakura," laughed the masked Sougon. "Too weak."

She tried to counterattack with an earth jutsu. "Earth Release: Sinister Spikes!" It was one of the jutsu Tsunade-sensei had taught her to practice her earth elemental affinity. Huge earthen spikes shot out from the ground in a line, straight for the masked ninja.

Sakura thought he would have to dodge the attack, giving her room to maneuver, but instead his eyes only burned—inflamed with golden power.

"Bakudan," he said.

*Bomb.*

It was a bomb indeed—a bomb that materialized out of thin air, a bomb made of nothing but superheated molecules, creating a rapid explosion at the source. Her Sinister Spikes were destroyed in a great golden explosion of heat. *He used his eyes to blow up my attack.* That was the terrifying bloodline power of the Sougon clan of Iwa, Sakura knew.

The power to control heat with their eyes.

The Enshogan.

"Too disappointing," said the man.

Finally, Sakura realized just how out of her league she was.

Asuma was a decorated jounin, one of the strongest shinobi in Konoha. But Ino and Chouji were totally useless. It was only Asuma and her, against these freaks. *These are S-rank shinobi, and I'm just a genin.* There was no way that they could win. What could she do? Where were the reinforcements from Konoha, why hadn't they arrived yet? She had made a terrible mistake leading Ino and Chouji into this death trap.

The masked Sougon leader came at her again, moving like lightning, his katana a blur of deadly fire. Sakura could barely even see his attacks, much less dodge them. In seconds she found herself on her back, the enemy standing over her. A slash came for her head—

—and Asuma's gorilla suddenly slammed its fist down on the masked Sougon. This time the masked ninja had to dodge away. Yet he counterattacked at the same time, cutting with his sword deep into Asuma's flank. Asuma grunted, falling to one knee, blood gushing down his side.

"Asuma-sama!"

"Sakura!” Asuma shouted. "Run, get the hell out of here!"
She ran.

She picked up the unconscious Ino in her arms and ran into the forest, trying to get back to Konoha. The Forest of Death had become an inferno. Orange flames slithered up ravaged trees, consuming everything in their wake. The smell of smoke filled Sakura's mouth. Now she could hear distant shouts, the sounds of explosions. A series of jutsu lit up the night sky above Honjo Laboratory.

Finally, the reinforcements from Konoha had arrived.

Sakura could not see them, but she could see their work. Zetsu's black thorns erupted from the ground in every direction, shooting up into the air, black thorns spiraling in a great twisting web. At the same time a gigantic white banyan tree burst out above the canopy, ten stories high, the branches hard and white as polished bone. The web of black thorns wrapped around the tree like a thousand chains, trying to constrict it, slice it apart. The tree fought back, branches sprouting out as fast as they could be cut. There was an ear splitting hissing and screeching, and the earth shook.

*That's Yamato's jutsu*, she knew. The leader of ANBU Squad 1 had arrived, among other leaf-nin teams.

The trunk of the white banyan tree glowed red for a split second, like it was being superheated from the inside. Then it violently exploded.

*Bakudan!*

A second later the trunkless crown of the tree also detonated, exploding like an over-pressurized furnace. The roaring shockwave was so massive that it blasted Sakura forward in the air, though she was nowhere close to the source. She almost dropped Ino, but managed to catch herself on the hanging branches of a nearby tree. Then she was running away as fast as she could, jumping from tree to tree. She did not stop until she had run out of breath. Then she looked back.

A tall white stump jutted up from the earth, like a dead statue with its body cut off. Above it, where the tree had been, there was a haze of shimmering steam the color of gold…

The air in front of her exploded.

*Shit!*

The attack just narrowly missed. She staggered back, looking about her frantically. She saw him just in time. The hulking Sougon leader stood on a burning branch above her, his bloody katana in one hand, his palm outstretched in the other. Evidently the Sougon leader had decided to chase her. She could see the inflamed network of blood vessels coiled around his golden pupils.

"Don't you have some escaping to do?" she shouted at him.

He laughed. "I'm taking the scenic detour."

"You missed."

"Oh, believe me, if I meant to kill you, you would already be dead."

His eyes shimmered gold—

Sakura leapt to the side. The branch she had been standing on exploded. The man's eyes glowed again. She dodged the explosion again. Again. Over and over, forcing her to run for her life. Sakura knew the man was toying with her. He can kill me whenever he wants. She was cornered, and Ino's
deadweight was slowing her down. What could she do to turn the tide?

"Sakura! Stay back!"

It was Yamato, the ANBU Captain. Two other members of his elite ANBU Squad followed him. Pug, the wisecracking young shinobi. And Rhino, a fierce bull of a man. The three ANBU fell upon the masked Sougon shinobi as one, attacking with precision and power.

Yet even they were not enough. The mysterious Sougon leader beat them all back, his katana a whirling blur of fire and ice. A chain of Bakudan explosions forced the three ANBU away from him. Rhino cried out in pain as one Bakudan blast seared his leg. Yamato had disappeared beneath a haze of smoke. Fire was everywhere.

Sakura could see only Pug in the confusion of the battle. Pug ran toward her, his carved ANBU mask flashing red in the forest flames. A bulldog with its teeth bared. "You shouldn't be here. This guy is an S-rank enemy. Come with me!"

He was too late.

When they tried to run the air exploded around them, trapping them, forcing them down into a small clearing. Something hit Sakura hard in the chest. She flew back into a tree trunk and cried out in pain, falling, crashing to the forest floor. Ino had tumbled from her arms. On her hands and knees in the dirt, dazed, Sakura could barely manage to raise her head to see her attacker. The man was silhouetted black against the burning forest.

He stretched out the palm of his hand toward her, and then his eyes were golden flames.

"Bakudan," the man said.

The explosion was blinding.

But Sakura was not dead.

She had been shoved to the side at the last moment.

Instead it was the ANBU Pug that exploded. Pug's body erupted in an inferno of golden flame, a bloody storm of skin and limbs and guts. What remained of Pug's head rolled into Sakura's hands. The ANBU mask had shattered in the heat. Half the young ANBU's face remained, the flesh burned off, unrecognizable except for one deep blue eye.

"Pug!" Sakura screamed.

The masked Sougon laughed. "That's one ape down." He stepped toward Sakura.

Sakura threw a kunai at him, weakly, clumsily. The man swatted it away with the back of his hand, like a fly. "You stupid ape. Do you think those little daggers can hurt me?" Sakura flung more kunai anyway. The man laughed. "You disappoint me, Haruno Sakura. You're far too weak to challenge me. And to think I thought you might be the one."

"Fuck you!" Sakura screamed.

"Well, if you insist."

Just then Yamato and Rhino returned. They leapt into the clearing to defend Sakura, throwing deadly jutsu at the masked Sougon. And not just them; more leaf-nins were arriving by the second, a whole
squadron of them, the bulk of the reinforcements from Konoha. And this time the Sougon leader knew that he was outmatched. An inferno of fire exploded around his body, covering his tracks.

When the smoke cleared, the mysterious shinobi was gone.

Sakura leaned back against the tree, exhausted, gasping for air and clutching her stinging ribs. Her entire body was covered in blood and guts from the exploded Pug. Thick hot blood washed over her, spraying all over her arms and body and face. Pug's decapitated head was in her hands, somehow. Pug's one remaining eye was still open, bright robin blue, frozen, staring blankly at the night sky.

He looked so young.

"Fuck!" Rhino shouted in rage and pain. "That Sougon bastard—he—"

"He's gone," said Yamato in a flat voice, his face hidden behind his ANBU mask.

More leaf-nins streamed into the clearing. Among them was the ANBU Saint, also of Squad 1. Saint was holding half of a blasted metal case, torn in half at the hinges. The glowing crystal Sakura had seen before was gone, obviously stolen away. The battle was over and the attackers had escaped.

"Sakura!" a voice cried.

It was Chouji, carrying the bloody, limp body of Sarutobi Asuma in his arms.

"Asuma-sensei—he got hit by that Bakudan thing, he's hurt bad—we've got to get him to the hospital right away, or…"

*My god*, Sakura thought. The easiest mission in her life had gone to complete shit in what seemed like only minutes. The attack on Honjo Laboratory. The escape of the Akatsuki terrorists. Asuma-sama's critical injuries. And the ANBU Pug… he'd died saving her life. Pug had been blown to smithereens by a masked shinobi far more powerful than her. Because she'd thought she was strong, strong enough be the hero and save the day, but all she was good for was being rescued by a better man, once again.

*Stay back,* Asuma-sama had told her. *That's an order!*

"I'm sorry," Sakura whispered.

The ANBU stared at her. The other leaf-nins stared at her. Chouji looked away.

None of them said anything.
In the Looking Glass

They rushed the stretcher through swinging double-doors into the hospital emergency ward. A sudden flash of fluorescent light blazed in Sakura's face, and she held up her hand against it. There was an immense confusion of sound—doctors shouting, whirling machinery, footsteps running on the tile floor. For some reason Sakura looked back. The masked ANBU of Squad 1 stood out there, in the dark cobblestone streets outside the hospital, left behind. Then the doors swung shut and they were gone.

Sakura ran with the stretcher down the long hallways.

"What happened?" the lead doctor asked her. The Konoha Chief of Surgical Medicine, Dr. Honjo Micho. His graying hair stuck up from his head in tufts, like it had been rubbed over with a charged comb, and his glasses gleamed white in the light.

"Asuma-sama was hit in the chest by some kind of heat jutsu. Bakudan."

"Bakudan!" another of the doctors exclaimed. "That explains all the cell ruptures I'm seeing. Critical damage to the liver, kidneys, lungs... the brain. The damage is everywhere."

"I... I think the attack superheated the blood in his heart. When it was pumped into his circulatory system... I tried to heal it."

"Yes," said Dr. Micho. "If it weren't for you, Asuma would already be dead."

They wheeled the dying Sarutobi Asuma into the emergency operating room. Gleaming steel walls swallowed them on all sides, reflecting their movements as in a looking glass. Lines of glowing scrollwork covered the walls, charging them with electric energy. They quickly striped Asuma's body and placed it in a depressed well in the middle of the room. The doctors placed seals on the body, complicated, entangled layers of enzyme catalysts and ATP imitators and anti-infection wards that Sakura could barely follow. Medic-nins in the corners of the room burned their chakra, funneling electric power to the central well through the scrollwork.

Micho was going to attempt the Creation Procedure. Regeneration of Asuma's entire cellular structure from a cryogenic state. It had the best chance of saving him. But it would take time.

"Sarutobi's vitals are failing!" one of the doctors said.

Micho was yelling at the attending nurses. "What are you useless boobs doing? Where's my blood transfusion? And my shot of suprax? And the dry ice?"

"We have to operate now," a doctor said.

A chakra scalpel already glittered in Micho's hand. "Ice him," Micho said.

The medic-nins shoveled dry ice into tranches against the well. Cold fumes flowed out, blanketed Asuma's body and froze it. Electric energy pulsed, throbbed until the well glowed blue-hot with its charge. Micho sliced into Asuma's chest with his chakra scalpel.

"Let me help," Sakura said.

Micho didn't look up. "You're in traumatic shock," he said. "You need medical attention."
"I can help."

"Sakura, shock is extremely—"

"I know. I can help. You need it for the Creation Procedure."

The old doctor sighed. "All right. Maintain the infection seals."

Sakura kneeled by the well. She pressed her hands against Asuma's torso. Suddenly she noticed that her hands were covered with blood.

"Three…two…one…now!"

Enormous waves of electric chakra ran through Asuma's body, held in by the seals, crackling like lightning. The dry ice melted, evaporated into steam.

The steam almost seemed the color of gold. No, that was before. Before? She stared at her hands. Now she remembered. She had thrust them right into Asuma's chest, tried to save him. His chest had been warm, and the blood had poured over her hands like a hot bath. Now it was dry, cold. The congealed blood clung to her like a second skin. It covered her. What a pity it would be to clean it off.

Her hands shook.

"Sakura!" Micho yelled.

_Damnit!_ Somehow Sakura willed herself back to reality. The Creation Procedure. Her hands. No. Focus. She began to unravel the seals on Asuma's body. Micho and the doctors performed the main operation, but she helped to maintain the infection seals, filled in the gaps between their seal releases. Focus… one step at a time… At last the procedure was finished. The Creation Procedure had successfully catalyzed extremely fast and universal regeneration in Asuma's cells, enough to heal almost any kind of wound.

Almost.

"Suprax! I need more suprax!" Micho shouted.

"It didn't work!" one of the doctors said. "The damage is too much."

"Vital signs failing," another said.

"Sarutobi's frontal lobe is inactive. He's going to turn into a vegetable—"

"Son of a bitch!" Micho said. Suddenly the old man turned to Sakura and grabbed her by the shoulders. She was looking at her hands.

Micho shook the girl until she looked at him.

"I'm experiencing an acute stress reaction," Sakura said numbly. "My performance is compromised. Permission to rest."

"Granted." Micho's face was soft. "Sakura, thank you."

Sakura stood up. She walked out through the doors of the operating room into the emergency room.

As she left she heard Dr. Micho call out behind her, "Get the Hokage!"
The emergency room was crowded with other people. Dozens of shinobi had been involved in the attack on Honjo Laboratory, and the entire hospital was in an uproar. Some nurses found Sakura and fuss ed over her: checking for bodily damage, salving her wounds, slipping a few pills under her tongue. In truth, Sakura was hardly injured at all. She'd received the same bruises and cuts from any number of hard training sessions.

That was not the problem. In some corner of her mind Sakura understood what was happening to her right now. An acute stress reaction in response to a traumatic event. Symptoms included numbing, depersonalization, and continued re-experiencing of the event by way of thoughts and flashbacks. It was a perfectly natural response. She looked at her blood-covered hands.

In them she saw a burning forest. She saw the ANBU Pug's exploded body, erupting in an inferno of golden flame, a bloody storm of skin and limbs and guts. What remained of Pug's head rolled into Sakura's hands, his eyes staring blankly open. "That's one ape down," laughed the masked Sougon. Asuma-sama, lying unconscious in Chouji's arms, a hole in his chest, blood pouring out of him. "Stay back!" he shouted at her. "That's an order!" "A grotesque plant-thing rose slowly from the ground in front of a smoking ruin. A man's eyes were golden flames, and he whispered a word.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I shouldn't have..."

Suddenly she wondered what the ANBU were doing. They must have given their report by now. She imagined them kneeling before the Hokage. With one hand Captain Yamato presented Sakura's sensei with the half-blown up briefcase filled with nothing. With the other he pulled out the detached head of Pug. "It was Haruno Sakura, sir," Yamato said. "It was all her fault. She killed him."

_I killed him._

She didn't know long she waited there. It must have hours. Confused, exhausted thoughts overflowed her mind.

At last Dr. Micho walked through the doors of the operating room, followed by a gaggle of doctors. Sakura stood up, stared at him. Micho grinned widely. "Sarutobi Asuma will live! The Fifth saved him. It's a damned miracle."

_Asuma-sama._ Sakura closed her eyes. The Hokage had saved him.

"She wants to see you," Micho said. He pointed to the operating room.

Sakura stared. Then she walked through the doors.

The medical staff had all left the operating room. The room was silent. Gray scrollwork peeled off the walls like faded paint, exhausted and useless. Asuma was sleeping on a stretcher in the middle of the room, his body covered by a white sheet.

A woman had her hand on Asuma's chest.

She wore a green kimono, hastily thrown on. Her hair was the color of the sun, and her skin was pale like ice. She was beautiful, aristocratic, but more than that. She was unapproachable. You could not look away. There was an extraordinary charisma about her, mesmerizing, magnetic. You could feel it in your bones, in your hidden thoughts. And in those haunting dark eyes above all. Like a god they ran in fear who saw her, if they were enemies, worshiped her in awe, if they were her friends.

They whispered her name, the epithets they had given her, and the words were incantations. Senju Tsunade. The Princess. The Legendary Sannin. The Scarred Beauty. The Queen of Torment.

When she spoke her voice was a reed in the frozen snow.
"Sakura," the Hokage whispered. "What have you done?"

"I'm sorry," Sakura said, head held low. "Tsunade-sensei…I failed you. It was all my fault."

In an instant Tsunade had crossed the room and embraced Sakura in her arms. "No. It was not your fault, Sakura. It was mine."

"Tsunade-sensei—"

"I shouldn't have sent you on that mission. I should have known this would happen."

The Hokage's embrace was so tight that it hurt. When Sakura looked up, she saw that Tsunade's eyes were wet. She's crying, she thought, mystified. Even I can't cry, but she's crying. Sakura had never seen her sensei cry in her life. Tsunade placed her palms against Sakura's bloody cheeks, her bloody face. The touch was burning hot.

"You're not strong enough," continued Tsunade in a pained whisper. "Do you understand, Sakura?"

There was a long pause as Tsunade stared into her apprentice's eyes. "Give it to me."

Sakura did not understand.

"Your forehead protector. Give it to me."

"What?"

"From this moment on, I am relieving you of your duties. You are no longer a ninja."

Sakura was dazed. "Tsunade-sensei…why…?"

"Because many fine shinobi are dead, but you are still alive. Because of this." Senju Tsunade gestured to the comatose body of Sarutobi Asuma lying in the operating room. Her voice was full of grief, of fear and torment. "Because I don't want this to happen to you, too. Sakura… please."

For a very long moment Sakura did not move. Then she slowly untied her forehead protector and handed it to her sensei. The metal protector plate was cold in her hands. Her hands shook.

The Hokage accepted the forehead protector in silence. Behind her sensei, Sakura saw her own reflection in the polished metal walls of the operating room, like a looking glass. Sakura could not help but stare at it. She saw a girl who was covered head to toe in dried red blood, except that there was a white band of clean skin across the girl's forehead. The girl brought a hand up to touch the band and she wondered why it was clean.
The dream always ended the same, but each time she never remembered. The sickle moon hangs high in the sky, pale as white porcelain. Snow carpets the forest in heaps and drifts, and the trees are a skeletal tangle of naked lungs, their mouths thrust under the snow, holding their breath so as not to wake the sleeping earth too soon. Everything is so still and silent. Even the little bubbling brook is frozen, and the wooden bridge over it deserted, except for her and him.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" she says. "I never noticed before."

"No. You're a spring girl," he says.

She laughs. "And what season are you, Uchiha Sasuke?"

He doesn't say anything, but draws her close. His breath is hot on her face and his tongue tastes like fire. But the kiss ends. Then he is once more distant, cold as he has been this whole night. In her arms he seems to tremble and shake. He looks past her, staring at something she cannot see.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

He pauses. "You can't come with me," he says.

"Come where?"

Suddenly he pulls away, turns his back to her. Only then does she notice the knapsack strapped there. His voice is hard. "Don't you get it? I'm different from you. There's something… something I have to do…"

Finally she understands. How stupid she is, that it takes her this long. "The White Snake… you can't. That's treason!"

"Good," he says.

"And me? Us? You damn liar! You said—"

He turns. His eyes are as dark as the night woods. "I didn't lie."

"Don't leave," she says, desperate, pleading. "I won't let you!"

She rushes at him with balled fists. But he catches her up easily. She's so weak and helpless. All she can do is cry. Through a haze of blurry tears she sees him smile softly one last time. Then something hard strikes the back of her neck.

"Forget me, Sakura," he whispers—

"No!" the girl screamed, bolting up in her bed. For a moment she could not figure out where she was. Then she remembered. Groaning, she wiped the sweat off her face with a bed sheet and tried to calm herself. Sasuke had been gone for four months. Four months of this nightmare.

"Saaakuraaaa," a little voice moaned from the other side of the room. "You woke me up! Again." A small ball of hot pink hair and skinny limbs surfaced from beneath dolphin-print bed covers, rubbing her eyes and yawning. Her little sister, Kyoki.

"It's time for you to get up, anyway," Sakura said.
"No, it's Saturday," Kyoki said, impossibly indignant, brows furrowed with all the might she could muster.

Sakura couldn't help but laugh. "Okay, I'm sorry." This apology obtained, the little pouter immediately dove back under the covers. Only a tuft of pink hair could still be seen poking out from under them.

Sakura hadn't gone to sleep until very late last night, but somehow she didn't feel tired now. She got dressed quickly, taking care not to disturb her sister. Nothing special, just jeans and a top. Sunlight shone through the curtains draped across the window. She could faintly hear the blacksmith across the street banging on his anvils, the bustle of people in and out along the dirt and cobblestone paths. Then she went to the bathroom sink to wash her face.

After washing Sakura went out of the bathroom into the room that doubled as the kitchen and living room of their three-room apartment. The white paint was peeling on the walls and the smell of mold was everywhere, but for the most part they kept it as clean as they could.

Her mother was already up, sitting at the kitchen table, working through receipts and expense bills. Her brow was creased beneath thick eyeglasses, her black hair prematurely streaked gray, looking like just what she was: an exhausted, overworked librarian. When she saw her, Haruno Umeka smiled wanly. "Good morning, Sakura."

"Hey, mom." She sat down at the small table and began stuffing down a breakfast bun.

Her mother hesitated, then ventured, "How are you?"

"Fine."

"Good, that's good." She paused for a while. Then she said, "Is there anything you want to talk about?"

Sakura looked up. Her mother looked very bad, even worse than usual. Pale and thin, like porcelain. For a moment she was sorry for her. "No," she said.

"I mean… you've been hanging around here at home so much, ever since you came back from that mission—"

"I'm fine," she said.

"Well… I'm always here if you need me."

Without answering Sakura turned back to her breakfast. She hadn't told her mother anything yet. It would all come out eventually, she knew, and sooner rather than later. It was stupid, the silence. She just didn't want to be the person to break the news. My father was one of Konoha's greatest shinobi, and his daughter never made it past the rank of genin.

Kyoki came scampering into the kitchen, a jumping, spunky little girl of eight, strands of long pink hair flying everywhere, large forest green eyes wide with life. "Sakura woke me up again!" she announced, almost gleefully. "Now I can't sleep!"

Sakura picked her up. Kyoki squealed, laughing, resisting her, but soon she had the little creature nestled tight in her arms. "Kyoki, you big fat munchkin. What are you gonna do, sleep till sunset? Come on, let your big sis take you for a walk, okay?"

"Okay!" Kyoki cheered. "I wanna go to the Steam Gardens!"
"Only if you be good."

Kyoki frowned at this, brows furrowing with suspicion. Cautiously she asked, "What's being good?"

"Drinking your milk."

"Aww! No way!" The little girl pouted, but Sakura stood her ground. That was the key with Kyoki. You had to make sure not to indulge her or she would run right over you. Their mother got up and poured a glass for her, watching on silently. After some loud protest Kyoki ended up downing the whole glass of milk in one gulp. She stuck her tongue out in disgust but recovered quickly. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and said, very seriously, "Okay! Let's go!"

"Okay," Sakura laughed.

"Don't come back too late," their mother said. "Tomorrow, you know… your father…"

"I know," Sakura said.

They unlocked the bolts on the steel front door and ventured out into the streets of Konohagakure. The Village Hidden in the Leaves. Her family's apartment was toward the back of a side street, facing a blacksmith's shop. The blacksmith clanged away into the night, which was annoying, but the rent was cheap, and during the winter they could borrow unused coal from the blacksmith to heat their home for free.

Sakura and Kyoki walked hand in hand, Kyoki happily swinging her limbs this way and that. Here, on the outskirts, away from the administrative districts and the main thoroughfares, the village was more haphazard, run-down and even soiled. They walked down winding dirt streets crowded with peddlers, newspaper boys ringing bells, big-boned women calling out prices for their buns and noodles from streetside stalls, old shamans who claimed to read your life's story in your palm. The morning was an immense noise and tumult, a sea of people on foot and bicycles and rickshaws and the occasional horse-drawn carriage.

Once Sakura looked up and saw a ninja crouched on a rooftop. Usually sentries weren't placed so far out from the central districts, but now they were everywhere. The increased patrols were part of the precautionary measures the High Council had put in place in the aftermath of the recent terrorist invasion by Orochimaru and Akatsuki during the chūnin exam. The December 7th attack, it was called now. The signs of the attack were still visible everywhere. Exploded streets, knocked-in houses, uprooted trees that littered the side of the road. And the more subtle signs, too, the way people walked more cautiously, the way their eyes moved and the way they clutched their children closer. Konoha was their home, and Akatsuki had violated it. They had survived, most of them, anyway, but they hadn't forgotten.

They grieved instead. And in their grief, their anger, the people of Konoha had resolved to make their home safe once again. The symbol of their resolution was everywhere, drawn on the advertisements, the posters plastered on every building and street corner. The symbol was a five-pointed white star within a blue pentagon. Each point of the star represented one of the five greater countries of the world: Fire, Water, Lightning, Earth, and Wind, and the center of the star represented the collective humanity which joined them to each other. Above the symbol there were only five words:

THE UNITED COUNTRIES. NEVER AGAIN.

The United Countries. The first international political organization, dedicated to the aim of maintaining world peace and facilitating understanding between different peoples. Its establishment
was the signature policy initiative of the Fifth Hokage. The Hokage had promised that the United Countries would be a vehicle to unite the power of the world against Akatsuki and other transnational threats. She had promised that it was the only way to truly ensure the security of Konoha in an increasing interconnected and interdependent world. The people of the village believed her.

But others did not. The other ninja villages, for example. They were suspicious of Konoha's intentions and greedy to seize a comparative advantage in the wake of Konoha's catastrophic decline in strength. Thus far, no country except the Fire Country supported the Hokage's project. So there would be an Embassy—the United Countries Embassy. A diplomatic mission from Konoha to the other ninja villages, including Suna and Iwa, where the next chuunin exam would be held, to try to convince them to join the United Countries. The Fifth would lead the Embassy personally. If all went as hoped, at least three of the five greater countries would sign the United Countries charter at the conclusion of the Iwa chuunin exam in the Earth Country.

_Never again._

Sakura had believed in her teacher's vision of world peace. She had dreamed of going on the United Countries Embassy, dreamed of going to Iwa and being there as the system of the world was reshaped. She had dreamed of fighting in the chuunin exam. Now…


"I know that, you munchkin." Sakura tousled Kyoki's hair playfully. "Come on. Let's go visit someone first."

Sakura and Kyoki entered one of the main thoroughfares, a broad brick avenue bustling with well-dressed people and lined with modern shops. Here the road led directly to Hashirama Square, with the backdrop of Hokage Mountain behind it. The huge stone-carved faces of the Hokages on the mountain loomed out over the village. Sakura stared at them. There were four men, the previous four Hokages. The fifth face, half-complete and still cased by construction scaffolding, was of Senju Tsunade. They had finished her lower face, including a chin and lips and half a nose, but the upper face was still a mass of undefined rock. The sculptors would do the eyes last.

On the street, they stopped beneath a flower shop with the name "BLOSSOMS." Sakura hesitated for an instant, unsure whether to go in. But Kyoki ran in before she could stop her.

In the shop a girl dressed in an apron emblazoned with the store logo was manning the counter. When she saw Sakura she gave a little yelp. "Where have you been?" she cried. Then she bounded behind from the desk to give Sakura a big, tight hug.

"Hey, Ino," Sakura managed as they hugged.

Leaving Kyoki to play around with the flowers bouquets, the two girls started talking. "I'm sorry about the mission," Sakura said. "It was my fault."

Ino tossed her head as was her habit, the long ponytail swishing. "Don't worry about it. They say Asuma-sama's gonna wake up any day now, good as new. Uh, you know, stuff happens…" She didn't seem to want to pursue that line of thought further, so then she just said, smiling cheerfully, "We're still best friends forever."

"Thanks."
"So where've you been? I must have left you, like, twenty messages. I was just going to go find you…"

"Sorry. I just had to—think things over for a while."

"No wonder you're so pale. You need some sunshine, you cactus!" Ino laughed, squeezing Sakura's hand. "Let's take a walk, how about it? I can't stand this place, anyway. You're just the excuse I need to take the day off." She giggled.

Ino immediately closed the flower shop and joined her and Kyoki. They walked down the avenue through Hashirama Square. The Square was still half-destroyed, littered with the scars of the battle that had raged between Konoha ninjas and the Akatsuki terrorists and their sand-nin dupes. Huge chunks of it were still roped off for repair work. But behind the Square they could see the canopies of a large forest park, set against Hokage Mountain, untouched by the Akatsuki attack.

Entering the park was like passing from one world to the next. There was a sudden quiet; a stillness that was almost incomprehensible given the noise and bustle in Hashirama Square. For this was the spot around which the Founders had built up all of Konoha: the site of a large hydrothermal vent, bubbling up into a chain of boiling hot springs. The Founders had tapped the vent, piping the steam to power turbines that were the primary energy source of the village. But they kept much of the hot springs, designed it into a park, a place where the villagers could go to escape the violence outside, where they would feel safe.

The Steam Gardens. The beating heart of the Village Hidden in the Leaves.

The three of them spent all day wandering through the Steam Gardens. They clambered up the roots of massive, twenty-story tall trees that grew out of the billowing, steaming hot springs itself. They slid down mossy, knotted walkways that hung suspended from trunk hollows lined with bursting flowers. They splashed through pools of condensed steam that dripped down from nests of dark leaves like rain. It was the longest time any of them had spent together for months, since before the Konoha chuunin exam. Kyoki ran this way and that, yelling, panting, flushing, out of breath. Ino clung to Sakura's arm and babbled pleasantly about nothing, boys, flowers, customers, parents, shopping.

"Sakura!" Kyoki said. "I wanna go to the Firefly Nest!"

"Okay," Sakura said.

The Firefly Nest was Kyoki's favorite place in the Steam Gardens. It hung over a twisting wood platform that grew out between a ring of massive trees, about three stories in the air. The trees formed a dense weave of tangled branches overhead, so thick no sunlight could get through. But there was still light. This was because around the platform swarmed an incalculably enormous number of fireflies. The fireflies glowed like a hundred thousand little yellow-red lanterns, or stars, or constellations, winking in and out, circling the dark sky. Kyoki laughed and shrieked, running through the firefly swarms, chasing them with grasping fingers. Sakura sat on a stone bench and watched her sister.

Suddenly there was a very loud shout above them. Sakura looked up. A boy jumped from the tree canopy into the cloud of fireflies. With his hands he plucked fireflies from the air at incredible speeds and stuffed them into a large glass jar he was carrying. He landed on a branch and leaped up again, zigzagging between the trees. He was a blur of movement, extremely fast, and Sakura could barely follow him. She managed to make out that he was wearing a green jumpsuit.

At last the boy did a quadruple backflip and landed on the wood platform in front of Sakura. He
bowed and then struck a pose. "Sakura-chan, your beauty is astounding! Rock Lee, the Green Flash of Konoha, will protect you with his life!"

"Wow, Lee, you're so cool!" Kyoki cried. Lee gave her a thumbs up.

"Kill me now," declared Ino.

Lee handed Sakura a jar crammed with captured fireflies. "Please allow me to present you this gift. A humble token of my love."

"Uh, thanks," Sakura said. She couldn't help but laugh at the bizarre gift. Just then Kyoki ran up to Sakura and took the jar from her big sister. The little girl twisted open the jar lid. A stream of fireflies flew out. They swarmed around Kyoki and landed on her. She squealed in delight. When she moved the fireflies scattered everywhere.

"Sorry, Sakura," someone said behind them. "Lee thinks you're still seven years old."

"Shut up, Neji!" Lee shouted. "Everybody likes fireflies."

Neji leaned against a tree, arms folded. His huge white pupils stared at them, unreadable, disturbingly blank. Sakura felt a sudden urge to look away. "Sakura," he said. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

"Of course she's fine!" Ino said. "Well, if there weren't a stalker following her around everywhere."

"I'm not a stalker! I'm training!" said Lee. "I come to the Steam Gardens every day to train my taijutsu reflexes. You just happened to show up. It's a coincidence!"

"Oh, right," Ino said. She swished her ponytail. "Training. Your way of the ninja. How could I forget."

Lee was oblivious. "I'm so excited! The Iwa chuunin exam's starting in less than two months. Gai-sensei says that we're going with the UC Embassy to Iwa! I'm going to train constantly. I'm going to work harder than I ever worked before. And I will become a chuunin! That is my ninja way!" The words came out in a torrent of enthusiasm, and he pumped his fist.

Just then an idea occurred to Lee. He looked at Sakura happily. "Hey, Sakura-chan. Since we're both going on the Embassy, maybe we can train together!"

"No, you leave her alone," said Ino. "You're creepy, do you know that? Here's some advice. Next time you think of a gift? Give a girl something that's not totally disgusting!"

"I—what—" Lee sputtered.

"It's okay, Lee, I like your gift," Sakura lied. The words slipped out of her without a second thought. "Besides, I'm not going on the UC Embassy."

Rock Lee blinked.

Ino frowned. "What do you mean? You're on Team Asuma for the chuunin exam, with me and Chouji. You've got to go."

"I'm sure the Fifth will assign you a new teammate. I… can't go." Once she had already started, there was no reason to hold back the truth. "I can't take the chuunin exam because I'm not a ninja anymore. The Hokage took away my forehead protector."
Everyone stared at her.

"You're joking, right?" asked Neji after a long silence.

"No."

"Well, why the hell would she do that?" demanded Ino in an angry outburst. "Don't tell me that old hag blames you for the mission!"

Sakura felt good that her best friend would rally to her defense. Still, it did not change the reality of the situation. "Tsunade-sensei doesn't blame me." You're not strong enough. Sakura could almost feel the blood still on her hands, the thick hot blood that gushed from Pug's exploded body. "But I... disobeyed Asuma-sama's orders. Pug died because of that, and Asuma-sama almost died, too. Tsunade-sensei said, if I went on like this, I would just get someone else killed. Or myself. And she's not wrong."

"She's totally wrong!" protested Rock Lee in shock. "You're a great kunoichi, Sakura!"

Sakura was about to answer when another voice interrupted. "Ino! Sakura!" A pudgy leaf-nin was running up the platform of the Firefly Nest. Chouji. The boy had been running so hard that he doubled over just to catch his breath. Yet a smile lit up Chouji's face. "I just came from the hospital!"

"What is it?" asked Ino.

"It's Asuma-sama! He's woken up!"
Sakura was not sure what to expect when she walked into the hospital room. Would Asuma-sama be angry with her? Would he be fully awake, fully rational? The Bakudan blast he'd taken had brought him so close to death that it was miracle he'd survived at all. Brain trauma or injury would not be unexpected.

She would never have guessed the truth.

The decorated shinobi Sarutobi Asuma, sensei of Team 10, was, of all things…

… reading a pornographic novel.

The latest edition of the Icha Icha series had just come out. It must have been pretty good, because Asuma was giggling like a schoolgirl gossip as he flipped through the pages. Evidently he was well on his way to making a full recovery in all respects. Asuma rubbed the back of his head when he saw Sakura enter, looking much embarrassed—his face had turned beet red. "Ah, Sakura. You caught me."

"I'm just glad you're alive to be read dirty books." She sat down by the bed and bowed her head. "Thank you, Asuma-sama. For saving my life."

"Tsunade would be angry with me if I didn't. I made that mistake once and, well, it was… unpleasant." He grinned. "Thank you for saving my life."

Sakura nodded. She'd let Ino and Chouji pay their respects to their sensei first, wanting to have a private conversation with Asuma. There were certain things she needed to discuss.

Questions that only Asuma could answer.

"Do you… know about what happened?"

"Tsunade debriefed me earlier today." Sarutobi Asuma suddenly grew very serious. He even leaned up in his hospital bed, grimacing as he did so. The leaf-nin jounin was dressed in a white hospital gown, bandages still covering most of his body. It might be a week or two before he left the hospital. "Sakura. Can I ask you a question? You must tell me the truth now."

She braced herself for a withering critique. "Of course."

"You won't tell Kurenai about my Icha Icha books, will you?"

The absurd gravity of Asuma's question caused Sakura to burst into giggling laughter. "No!"

"That's good. Because if you did, I would, of course, have to break off all contact with you forever." Asuma grinned, scratching at his beard. "That would be an unforgivable offense. All other things, I can forgive."

There was something in that last sentence—a shift in the tone. Sakura caught it, but she did not quite understand it. There's something he's not telling me. Sakura could see it in his downcast glances; in the way his smile did not quite reach his eyes. Asuma-sama is hiding his grief behind a smile.

But why?

"Asuma-sama… the Hokage, she—"
"I know. She is being a fool."

"I disobeyed your direct orders."

"You did." Asuma's eyes flashed. "I ordered all three of you to stay back because there was no way to know how dangerous the situation was, what kind of enemies we faced. You came running in anyway... and what's worse, you dragged Ino and Chouji along with you. Ino and Chouji! What were you thinking, Sakura? We're supposed to protect the sheep from the lion's den, not throw them into it. If you are to be a chuunin, you must understand what it means to lead. To think before you act."

"I'm sorry."

Asuma sighed. "You deserve a demerit for disobeying orders in this situation. I might even dock your pay. Yet there was no reason for the Hokage to suspend you. I don't know what Tsunade is thinking."

Sakura shook her head. "People died because of what I did."

"That's not true. Did you blow up Honjo Laboratory? Did you attack Konoha? Nobody died because of you. It wasn't you... it was them." Asuma's voice darkened. "Tell me, Sakura. Do you know who attacked Honjo Laboratory?"

"Akatsuki. Zetsu, that freaky plant-thing. He said he was the Akatsuki second-in-command." She paused. "And—"

"You hesitate."

"The other three shinobi who attacked us—the masked ones. I... don't think they were part of Akatsuki."

"You're right." Asuma was truly serious now. "And did you recognize the jutsu they used?"

Sakura knew. Of course she knew it. The sudden explosion from out of nowhere, the golden steam that lingered after the explosion, the wave of heat. There was only one jutsu that could do something like that. One of the most infamous and deadly techniques in the ninja world. "It was Bakudan," she said. "One of the bloodline techniques of the Enshogan."

The Enshogan.

*The Heat Seeing Eye.*

The Enshogan was one of the three great doujutsu of the world, along with the Sharingan and the Byakugan. It was the bloodline power of the Sougon clan of Iwagakure, the village hidden in the stones. Those Sougon who possessed the Enshogan eye had the power to see heat itself, the power to control the heat around them.

Of all the jutsu granted by the Enshogan, one of them was especially infamous. A jutsu which allowed the Enshogan user to so rapidly raise the temperature of a chosen target that all the target's molecules were ripped apart at once. The ultimate assassination jutsu, Bakudan. It was nearly instantaneous, uncounterable, requiring only the user to be within visual range of the target. There was no possible defense except to be fast enough to dodge, or to evade the explosion in the first place. Sakura had been too slow.

The ANBU Pug had been too slow.
"Yes. The Enshogan of the Sougon clan. And have you wondered why three members of such an illustrious clan might be in cahoots with Akatsuki?"

"They broke into Konoha's most secure research facility. They stole that crystal thing." Sakura remembered the way the crystal glowed in the metal suitcase, shimmering and pulsing, like a seething heart. "That was obviously the objective of the mission."

"And who sent them?"

Sakura hesitated. She was edging into dangerous territory now, she knew. "Well… the Sougon ninjas were masked. That means they didn't want their identities to be known. I mean, it's obvious which clan they're from… but we can't prove it. So whoever sent them can have plausible deniability. Someone who really wanted to steal the crystal, but didn't want to start an official war."

"Who?" Asuma pressed.

"Sougon Sawar the Sun Breaker." She paused. "Sawar is the head of the Sougon clan… and the Fourth Tsuchikage."

"The leader of Iwa. A bold accusation, Sakura. No doubt Sawar would deny it." Asuma scratched his beard again. "Yet I fear you are right. It was no accident that these Sougon showed up now, right when Konoha is preparing to go to Iwa for the chuunin exam. The Tsuchikage wanted to send a message. And he sent his most powerful clan members to deliver it."

"Who were they?" Sakura asked.

"Two of them I don't know. But the one you fought… he was very strong. An S-rank ninja." Asuma frowned. "There are only four ninjas in the Sougon clan considered S-rank ninjas. The Fourth Tsuchikage himself, of course. His two younger brothers. And his son. A genin boy, only a few years older than you."

"How can a genin be S-rank?" That was the same rank as Tsunade-sensei herself.

"It's not unheard of. Gaara was nearly an S-rank ninja during the Konoha chuunin exam, and now he is the Kazekage. The Tsuchikage's son, Sosano, called the Prince of Dawn, is a prodigy genius. Like Gaara, he was held back from promotion for political reasons—to save his strength for the most competitive and prestigious chuunin exams, like this one. But was it Sosano who attacked us? No. I've fought our attacker before, and I know him."

"One of the Tsuchikage's brothers?"

"Yes, Sougon Charasu. He is utterly loyal to his brother Sawar, an experienced commander and leader. Charasu of the Inferno, he's called, for his mastery of the destructive power of the Enshogan. There was a rumor recently that Charasu had fallen ill… that he could no longer fight. It appears that his illness was actually just a cover for the real mission."

*So it was Sougon Charasu that killed Pug.*

And the Tsuchikage that was ultimately responsible for his death.

Sakura felt a chill go through her.

"But why?" she asked. "I don't understand. Iwa and Konoha are at peace. We even want to be allies… that's what the United Countries Embassy is all about. So why did the Tsuchikage attack us? And what was that crystal thing he was trying to steal?"
"Ah. That's… complicated." Sarutobi Asuma shook his head. "You must ask Tsunade."

Sakura had not seen the Hokage since their encounter in the bowels of Konoha's hospital three days ago. She still remembered her sensei's tears… her pained face as she took Sakura's forehead protector. *Tsunade-sensei doesn't want me to die, she wants to protect me. Was that so wrong?* Sakura had gotten Pug killed because of a stupid mistake.

Because she thought she was stronger than she was.

"What's the point?" Sakura asked. She could not keep the bitterness from her voice. "What's the point of any of this? So what if I know that Sougon Charasu killed Pug? I can't do anything about it. I'm not even a ninja anymore."

"Tsunade suspended you from active duty. You are still a shinobi by rank."

"Oh, that's helpful."

"Believe me, Sakura, this is only a temporary situation. The High Council is already breathing down Tsunade's neck about it. Ask Tsunade to give you a second chance. Konoha is already stretched past the breaking point between the December 7th attack and all the resources being diverted to the UC Embassy. We badly need more strong shinobi. She can't refuse you, Sakura. You can still be a ninja."

*I can still be a ninja.*

Sakura did not speak for a long moment. "And what if I don't want to be, Asuma-sama?"

She turned to go.

"Wait," said the Leaf jounin. "You can't just quit now."

"Why can't I?"

"You made a mistake on the mission. That mistake will be with you for the rest of your life. As it is with mine. As it with the life of every shinobi in this village. You aren't the first. If the Founders had given up every time they made a mistake Konoha wouldn't even exist. Sakura… you can't just run away now. Not at the very moment Konoha needs you the most." Asuma's voice had a deadly edge to it, sharp with grief. "Sakura… don't make me regret it when I saved your life."

Then, suddenly, she knew.

She knew what Sarutobi Asuma was hiding.

"Who was he?" Sakura blurted out.

Asuma stared at her.

"Pug… the ANBU boy who died in the Forest of Death. Who was he?"

Sarutobi Asuma paused. The Leaf jounin considered her for a long moment before answering. Then he said, softly, "He was my little brother."

*His brother.*

Sakura felt sick to her soul.
I killed Asuma-sama's brother.
The First Lesson

Madara military cemetery had originally been built on the outskirts of the village. But Konoha had grown, and the village had swallowed up the cemetery, surrounded it on all sides by buildings and traffic. And the cemetery itself had grown, too. The original planners had not known there would be so many dead. It was a vast expanse, walled in by rows of trees and vine-tangled walls, and lined with rows of white marble headstones. Here were buried all those who had died in the line of battle, along with their families. Many of they were new—the dead from the recent Akatsuki invasion, the December 7th attack.

One was the newest of all.

Sakura found the gravestone without much difficulty, even in the foggy gray of the afternoon. There had been a big funeral, days before, for all the shinobi that had died in the attack on Honjo Laboratory, and the dirt was still fresh. The Hokage herself had given the eulogy. It had been a fine, touching speech. Senju Tsunade was quite good at giving speeches.

A few words were carved into the white marble stone. They read:

Here lies
Beloved son, brother, soldier
SARUTOBI SAISEN
"Pug"
A.N.B.U. Lieutenant
June 4th, 506 – May 4th, 526

He had been 19. Already an ANBU ninja, already part of the elite Squad 1 team led by Captain Yamato. Unheard of at that age—a ninja prodigy. Sakura could only see his blown-apart body, bright blue eyes that stared out blankly out of a face that seemed as young as her own.

Saisen. So that was his name. A member of the Sarutobi Clan—Asuma's little brother.

At least until Sakura had got him killed.

Sakura had met Pug a few times in his capacity as an ANBU, but they'd never really talked, and she'd never known him in his daily life. I wish I had. "Pug, we called him," Asuma had told her, "because of his pug nose, and because he loved dogs. Dogs were always his favorite animals. Pug… you know, he had a rough childhood. I wasn't there for him, and my father… well, my father could be a cruel man. But Pug always had his dogs. I made up the nickname to make fun of him, but Pug made it his own. Even made it his ANBU callsign." She could hear the pain in Asuma's voice. "Dogs love unconditionally, and Pug was like that, too. We weren't the closest of brothers as children… but he loved me anyway. Pug loved everything about life. I wish we could have had more time together."

Suddenly Sakura remembered a set of different words, a different time.

The memory asserted itself powerfully. Snow still covered the village, sparkling sharply in the morning light, packed deep on the ground. That day she walked up the steps of the mountain to the Office of the Hokage. For hours she waited before she was shown into a room. Behind a desk the Fifth Hokage reclined in her armchair in a green kimono, her hands laced together before her.

"Please!" Sakura said forcefully, with all the confidence she could muster. "Make me your
apprentice!"

"And why, girl, would I do something like that?"

It burst out of her in a torrent of words. "Because I don't want to rely on other people's strength anymore. Because I want to protect the people I love. Please, Hokage-sama… just give me the chance. I won't let you down. I promise."

Senju Tsunade leaned back, clicking her fingernails together. She stared at Sakura. Her dark brown eyes gleamed—and Sakura could not see what lay behind them.

"Fool," she said. "Don't make promises you can't keep. Let that be your first lesson… as my student…"

The first lesson.

She had forgotten. Or maybe it was that she had never learned it, not really. What a stupid promise.

She stared at Pug's gravestone for a long time, until it was sunset and the tomb gleamed ashen against the red-orange light.

Just then a little munchkin burst out running from the cemetery gates and hugged her waist, squealing. Kyoki. Sakura turned, putting her hand on Kyoki's head. Their mother followed behind Kyoki, stepping slowly along gray flint paths, carrying a bouquet of pink roses.

They had come for their family's weekly pilgrimage to her father's grave.

"Who's that?" Kyoki asked, looking at the tombstone.

"A ninja," Sakura said.

"How'd he die?"

"He was killed."

Kyoki was going to ask more, but their mother shushed the girl, which was unusual behavior for Haruno Umeka. Her mother looked almost determined.

Her father was buried far from Sarutobi Saisen.

Sakura and her family headed for the original center of the cemetery. This was the place reserved for eminent personages, for high-ranking and celebrated ninjas. Sakura's father was eminent indeed, a legend whose name was as great as the Sannin. To her, though, he was just a large, jolly man, with a booming laugh and strong arms. He lifted her up in the air, laughing as he pressed the folds of his scratchy red beard to her face, smelling of lavender soap and safety, sanctuary and strength. "Don't do that, daddy!" she squealed, trying to get away from his beard, helpless in his gentle grip. The man laughed, his voice booming. "Come, little blossom. Won't you give you father a goodbye kiss?"

Like all the graves it was a simple one, just one white headstone. It read:

HARUNO ARASHI
Jounin Captain
"The Demonslayer"
April 27, 487 – July 23, 518

Her mother laid the bouquet of roses at the foot of the grave. Then the three of them bent down to the
floor and prayed to their father's spirit, for guidance, for wisdom. Sakura remembered the first time they had been here: that was a foggy day, too, though there were a lot more people. It had been a grand funeral. The Third Hokage himself had attended and given a little speech. Her mother was there, holding baby Kyoki in her arms, who didn't understand what was going on. Sakura remembered going forward to touch the gleaming wooden casket with her hand: it had been cold and smooth, not like her daddy's warm face, his scratchy beard. It would the closest she would ever get to that again. *How could you do this, daddy?* was all she could think. *How could you do this to me?* But he was gone and not all the tears or the prayers in the world would bring him back. She knew that now.

That was the first lesson.

After a while, their mother called Kyoki over to her and told her to go play elsewhere in the cemetery, and that she wanted to talk to Sakura alone.

"What?" asked Sakura.

"Sakura… I know about what happened. The Hokage came and told me three days ago."

"You knew?"

"I thought you were going to tell me yourself. I wanted to give you some time."

For a moment Sakura couldn't face her mother. She looked away, face burning. They didn't say anything for a while. Then her mother ventured again, "Please, Sakura. How did this happen? This isn't like you. Your father—"

Sakura exploded suddenly. "Always dad! Your father this, your father that. He's dead, mom! When're you gonna figure that out?"

Another long silence.

Sakura glued her eyes to her father's gravestone. Finally she said, "Sorry. I didn't mean that. Really."

It didn't help. Her mom seemed so insubstantial then, so small. Like Sakura could blow on her and she would disappear, like pieces of paper held together with watery glue. Haruno Umeka used to be beautiful, once. Now she was just a shell of her former self. The gray hair, the gaunt face, the pale lips and drab clothes. Not a living person but a ghost.

Haruno Umeka's lips moved, but no words came out. "Is this why you don't tell me anything?" she managed to say. "Sakura… I'm sorry. It's so hard for me to understand you. I just want you to be happy."

"I know, mom."

"Sakura…" Her mother embraced Sakura again, hugging her tightly. "I… I don't really understand what happened. But I know that you always did your best. I have faith in you." Her mother hesitated again, then continued. "And I… I know your father would too. Whatever happens… he would be proud."

She felt the tears sting her cheeks at last, warm and salty. "Thanks, mom."

Kyoki came running back. "I want a hug, too!" she exclaimed, blissfully innocent. Mom picked her up and the three of them had a wonderfully nice group hug. The hug went on for a quite a long while. When they broke apart it was already growing dark.
Hand in hand, with Kyoki in between them, the Haruno family started for home.
Sakura climbed the steps leading up to Hokage Mountain uneasily. The stone faces of the five Hokages loomed up over her. She tried not to look at them. Instead she remembered Asuma's advice: "Ask Tsunade to give you a second chance. Konoha is already stretched past the breaking point between the December 7th attack and all the resources being diverted to the UC Embassy. We badly need more strong shinobi. She can't refuse you..."

The Hokage's two assistants, Izumo and Kotetsu, let her into the Hokage Tower immediately. Sakura walked into the circular building and down a long hallway. Unexpectedly there was a squeal from behind her. A small, fat pink pig with stubby legs rushed across the tiled floor toward Sakura. She stretched out her arms to welcome the pig.

"Tonton!" Sakura said, laughing. "I missed you!"

Tonton squealed, delighting in Sakura's embrace, burrowing her soft snout into the girl's chest. Sakura tickled her and she squealed, her little paws milling in the air. The pig missed her, too, at least.

Abruptly Tonton jumped out of Sakura's arms. The pig ran down the hallway to the room at the end, snorted, and slipped inside through the ajar oaken doors. Damn pig, Sakura thought, staring at the doors. Gone in to your master, huh?

And then she walked through the heavy oak doors into the Hokage's office.

The circular office was empty except for a large desk of gleaming dark wood, set against huge vaulting windows that opened into a panorama of Konoha stretching away from Hokage Mountain below. Senju Tsunade the Fifth Hokage was sitting behind the desk, posture perfect, elbows on the desk, hands clasped before her, dressed in her formal white robes. Tonton had jumped on her desk and curled up there next to her master.

The Hokage did not seem surprised in the least by Sakura's presence. "Sakura. I know why you're here. The answer is no."

Sakura swallowed. "Tsunade-sensei... please. Give me another chance."

"No."

"Everyone makes mistakes."

"It is not about the mistakes you made during the attack on Honjo Laboratory. It is about the future of your own life. Sakura... believe me, this is for your own good."

"Tsunade-sensei... you trained me for four months—"

"And what did I teach you? Did I teach you how to blow people up, or did I teach you the healing arts? How to save lives? There are as many different kinds of strength as there are branches on a tree. It is only a fool who thinks that violence is the only answer. There are far better ways for a young woman of your talents to contribute to the village."

"How?"

The Hokage handed Sakura a folder. "I've talked with Dr. Micho. He has connections across the
medical world. We've arranged for you to go to Ashwarren, enter medical school there on a full scholarship, and then return to Konoha as a civilian doctor. Here is the acceptance letter. Or, if you wish, I can continue to train you as a non-combat medic-nin. You will retain your rank and commission, but you will not be sent out into the field. Dr. Michio himself is retired from combat. Michio employs his skills to save lives… he does not run around slaughtering people like some two-bit mercenary. I believe this is the right path for you as well."

It was a generous offer. Sakura saw the wisdom of the Hokage's words. She saw it… but she could not accept it.

"Being a ninja is my whole life."

"But why? Is it because of your father? Haruno Arashi the Demonslayer was one of Konoha's greatest shinobi, and my friend. But he is dead. You must forge your own path."

"It's not my father."

"Then who is it? Is it Sasuke?"

"No. It's about—" Sakura hesitated. When she looked at her hands, she could still see the blood. Pug's decapitated head cradled against her chest, his burned, blank face. "It's about making up for what did."

"A poor reason to throw your life away. I know what you wish to ask of me. You want to go on the UC Embassy, take the Iwa chuunin exam, and prove your strength. You are a damned fool, Sakura. Iwagakure is a place unlike anywhere you have been before. You are not prepared."

"I've been on dangerous missions before," Sakura said stubbornly. "Death is part of being a shinobi. You know that more than anyone. Why won't you let me make this choice… the same choice you're giving everyone else? I freely risk my own life."

"You don't have any idea of the risk. There are far worse things that can happen than just your own death."

"I don't want to be just some kind of civilian doctor!"

"Then what, exactly, girl, do you want?"

All of a sudden Sakura was breathing hard. Her fists were clenched so tightly the nails dug into her palms. Tsunade-sensei was her teacher, her most trusted counselor. Why was she making this hard, damn it? It's not fair.

"I just want a chance… to make up for what I did," said Sakura. "I just want the same chance… that you gave yourself."

The Hokage's eyes gleamed dangerously. "Evidently my advice falls on deaf ears."

"Tsunade-sensei… you're a hypocrite. I know what happened at the end of the Third Ninja War. I know your brother and your fiancé died, so you ran away from the village. You want to say I'm too weak? That's you! I know—"

"You know nothing."

"—you left the village for sixteen years because you were too weak. The war had screwed with you, you couldn't handle it! You were a coward. I screwed up, but I'm not a coward. I never ran away
from anything—"
"Fool," said Senju Tsunade.

FOOL.

The word echoed and echoed in her mind… a genjutsu! Sakura made the move to dispel the genjutsu, but nothing happened. That was impossible. She could partly break even S-rank genjutsu. Unless it was…

_Torment!

The ultimate genjutsu. The jutsu that drew from the power of Shinigami itself, that attacked the victim's very soul.

The jutsu of insanity—

Sakura's vision cracked apart like glass, shattered into a million pieces. She was falling into an endless black void—

Suddenly the girl found herself standing on a lake in a cold, gray dawn sky. Through the thick haze of fog she could barely see distant mountain peaks. Where was she? What was she doing here? She had been doing something… couldn't remember. Was this a dream? There was a horrible smell, a nauseating stench that made her gag and reel. She stumbled to her knees, feeling sick. Then she realized where the smell was coming from.

Floating in the water of that lake, everywhere, were layers and layers of cold corpses. They were packed together like sardines, and the water was red with their blood. They had been there for some time, days at least. The stench of the decomposing bodies filled the air. Sakura stared into the blank eyes of a dead ninja, frozen stiff and rotten with maggots. His Konoha forehead protector was cracked and half-melted. And next to him, the corpse of a stone-nin… everything was totally silent. In the thick fog she could hear or see nothing. Clamping down her mouth and nose with her uniform shirt, she tried to get away from the lake, away from this massacre and slaughter. She tried not to step on any corpses, but there were so many, there was no help to it.

Suddenly the lake shook, churned, as if the earth beneath was breaking apart. In the midst of all that fog, she saw a faint red glow, a red circle upon the crimson water. A beam of light shining up out of the lake. Something about it drew her to it. She dived beneath the lake into the cold frozen water. Beneath the layer of corpses and blood and mud that clouded the surface, the lake was suddenly crystal clear, and illumined with light. The light was unnatural, a bright red radiance which flooded out of a large passage cut into the lake bottom, hundreds of meters beneath the surface.

She swam down through the water toward the passage. Finally, just when she thought her lungs were going to burst, she emerged out of the water into a chamber carved out of the bedrock, branching out into a complex warren of man-made tunnels. It was a secret base. Shivering, lungs burning, now the girl saw what the red glow was—flickering emergency lights, wailing siren shrieks. There were corpses here, too: fresher now, splayed grotesquely on the floor and walls, stabbed or sliced or crushed or blown to bits. From the trail of corpses, it was clear which way the battle had gone. She followed the trail into the tunnels.

The rock shook again, trembled. The walls splintered. Rubble and dust fell from the ceiling. What was that? What was happening? But somehow Sakura did not feel afraid and pressed on. She walked through dimly lit tunnels, past blown-apart steel vaults, into ruined barracks and across bizarre, delirious laboratories filled with whirling electronic equipment, moving deeper into the stone
earth. She knew because it was getting colder. The deeper she got, the colder it became. Her breath made hot vapor in the frozen air.

And here she began to hear the screaming. It was the screaming from a battle that was still going on. Sakura started running. Suddenly she came to it: an immense natural cave, hundreds of meters tall and even wider, a hidden cavern buried a kilometer beneath the earth. The cave was filled with ice, glittering limestone icicles that dripped from the ceiling in long daggers. And in the middle of this cavern there was a terrible thing. It was immense, frozen, a gigantic metal and flesh construct covered in ice, fed by huge, black cables that burst from the floor and which thrust deep into its chest—the thing had a chest, which seemed to breathe and heave, blinking lights and pulsing arteries and seals screeching with electric power—like a giant frozen incubator, a metal and flesh womb. The thing shrieked, as if damaged, and with each heaving the walls of the cavern cracked, the ground trembled. Beneath that frozen shell and metal crust there was something very hot, because billows of steam shuddered out of it through the hole that had blown in its side, hissing against the cave ceiling. And it bled—rivers of black blood, like oil, that poured out of the hole.

All around this terrible machine, in this frozen ice cavern, ninjas were fighting and killing and dying. Hundreds of them, teeming and swarming, attacking each other in waves, like two tides breaking on each other, and each time the water that tossed and sloshed was human blood.

"The complex is collapsing!" a woman yelled about the roar of battle. A familiar voice, like a winter reed. It seemed younger. "We have to get out!"

"Not yet!" a man with flowing white hair shouted back. "Get the crystal! The Annihilation Heart!"

No one seemed to notice Sakura. She waded into that furious din, seemed to pass through it like an invisible ghost. Confusion everywhere, chaos, shouting and screaming, smoke and lightning and fire and flashing, thundering weapons. The cavern walls were cracking apart, reams of icicles broke and stabbed down into the struggling ninjas. Everything shook wildly. The girl could barely tell what was going on. But she knew she needed to get to the machine. That was the key, that was the heart of everything.

The man with flowing white hair and the woman led a group of Konoha ninjas, slashing their way through the ranks of stone-nins to the front of the heaving machine. "The crystal!" the man shouted. Sakura saw it—glittering there, gleaming, in the center of the damaged thing, within the gaping hole ripped open in its side—the crystal, the fetus at the core of that womb. It was a seething heart, blazing white with incomprehensible heat. The Annihilation Heart. She had seen it before, somewhere, but she couldn't remember where.

Only the other woman stood in her way.

A woman with braided black hair, a woman with burning eyes. It was the most beautiful woman that Sakura had ever seen in her life. Her skin was dark as the night, but her eyes were bright as the stars, and the katana sword in her hand was glittering white, the edge so sharp it seemed to cut the very frozen air. Her face was sad and gentle, wise and proud. And Sakura knew this woman was one of the greatest shinobi that had ever lived. Seurin Shadowstar.

"I see you," Seurin said, and the whisper was a haunting echo. "So it comes to this at last. Do all our dreams have to end this way? My friends, it is not too late."

"It was always too late," said Senju Tsunade.

They came together in a clash of roaring fire—
But Sakura only had eyes for the crystal. It was right next to her, so close that it filled her entire
vision. The crystal's light was so beautiful. So pure. All she had do was reach out and grab it—

The Annihilation Heart exploded.

It was a bomb like the death of a star, a detonation of searing white light. Sakura felt her own body
dissolve in the explosion, burn away to scattered atoms. And the rest of them, the machine, the
cavern, the lake, the people, a thousand lives and souls—all burned away into nothingness in an
instant. Yet the instant lingered, replaying in a loop, over and over again. And in her hands the
Annihilation Heart seemed as if it was a burning face, an eyeless mouth. The mouth screamed.

It screamed of Torment.

Sakura screamed with it. All the pain of the world exploded into her mind, into her soul. Agony and
horror. Rage and fear and loss, despair and grief, shame and regret. Death. It was far too much for
any human being to endure. Sakura felt her soul breaking apart—erasing—dissolving into a living
hell—insanity—an endless scream—

The white light shattered into a million pieces.

The genjutsu cracked, vanished, and Haruno Sakura was on her knees on the tiled floor of the
Hokage's office.

She shuddered violently. Hot tears leaked down her cheeks, and she thought she would choke on her
own vomit. She couldn't breathe. The vision of the screaming crystal still filled her mind, more than
shock, more than a nightmare. A prophecy. One second more and she knew she would have gone
completely insane.

God... it wasn't real...

She stared at her hands for a long moment, uncomprehending. Hadn't she died in the illusion? No,
the genjutsu had ended just before. Just before her own death.

So this... this is Torment...

Torment... the ultimate genjutsu...

No one had ever survived it unless they were meant to.

Through the shock Sakura managed to wrench her neck upwards. She looked up with wide, blurred
eyes.

Senju Tsunade the Queen of Torment loomed over her. "Fool," she said. "That is what war is. That
is what this life means. Do you understand now, Sakura? You do not want it. Go be a doctor... go
and save lives, and be happy. Leave this path of torment before it's too late."

She turned away.

Sakura's voice trembled, but she forced herself to speak.

"Tsunade-sensei!"

The Hokage turned back, surprised.

Slowly, painfully, Sakura got to her feet. Then she looked her teacher in the eye, face to face. She
spoke. "Tsunade-sensei... is that the best you can do?"
The Hokage did not speak.

"I know… I disobeyed orders. It was my fault Pug died. If I could sacrifice my life to bring him back, I would… but I can't. But what if I could become stronger? And then I could… bring someone else back? To make up for what I did. Please, Tsunade-sensei. I need another chance."

The Hokage's dark eyes gleamed. They were full of something strange, something Sakura did not understand. She spoke softly.

"Is that truly what you want, Sakura?"

"Yes."

"You lie," she whispered.

As she said the words the Hokage turned away and walked back to her desk. Tonton jumped up from where she lay curled up and ran into her master's arms. The Fifth Hokage spoke.

"So be it, Sakura. I will grant you a second chance. However, I won't restore you to active duty right away. You must first prove to me that you are ready. For the purposes of the United Countries Embassy you will act as my personal servant. Your primary duty will be to take care of my pig. I trust this duty shall not be too demanding… in the meantime, prepare yourself. When the Embassy arrives at Iwa, I will test you. It will be a test of strength. If you pass my test, then you shall be reinstated as a ninja, and you shall participate in the Iwa chuunin exams. If you fail… then it's over. Do you understand?"

Sakura nodded.

The Hokage turned. She walked over to Sakura and thrust Tonton into her hands. Tonton squealed happily, rubbing her fat pink bulk against her new caretaker's stomach.

"Dismissed," said the Hokage.

Sakura walked out of the office as best she could. As soon as she turned the corner, though, she collapsed against the wall and slid to the floor. She shook all over. She couldn't breathe. All Sakura could see was a lake of corpses, and an exploding crystal, and a mouth that screamed torment. She wanted to run away but she didn't know where to go.
It was a fine spring morning when the United Countries Embassy mission left Konoha.

There was a big parade to see them off and all the villagers had come to celebrate, lining the route all the way from Hashirama Square to the main gate. Ceremonial police stood at guard and bands blasted trumpets while the hundreds of members of the Embassy marched alongside groaning horse-drawn supply wagons, waving to the gathered crowds. First came the Hokage in full dress uniform, minus the headdress, riding a gleaming white stallion like some fairy-tale queen. The villagers applauded wildly whenever she appeared, shaking little green flags, throwing fistsfuls of ticker tape. Next came the politicians and High Council members; then the soldiers: ANBU, jounin, chuunin, genin; then the priests; then the professionals, all manner of diplomats, bureaucrats, functionaries; and last the laborers and servants. It was to this last group that Sakura belonged.

At the gates, still closed, the Embassy paused and a bunch of Fire priests shuffled out and started burning incense and praying for the success and safety of the mission. Sakura took this opportunity to say goodbye to her family. Kyoki had laughed along the parade route, playing with the pig Tonton, excited by the spectacle and crowd and noise, but now she started crying and buried her face in her big sister's chest. "I'll miss you, Sakura!" she wailed.

Sakura picked up her sister and hugged her fiercely. "I'll miss you, too," she whispered.

Her mother was more composed. She handed Sakura a wrapped package, items for the trip. "Be safe," she said softly, cupping lined hands around her daughter's face.

"I'll be back soon. I promise," said Sakura.

Haruno Umeka smiled, but the joy did not quite reach her eyes. She stood with Kyoki behind the roped sidewalk then, waving as Sakura rejoined the others. Most of her friends were there: Ino and Chouji, Lee and Neji, Tenten. Famous ninjas, too, the leaders of the village clans, people like Sarutobi Inishu and Nara Shikaku. Two High Council members, Hyuuga Hiashi and Dr. Honjo Micho, Konoha's Chief of Medicine. Katou Taki the Judge. A contingent of Fire Priests led by Wakanura Chiriku. The best, the strongest of Konoha.

And her.

Sakura walked aimlessly through the Embassy luggage wagons, playing with Tonton as functionaries swarmed this way and that, barking last-minute instructions, checking and rechecking furiously. In the distance the Hokage sat on her white horse while Hatake Kakashi—Sakura's old sensei, just returned from a long mission—and some of the High Councilors conferred with her. The Fire priests were finishing up their ritual prayers. It was almost time to leave.

Just then Ino and Chouji came up to her. There was a boy with them, a genin, someone she didn't know.

"Sooo, Sakura, how do you like being the official UC Embassy pigwasher?" Ino asked, giggling. Sakura knew she said it without a second thought. *Stuff happens, right?* her best friend had told her.

Ino barreled on. "Oh, hey. This is Anake. He's going to take the chuunin exam with our team. The new Team Asuma. Since you got demoted to pigwasher and all." She leaned in close, giggling, whispering in Sakura's ear. "He's kind of cute, isn't he?"

Shimura Anake vaguely reminded her of Sasuke. She had heard of the boy. He had graduated the
year after them, a genius, number one in his class just like Sasuke. They had the same kind of dark stuck-up conceited cool look, except Anake had blue eyes and Sasuke was better at it.

"Nice to meet you," she said.

"Indeed." Anake smirked. He looked Sakura up and down. "A pity you were suspended. Otherwise I would never have had the chance of being teamed up with these two fine specimens of the ninja world. An airhead bimbo who couldn't tell a kunai from a tube of lipstick to save her life. And a gluttonous fatass who after a few weeks of tasting our meager rations on the Embassy would undoubtedly sell me to Akatsuki in exchange for a jar of jellybeans. Ah, wonderful, magnificent! Surely I shall pass the Iwa chuunin exam, the most infamous, the most horrifyingly difficult exam on earth, with these glorious comrades at my side. Thank you again for being suspended. Pardon me, I have to go kill myself now."

Anake put his hands in his pockets and walked away.

"His teammates got whacked on a mission a couple months back," Ino explained. "He's, uh, not so bad once you get to know him..."

"Are we really going to have to eat rations on the Embassy?" Chouji asked, eyes wide.

Ino laughed. "A bowl of noodles and two cans of beans per meal."

Chouji looked like his mouth was going to fall off. Mournfully he rubbed his stomach, which in response actually produced a rumble of hunger. It sounded awful. At last he cried out: "This is gonna be a really, really long summer!"

"Of that, young Akimichi, you could not be more right," a voice said behind them.

It was the Hokage. Somehow she had sidled next to them on her white horse unnoticed. Tresses of long golden hair fell in waves against her shoulders, blazing in the bright sun. In the center of her forehead gleamed a lone purple diamond, and her eyes flashed like fire-lit jewels. She was, truly, a queen. Even Sakura was taken aback by her regal beauty.

All the people in the Embassy snapped to attention when they saw her. Many knelt. "Hokage-sama," they whispered. "Hokage-sama!"

The Hokage laughed. Her laughter was like silver chimes, soft and flowing and cool. "It is time!" she called. "Open the gates."

Ninjas at either side manned the great winches, turned them. On cue trumpets blared, drums beat. A tidal wave of sound. With an enormous creaking the main gates opened, first as a slitted window, then as a dam flooding wide open. The forests of the Fire Country waited for them beyond the village walls, endless waves of green tangled trees stretching to the horizon, looming. And beyond that, their mission. The United Countries Embassy. They would travel across eight countries, half the world, to dozens of cities and seven hidden ninja villages. First across the Fire Country, to the capital Ashwarren. Then through the River, Waterfall, Grass, and Rain Countries. Into the Wind Country and Suna. And at last through the Swamp Country to the Earth Country, and to the Iwa chuunin exam.

The United Countries Embassy. The hope of the world.

"Hokage-sama!" the crowd cried now, as if one voice. "Hokage-sama! The Fifth! The Fifth!"

Then pulling on the reins of her horse Senju Tsunade the Queen of Torment galloped away, into the
The Fifth Hokage's voice carried through the air like fire.

"My fellow citizens, my fellow ambassadors!" she shouted. "We set forth now on a great mission! The United Countries Embassy! What is at stake is nothing less than the peace of the whole earth. Each one of you has been specially chosen—your skills, your talents, your potential, whether as soldiers or diplomats, scientists or men of God. Know that through your work, your behavior and actions, you will be representing us to the world. You will show the world who we are. And who are we?" She raised her arms high to either side, spreading her palms to face the sun. "I said, who are we?" she cried.

"The Leaf!" they all shouted back, a deafening roar that filled the village, the furious waving of ten thousand little green and red flags, clapping and cheering. "The people of the Leaf, the people of Fire! The heirs of Senju!"

"Yes! And when seven decades ago the entire world was gripped in the thrall of lawless anarchy, why do countless millions now live in peace and freedom?"

"Konoha!"

"And when the oppressed, the suffering, the powerless cry out for salvation, where is the shining beacon of hope to which they turn?"

"Konoha!"

The Hokage's voice elevated to its greatest height. "And when, in ditches and ravines, in the darkest of hours and in the terrible fury of war, our fathers and grandfathers struggled, did their duty, and died, what was it, what was the dream, for which they gave their lives?"

"Konoha! KONOHA!"

"Amen." The Hokage wheeled around the horse again in a broad circle, riding along the main avenue. "Konoha! Our great tree, with its enduring roots and strong branches and countless leaves, constantly renewing itself, constantly growing and changing. Is that not such a fitting symbol for our hidden village? We only need consider the crisis which has come before us in the present moment.

"Six months ago, on that day of infamy December 7th, we were attacked by an unprecedented terrorist plot, an invasion of Konoha itself by the organization Akatsuki and its leader Orochimaru the White Snake. Akatsuki had under a program of sinister deception secretly taken control of the hidden villages Suna and Oto and used them as pawns in an attempt to destroy Konoha itself. The December 7th attack struck us, as it were, like a bolt of hellish lightning, and pierced deep into the trunk. Many lives were lost that day—the best of us all. And even as we rallied to drive the enemy to utter defeat, even as Orochimaru fled in terror back to the wretched little cave where he lurks, the future of the village was deeply uncertain. The dire prospect of a sustained economic, military, and political catastrophe loomed before us.

"Consequently, in the immediate aftermath of December 7th, I told you that our top priority must be to stabilize the village and prevent our losses in the invasion from spiraling into an even more disastrous economic depression. We instituted a temporary emergency plan to mobilize manpower in order to repair our defenses and rebuild our revenues. I am proud to say to you that today, because of
all the extraordinary sacrifices of our many courageous soldiers in uniform, this has been done. The
grateful of every heart in this country goes out to the teams of shinobi who, undaunted by odds,
unweary in their constant challenge and mortal danger, are turning the tide of the crisis by their
prowess and by their devotion.

"We have made known to the world that there is no place on earth that can recover more quickly,
from greater crisis, than Konoha. Now the immediate danger has largely passed. We are on a surer
footing; we have endured; we are gathering renewed strength.

"Yet we cannot underestimate the crisis. The crisis is still before us, and fear and hope are alike
beneath it. Fear because the reality of the international situation tells us that, as long as Akatsuki
exists, the horror of December 7th is but the harbinger to even more deadly and more terrible events.
And hope because our fortunes are still in our own hands; because it is we who have the power to
save the future.

"That is the mission of this United Countries Embassy.

"There are some gentlemen, and I do not doubt their sincerity, who question the fundamental concept
of the United Countries. They claim that the future vision of an international organization dedicated
to maintaining world peace is too impractical, too idealistic.

"What these noble gentlemen forget is that Akatsuki has already shown us their vision of the future.
They showed it to us on December 7th in the life's blood of our sons.

"Their objective is absolute tyranny and dominion over mankind. These terrorists kill not merely to
end lives, but to end our way of life. With every atrocity, whether on December 7th, or the massacres
in the Rain Country, or the concentration camps in Sound, they only become more aggressive. Do
not harbor any delusions! Their greatest hope is that Konoha grows fearful, retreating from the world
and isolating ourselves behind these great oak walls, so that they shall have space to work their evil
unconstrained. They stand against us, because we stand in their way.

"But Konoha will not hide. We will not run, or hesitate, or falter until ultimate victory.

"We will not stop until Akatsuki has been utterly destroyed and the scourge of tyranny wiped from
the earth forever.

"I promise you that. But I must be frank with you as well. This war shall not be easy. Neither can we
do it by ourselves; it is too great an undertaking. The reality of that brutal truth was exposed
undeniably on the day December 7th.

"On December 7th we saw our vulnerability—and we saw its deepest source. For as long as whole
regions of the world simmer in resentment and tyranny—whether it is Wind, or Sound, or Rain, or
even parts of our own Fire Country—violence and terror will gather, and multiply in destructive
power, and cross the most defended borders, and raise a mortal threat. We paid for the poverty of the
Wind Country in our own blood.

"Of course, it is clear the December 7th invasion exposed several serious vulnerabilities in our
military and economic structure. I have spoken of the necessary reforms we must make at length
elsewhere, and I shall not repeat them now. But I will say this. No domestic reform, however
necessary, is enough to ensure the long-term security and stability of Konoha. In this new century,
there is no hidden village or country or even alliance of countries with the power to claim military
supremacy over the rest. Any attempt to do so would only generate an escalating arms race that could
not but end in a Fourth Ninja War.
"Moreover, the greatest danger to our security in this increasingly interconnected world comes not from states, but from transnational threats—rogue terrorist groups, such as Akatsuki, that operate secretly in many countries.

"We can no longer afford to deny the fact of our overwhelming interdependence with the other peoples of earth. Today's security threats cannot be addressed in isolation. The only way to reduce global threats is to design and implement global solutions. I shall give you a tangible example of what I propose. Six months ago, in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, I struck an alliance with the hidden village of Suna. This was, to put it lightly, a highly controversial move. But I said to you then that the alliance was necessary in order to save ourselves—that cooperation and collaboration, instead of enmity and mistrust, would further both the interests of Konoha and Suna. And it is so. Only days ago, with critical intelligence provided to us from the sand-nins, a shinobi team was able to infiltrate a high-level Akatsuki meeting. We recovered a vital document which demonstrates Akatsuki's plans to instigate a Fourth Ninja War. They are recruiting rogue ninjas from all around the world. Their plan is well in motion. I tell you this to impress the urgent and even existential nature of the present crisis, which we are only aware of through the alliance with our former enemies.

"This crisis has only one solution.

"There is only one force of history that can break the reign of hatred and resentment, and expose the pretensions of tyrants, and destroy the power of terror, and that is the force of peace. In the modern world, the survival of peace and freedom in our country increasingly depends on the success of peace and freedom in other countries.

"To that end, today I shall personally lead an Embassy abroad in order to create the international organization called the United Countries. The United Countries will be a permanent structure of peace. It will be an instrument for the willing cooperation of free peoples in a world in which, relieved of the menace of aggression, all may enjoy economic and social security. Only such an instrument will have the power to unite the strength of the world to destroy Akatsuki.

"God willing, the war against Akatsuki will be the last war ever to be fought; and it shall be the war on terror.

"In my absence, I am appointing Hatake Kakashi, one of our greatest shinobi, as my Acting Hokage in Konoha. He shall speak with my voice and my complete confidence. Let there be no dissent or disunion; for our strength is our unity of purpose. We must not be divided at the crucial moment.

"I do not wish to give the impression that all mistakes can be avoided and that many disappointments are not inevitable in the making of the United Countries and in the war against terror. But we must not lose the hope of establishing a new order for the ages which will be capable of maintaining peace and realizing a more perfect union between peoples. This organization must be the fulfillment of the promise for which men have fought and died since the Founding of Konoha. It must be the justification of all the sacrifices that have been made.

"To that high concept there can be no end save victory.

"My fellow ambassadors! I speak to you now particularly. This country, this great tree, has placed its destiny in your hands. All our hopes go with you on your mission. Never before in the history of the village has such an extraordinary gathering of talent, of prowess, of devotion, been assembled as one. It is as if we went to the great tree and we went and found all the noblest branches, and the strongest twigs, and the most beautiful little leaves, and we gathered it all up before us as kindling.

"Yes, that is what this Embassy is. That is what we are: we are the kindling. When the tree leaves dance, one shall find flames. The fire's shadow will illuminate the village, and once again, tree
leaves shall bud anew. Do you understand? We shall be as the kindling in the flame! And we shall spread fire!—a fire in the minds of men. It warms those who feel its power; it burns those who fight its progress. As hope kindles hope, millions more will find it. And one day this untamed fire of peace will reach the darkest, most wretched corners of our world. My fellow ambassadors! This glorious United Countries Embassy shall make history—and I hope it will be better history than ever has been made before. Let us go forward together with our united strength!"

The Hokage paused. For a long, lengthening moment her eyes swept the crowd. When she spoke at last her voice was almost a whisper, so that all strained forward to hear, and there was utter silence: "I pray that we may be worthy of the unlimited opportunities that God has granted us."

Then the Hokage pulled on her reins hard, and the powerful white stallion rose up on its hind legs, kicking the air and whinnying in triumph. The Hokage laughed, a sound like silver chimes. Spurring the flanks of the horse she shouted and galloped away, out of the gates of Konoha. Her hair and robe streamed behind her, shining, blinding.

The Embassy followed. Horses, foot, and wagon all moved simultaneously, a gigantic jumble of noise, a chorus of human voices, shrill whistles and excited laughter. Trumpets played. Drums beat. The villagers left behind threw ticket tape and fanned silken streamers. The wind caught the ambassadors of the Embassy as they marched forward, and suddenly their robes and flags seemed to billow like huge threaden sails, borne with the current back into Konoha. But the ambassadors pressed on, and then in what seemed like a moment they had passed out of the gates.

Sakura looked back once, as the Embassy was entering the forest paths. Through the tangles of dripping leaves the walls of Konoha loomed high as the hills, and in the distance she could just see the carved heads of the Hokages staring out on the mountain above the walls like ghosts. It was her home and she had seen it a thousand times before. But now she tried to look more closely, as if trying to catch of a glimpse of something unseen, some revelation or accusation, some insight that perhaps would reveal itself, now, as they receded in the distance. There was nothing; and at last the walls of Konoha faded away into the cool, enveloping darkness of the forest, and to the winding stone paths that led, so it was said, west across half the world. She would walk them now. To the Earth Country. To Iwa.

Prepare yourself, a voice told her inside.

Sakura listened.
Sakura dreamed her way across the Fire Country.

They all dreamed, every person among the thousands who marched with the United Countries Embassy. Visions of glory danced across their mind, fantasies of honor, and peace, and vengeance. From dawn to dusk they marched to remake the world, and as they beheld their grand procession, the magnificent flapping flags and the great wagon trains and the godlike Hokage shining on her white horse, it seemed anything was possible.

Sakura shared their hopes, but for her the dream was more personal. She dreamed of becoming strong.

On the second day of the Embassy she went to see Team Gai. They were training in a clearing in the forests outside the camp the Embassy had made for the night. For a long moment Sakura stood back and watched Lee and Gai spar, transfixed.

Then she walked into the clearing.

Lee stopped in the middle of a flying dropkick and almost tumbled to the ground when he saw her. He stood up straight, snapping his legs together like he was at attention. "Sakura-chan!" he called with a big happy joyful smile on his face. "I haven't seen you for so long!" Then he got a puzzled frown. "Hey, but why are you not wearing your forehead protector? Hokage-sama said we have to wear them on the Embassy at all times."

"Lee!" Tenten said. "You idiot!"

Lee was confused. "What do you mea—oh. Oh." The boy looked crestfallen.

Neji smirked. "Don't worry, Sakura. I'm sure Lee would be happy to give you his instead."

"Shut up, Neji!" Lee shouted. He wiped the sweat off his brow.

"Both of you stop it," Tenten said. She shook her head. "So, uh, Sakura, what brings you here?"

She didn't hesitate.

"I need help," Sakura said. "I need you to teach me how to open the Eight Chakra Gates."

Now they all stared at her. "That is a forbidden jutsu," Neji said.

Sakura looked down. "I know… but this the only way. The only way I can become a ninja again. The Hokage gave me one last chance. She said she would test me when the Embassy got to Iwa. I need to show her I'm strong. If I can open the Chakra Gates… but I can't learn it by myself."

There was a short silence, and then suddenly a shout of excitement. It was Maito Gai. The green jumpsuit jounin laughed deeply. "I feel the fires of youth burning in your veins, Sakura! The sensation intoxicates me!" He pressed his hand on Sakura's shoulder, so hard she almost collapsed. He grinned and gave her a thumbs up.

"From now on," he said, "You will train with us!"

The Embassy traveled west and south, and then due north, following the path carved into the ground by the First Hokage a hundred years ago, making a circuit of the broad curve of the Fire Country.
They passed through the Ash Valleys and the Shadowspring Forest, along the banks of the Jade River and into and out of cities the names of which Sakura had only read of in books. Kiushu. Shikoke. Hokuto. Onya. Others, more, an endless vastness, an overwhelming immensity. More than once, as the Embassy arrived at some new wonder, Sakura would ask herself, "What is this place?" as if it were somehow strange to her. But always she knew the answer. It was the place they served.

Tsunade-sensei had said that. "We are the shinobi of the Leaf, girl, and with the people of this land of Fire we have made a sacred covenant. We use our power to protect and serve them, and in return they promise us what we need the most. A home."

Sakura had asked her what the covenant was called, and when it was made, and who had made it.

"This covenant has no maker, girl," Tsunade-sensei had said. "Neither is there an inauguration. But it has a name. It is called the Will of Fire."

One of the purposes of the UC Embassy was as a show of strength in the aftermath of December 7th: to present the enduring power and resolution of Konoha to the world. Accordingly the Hokage had insisted the Embassy all dress in full military uniform for the duration of the whole mission, so that they all seemed very proper and gleaming as they marched. They moved along the road like the small army they were, altogether over eight hundred shinobi strong, thousands including the rest, though far more deadly than any army of regular soldiers. As they trooped past in long, tight columns, taking up both sides of the road, incoming traffic would have to make room and get off the road to let them pass.

As the Embassy passed through a town the peasants would always gather along the side of the road to gawk at them, the finery and the pomp of it all. Barefoot children would point and shout with excitement—"Ninja!" they shouted. "Ninja"—and then the ninja would wave and smile and stand a little taller, and then give out candy and little trinkets and propaganda pamphlets to the people, on the directive of the Hokage, who had loaded the caravan with those items. Sometimes someone would come up to the caravan to speak to a ninja, requesting the services of Konoha and handing over a bag of money, and after a little bit a team of ninjas would dart away from the convoy like wolves peeling away from the larger pack, rejoining later after they had chased down some prey.

Each of the rank and file ninja carried little with them, no more than a few things they carried in a sack on their back, and they marched the whole way on foot. But the jounin, the officers and the high-ranking shinobi, rode on armored horses, and the civilian functionaries rode in the wagons. The long caravan rolled slowly along the central axis of the Embassy, carrying food and water, weapons and supplies. Above them, strapped to a pole rising out the center wagon, the crimson and green flag of the Fire Country and the blue flag with the five-pointed white star of the United Countries flapped in the wind, like a king and queen lording over their subjects.

They marched from dawn till dusk. At night, they made camp by the side of the road, or in a town, or wherever they had stopped, and large tents were pitched for the ninja that wanted it; many opted to sleep on the grass and the hard ground, unrolling sleeping bags and eating cold rations and making small talk beneath the stars. The Hokage's tent was the biggest of all. In the evenings a small stream of dignitaries from the surrounding towns would stream into the camp and make their way to the Hokage's tent. After all the visitors had left, light still flickered in that tent until very late, and the faint voices of the Hokage and her advisers could be heard, debating and arguing about the great events which were shaking the world. Then, as the first rays of the sun peeked over the horizon, the Embassy representatives got up and stretched their limbs and packed up their tents, to do it all over again the next day.

As they moved north, towards Ashwarren, the roads widened, became highways bustling with
traffic, cattle and horses and people. The highway was flanked on one side by a nearby railroad, and often a train would chug past them, screaming as its wheels screamed along the railroad tracks. At the end of the fourth day the Embassy came to the vast volcanic mountain ranges which coiled like twining snakes across the northeast of Fire. The great peak of Mount Enasei loomed in the distance, gray and black. And just beyond the reach of the shadow of the mountain in the evening sun lay the city—the jewel in the shadow—Ashwarren.

Ashwarren, the capital city of the Fire Country.

Sakura saw the gleaming tops of the five towers of the city first, seeming to rise and grow above the horizon with each step they took forward. The sun was low in the sky, and the setting sun bathed the towers in red orange light. The five towers rose and rose, until they seemed to engulf the skyline, touching the clouds like grasping fingers, a gleaming steel hand reaching up to close its fist on the sky. The famous Five Towers of Ashwarren. The sight awed her. She had never been in any city larger than Konoha, itself a mere town by the standards of Ashwarren, the greatest city in the world.

As the caravan edged closer, Sakura saw that what looked like the back of the hand of the Five Towers was actually a huge, circular wall, separate from the towers and surrounding them. The wall was as high as those of Konoha and still blackened with fire. A blast wall, she realized. It had been built to protect the city population during the chaos of the Ninja Wars. Those walls could not hold the population now. An entire new city sprawled outwards from the inner one like a human fungus, smokestack factories and concrete tenements and shadowy slums, broad lanes lined with neon lights and glittering skyscrapers of glass and teeming steel, modern and daunting and everything that Konoha was not, could not be.

Yamanaka Ino thought she had gone to paradise. "Come on, Sakura. We're in Ashwarren! A real city! The shopping capital of the world! Think of the clothes… the shoes… you don't have to buy anything, if that's what you're thinking! It's called window shopping. But I can't go out all by myself. Come with me."

Sakura shook her head. "I need to—"

"Train?" Ino laughed. "Relax, we're not gonna get to Iwa for another month at least." Ino leaned forward to stare at Sakura's face. "Plus, look at those pores. You need some exfoliation."

Ino wouldn't shut up, so they went. Sakura hadn't packed anything except a set of servant and shinobi uniforms, not thinking of civilian clothing. So she wore the Konoha livery she had been wearing the whole Embassy. Ino wore a stylish blue spring dress, though she kept her forehead protector on as per the Hokage's orders. "Brings out the color of my eyes, don't you think?" she said. Sakura also brought Tonton along. The pig was happy to get out of the confines of the wagons and tents that Sakura had been keeping her in, squealing everywhere they went in Ashwarren.

The two girls took the underground subway, trains powered by steam that zipped around in a maze of tunnels under Ashwarren. Neither of them had been on it before, and they spent their time nose-pressed against windows, watching the dimly lit tunnel walls flash by. They wandered around the city for a while. They went shopping in colossus-like malls and went to eat at a high-end expensive restaurant on the roof of a skyscraper—Ino paid the bill. Then they went to a beauty parlor and got their faces exfoliated. Ino had her nails done too, but Sakura declined.

One incident occurred which much disturbed Sakura. They hadn't been in Ashwarren long when a cute young boy, about the same age as Kyoki, came up to them. "Are you a ninja?" he asked, staring at up Ino's Konoha forehead protector.

Ino smiled at the cute kid. "Yes."
The boy stared with wide eyes, his mouth hanging open like a fish. "Wow, so cool!" The boy's voice dropped down to a whisper. "Have you killed anyone?"

Ino leaned down to look the cute little boy in the face, very seriously. "You bet," she lied. "I've killed hundreds of people."

The boy giggled. "I want to be a ninja."

"Kaoru! Kaoru! Get away from them!" a woman yelled. "Get back here now!" The boy turned around, reluctantly, going back to her mother's arms. Her mother shooed him away from them. "Don't do that!" Sakura heard the mother whisper as they hurried away. "They're dangerous!"

Sakura turned to look at Ino. Ino shrugged.

After that Sakura couldn't help noticing the way people would stare at the two of them as they walked, the way they would watch them with wary eyes and keep their respectful distance. There was a clear undercurrent of hostility and fear towards Konoha from the city residents. It had been like that the whole way, in fact, even with the smiling waving peasants, with the civilians just outside the walls of Konoha itself. She just hadn't paid attention before. They're afraid, Sakura thought. Afraid of her. Afraid of her power and who she was.

Sakura almost forgot that now she, too, was a civilian.

"This covenant has no maker, girl," Tsunade-sensei had said. "Neither is there an inauguration. But it has a name. It is called the Will of Fire."

There was no covenant, Sakura thought. There was just a word, an ideal. This place, Ashwarren, was the place the shinobi of the Leaf served. The place they gave their lives to protect. But it was not their home. Ninjas did not belong here. She didn't belong here. Everything was too different—too strange, too hostile, too wrong, somehow. She wasn't sure what it was until she realized that the people here were missing something. They were missing faith. A faith in their own country.

That night Sakura went back to the barracks where the Embassy was staying, and she didn't go out again until it was time for them to leave.

Meanwhile Sakura started her training with Team Gai.

The first morning of her training, they took her over to a small lake that lay hidden in the forests by the Embassy camp. The lake shimmered in the cloudless sunlight. Gai took off his sandals and walked barefoot onto the middle of the lake. His students followed, as did Sakura. Sakura felt the water underneath her feet, cool and smooth; the surface rippled as she walked on it.

Gai struck a pose and grinned. "Sakura, you seek to open the Eight Chakra Gates! Your youthful passion greatly moves me. I, Maito Gai the Sublime Green Beast of Konoha, will teach you all that you desire. That's a promise!"

"I promise too!" Lee said enthusiastically. "I will keep that promise with my life!"

"Oh, Lee!" Gai said. "You burn so brightly with the flames of youth!"

"I am only an insignificant candle compared to you, Gai-sensei!"

"Without a doubt," said Neji.

"Shut up, Neji!" Lee cried.
Gai laughed. He turned back to Sakura. "If you want to open the Chakra Gates, you must first master every chakra node and pore in your entire body! The higher level of mastery, the more gates you can open. Are you familiar with the basic principles of chakra control, Sakura?"

Sakura nodded. "Yeah."

Gai did not seem to notice what Sakura had said. "Chakra," he lectured right on, "is essential to even the most basic jutsu of the shinobi. In its latent form, it is the natural life energy that is inherent to all living organisms. In its active form, it is a mixture of the physical energy present in every cell of the body and the spiritual energy gained from exercise and experience! Once active, the chakra can be channeled through the Chakra Circulatory System to any of the more than three hundred tenketsu, or chakra pressure points, along the body. These tenketsu are nodes from which chakra can be released and manipulated. Within these tenketsu are Eight Gates which control the overall flow of chakra within the body… like valves or circuit breakers. Normally these Gates protect the body by only allowing a safe amount of chakra to flow to the tenketsu. But by opening these Gates, a shinobi can surpass their own physical limits at the cost of extreme damage to their own bodies!

"Ninja practice constantly to learn how to manipulate chakra more effectively in order to perform jutsu. However, most ninja don't have the skill to truly control the flow of chakra within the body itself. They have to use external methods such as hand seals to help them mold the chakra into the specific jutsu they want. Ultimate masters of chakra control, such as myself, hardly need to use hand seals at all!"

"You're so cool, Gai-sensei!" Lee said.

Gai gave Lee a thumbs up. "I can mold the chakra inside my body through each of my tenketsu nodes. Both the shape and nature manipulation of chakra arise directly from within the tenketsu. Therefore, what shinobi commonly call 'chakra control' is really this ability to control the flow of chakra through all the tenketsu in your Chakra Circulatory System. Only when you master this ability will you be able to open the Eight Gates. There are many methods of training chakra control, such as leaf concentration, tree climbing, and water surface walking. But today I, Maito Gai, will reveal to you the ultimate technique of chakra control!"

Gai finally paused, finished with his lecture. He was out of breath. "Do you understand everything I just said?" he asked. "Any questions?"

I already knew all of that, Sakura thought.

Neji was shaking his head. "Gai-sensei, Sakura is the student of the Fifth. She probably knows more about chakra theory than you do. You know the Walking With Water technique, Sakura?"

She nodded. "It's a chakra field projection jutsu. It's similar to water surface walking, but far more advanced, when the user projects a chakra field out of the whole body at once underwater. I've never seen it done before, though."

Gai's mouth dropped open. "Ah! You already know about walking with water?" He seemed a little deflated, but recovered quickly. "Well… knowing and seeing are different. Today the Handsome Beast of Konoha will show it in action! Behold!"

As he spoke Gai began to sink into the lake he was standing on. Sakura watched in amazement as his feet went under the surface, then his legs and chest. It was like going down a lift. The water wrapped around his body, rippling, but without touching him. Soon Gai's whole body disappeared beneath the clear water, and Maito Gai stared up at Sakura through the surface of the lake where he was suspended. He grinned.
Then Gai began to walk. Not swimming, walking—walking with the water, as if the water under him was a solid surface. Sakura understood the principle. He had extended a chakra projection field around himself which repelled the water and kept it from touching his skin, so that when he moved it was actually through a thin layer of air in-between, without the usual water resistance or physics. But the chakra control it would take to maintain the field, especially during motion, was insane.

"Lee!" Gai shouted. "I need a rock!"

"Right!" Lee said. Lee rushed to the banks of the lake where he picked up a huge rock and threw it into the water near Gai. There was a big splash. The rock plummeted in the water.

Gai suddenly rushed forward under the water, running, and raised his leg in a flying dropkick. "Dynamic Entry!" he shouted. He connected with the rock and it blew up into a thousand pieces. The pieces tumbled to the bottom of the lake. "Haha!" Gai then did a series of punches, kicks, and other taijutsu moves in the water, blindingly fast. He changed direction at seemingly impossible angles, moving forward, backward, sideways and up and down instantly. At last he did an immense roundhouse kick—"Konoha Leaf Whirlwind!" he shouted—and burst out of the water to stand before Sakura on the surface of the lake. There was no splash. Gai grinned.

"You're so cool, Gai-sensei!" Lee said.

"That was… incredible," Sakura said. Gai's body, hair, and clothes were all still dry. "Like you never even touched the water."

"I didn't," Gai said. "That's why I could move so fast."

So this is what it takes to open the Gates, Sakura thought. This level of chakra control!

Sakura turned to Rock Lee. "So you can walk with water, too?"

"Both Lee and I can walk with water," Neji said. "Of course, with the Byakugan I can do it almost instinctively. It took Lee years of constant training to learn. As for you, Sakura… you're a chakra control genius, right? I wonder how long it will take you."

"Go on, Sakura-chan!" Lee said. "Try it."

"Let the power of youth explode!" Gai added. Tenten cheered as well.

"Okay," Sakura said. "Here goes."

Walking with water. Sakura concentrated, gathered chakra around her feet and ankles. One step at a time… one sink at a time. It was a matter of… pushing against the water, in just the right amount and at the right angle, so as not to break the surface tension but still allow her to sink. There! She sunk a centimeter. Two centimeters. The water almost went up to her ankles.

"I'm doing it," she said, excited.

"That's really good. It took me a lot longer just to get there." Lee smiled. "You're a natural, Sakura-chan. Keep going!"

It was extremely hard. She needed the perfect balance just to maintain the chakra field. She tried to use her chakra to push the water outwards into a bubble around her feet. But if she pushed at the water too hard, made the bubble too large, the bubble would pop. Try to keep going. Another centimeter. Her feet were under the water. Her legs—
The bubble popped and she fell down with a splash and a shout, soaking herself in the cool water of the lake. Lee laughed and helped her up back onto the surface. "It's really hard!" Sakura said, pushing a strand of wet hair out of her face.

"It's okay, you just need to keep practicing," Lee said. "I'll practice with you!"

He did. During the daytime they marched together as the United Country Embassy wound its across the Fire Country, and at night they trained walking with water, in nearby rivers or lakes or in the pools in the military barracks in Ashwarren. Usually Team Gai would be there as well, or Ino and Chouji, or Tonton. Apparently, not only could pigs swim they also liked it. But sometimes it was just the two of them, Sakura and Lee. Sakura made enough progress to immerse herself in the water fully, but every time she tried to move the chakra projection field would collapse. Lee, on the other hand, was an expert in walking with water, and liked to show off his Dynamic Entries and Konoha Leaf Whirlwinds.

It was a revelation to Sakura that Lee had no talent for chakra control at all. He had a poor grasp of the basic theory and improved very slowly, maintaining his control by blind trial and error rather than true understanding. Once she asked Lee how he had learned walking with water, and he cheerfully told her that he had simply practiced it 100,000 times until he got it. "But I bet it'll only take you 10,000 times, Sakura-chan!" he said. "You're a genius!" His obliviousness was touching; and somehow she was very glad for his company.

For all their company. The news of Sakura's disgrace had spread quickly through the Embassy from the first day. The Hokage's personal apprentice, banished, exiled to becoming a pig's caretaker, forced to grovel on her knees for a second chance. There were a few ninjas, especially genin, who delighted in Sakura's misfortune. She had to endure their taunts and smirks. But she was surprised at how many friends stuck by her. Ino, Chouji, Tenten, and of course Lee. Even Neji was unfailingly helpful. "From now on," Gai-sama had said, "You will train with us!" Sakura felt greatly heartened by these responses. They have faith in me, she realized. And I have faith in them. Was this the true covenant? Was this the true Will of Fire?

Hundreds of kilometers from Konoha, she felt almost at home.

From Ashwarren the Embassy headed west, out of the Fire Country, then south. They followed the course of the Haven River that began along the north coast of the River Country and flowed down into Rain. River was a rich country, an immensely fertile river basin with a branching web of lakes and streams. Here there were immense ports, the main cities of River—Mistra, Canaltown, Saitoi—bustling with ships and people, as well as Kawagakure, the country's hidden ninja village. Kawa was a town on stilts, built by a rocky shore across the first mouth of the Haven River itself, crisscrossed with canals and canoes and massive steel fishnets which hung from towering poles. The Embassy stayed for only a few hours in Kawa.

After the River Country came Waterfall. Waterfall was one of the smallest of the lesser countries, with only two major cities, Miyawe and Reel. Due south of Miyawe the Embassy came to an immense waterfall pouring down from a mountain, a curtain of deafening sound: the legendary Torrentrage Falls. The Embassy wound their way up the mountain to the source of the waterfall. In that place, rising out of Torrentrage Falls itself like glistening spires of spider-spun ice, rose the famed structures of Takigakure. Here the Embassy stayed longer than any other place besides Ashwarren. It was rumored that the Hokage was an old acquaintance with the leader of Taki, Misain Seve the Thrice-Dead, and that she hoped to convince Waterfall to join the UC. But the Embassy left Taki without any such announcement.

Day by day the Embassy moved south, through the rest of Waterfall, and then across the Grass
Country. Those were slow, languid days; hours of reflection and silence, solitude and practice. Endless plains of flat rolling steppe prairie grass greeted them, waving in the breeze. The sun was a blinding halo in the distant sky, and the flat horizon was only broken here and there dotted by wisps of chimney smoke from scattered towns and cities: Rinan, Greensun, Ratai. One day, as they were traversing a river valley on the way to the hidden village of Kusa, a rumbling in the distance began, loud as a chain of constant thunderclaps, though they were no clouds in the sky. At first Sakura thought it was some sort of attack. But then she crested a high ridge, and below her she saw the source. A herd of wild horses stampeded below them. Their feet were louder than the heavens.

In Kusa the Embassy again left without convincing the village leader, Ikenobo Zeami, or the Grass daimyo to join the UC. Sakura had a general awareness that things were going badly for the Embassy. But it was different than before. Even though she was the Hokage's apprentice and still saw her every day, Tsunade-sensei did not take any active role in her training. The Hokage's political agenda was distant from Sakura's personal concerns. All Sakura focused on now was her training; her mission to prepare herself for the test ahead. She didn't really care about anything else.

Until they came to the place Sakura would never forget for the rest of her life.

Team Gai was walking near the front of the Embassy when they saw it. The horizon was black with storm clouds, endless pillars and pillars of them, darker than pitch. Streaks of lightning flashed everywhere. A feeling of deep unease ran through Sakura then, pimpled her skin and pierced her through to the bone. The whole sight was unnatural, perverted. No storm could possibly be that big, even a flash storm. And somehow she knew this was no flash storm. It was permanent. A word came suddenly to her mind, and the word was death.

"It's like hell on earth," Tenten said, eyes wide.

"I believe," said Neji, "that is the Rain Country."
The Village Hidden in the Rain

The border between Grass and Rain was branded twice. From below, gray steel walls jutted up from the earth, man-built walls looming over the flat plains. Watchful grass-nins patrolled the fortifications. The walls seemed to be like nothing so much as some sort of giant cage, keeping their unknown captives locked behind it.

The second brand was not so obvious as the first. Sakura only noticed it when they had reached the border. Then she felt a drop of something wet on her cheek. Then more drops, falling from dark dew-laden clouds, a curtain of water that seeped deep into them, soaking and filling everything. From above, the heavens poured out their tears.

The UC Embassy wended its way through a maze of armed checkpoints; then, suddenly, they were in the Rain Country. The first thing which greeted their eyes was an empty ghost city. The ruins loomed eerily silent, broken rubble and twisted metal.

"What happened here?" Lee asked Gai.

Maito Gai did not smile. He hadn't smiled since they had left Kusagakure for the border. Sakura had only seen the green-jumpsuit, bowl-cut ninja so serious like this once before. That had been during the chuunin exam when Gaara crushed Rock Lee's legs.

"War," Gai said finally. "These are just buildings. You'll see the real ruins soon enough."

She did. There was only one major road through Rain that was not destroyed or in a war zone. On either side the road was dotted with refugee camps, slums of teeming squalor and violence. It was like a haunted land. They passed camp after camp of starving, half-naked, sickly people. Some refugees went up to the Embassy and begged variously for food, for medicine and protection. Others shrunk back, recoiling in fear, in imagined recognition. But most of the refugees just stared at the ninja with blank eyes. They had been driven from the homes by the civil war, driven north to the border with Grass. But the Grass Country had sealed off the border. Now there was no place for them to go except the camps.

_Akatsuki_, Sakura thought. Akatsuki did this. _This was the place where Akatsuki was born_. Fifteen years Akatsuki had originally emerged here, as a terrorist insurgency in the Rain Country that sought to overthrow the daimyo of Rain, Lord Mukai Hanzou. Through a decades-long campaign of terror and fear that made December 7th seem like a walk in the park in comparison, Akatsuki had turned at least half the Rain Country into a lawless, war-torn wasteland. The civil war would have ended in Akatsuki's favor long ago were it not for the power of Hanzou, the legendary ninja who had ruled Rain with an iron fist since the Second Ninja War. And so the war went on—and on, and on. Now it had even spread outside the borders of Rain, to Sound, to Wind and Fire. That had been since Orochimaru took over Akatsuki seven years ago and transformed it into an organization not just for Rain rebels, but for all rebels and all missing-nin worldwide.

_The ultimate source of the December 7th attack on Konoha is the Rain Country. Even though it wasn't directly executed from here, the attack would never have been possible if Orochimaru hadn’t been able to leverage the instability of Rain in order to create a terrorist haven. Rain is the epicenter, the headquarters, of Akatsuki. If our purpose is to destroy Akatsuki, the first place we have to destroy them is here._

Sakura knew that the Hokage was desperate for Rain to join the United Countries. Moreover, having already failed with River, Waterfall, and Grass, the Embassy could not afford to leave the Rain
Country empty handed. No doubt the Hokage had some sort of plan; but Sakura had no idea what it was.

Once Tsunade-sensei ordered that the Embassy stop at one of the largest refugee camps and unload aid packages to the people there. For a day Sakura herself worked in the hospital, a large tent where rain leaked through patches in the roof, trying to heal the sick and dying as best she could. There were thousands of them. Many of the refugees had horrible untreated wounds from the war, missing limbs or whole-body burns or deep kunai punctures. Others were dying from simple diseases that could be easily treated by antibiotics, except there were no antibiotics in the camp. Sakura tried to help them, but within a few hours she was utterly exhausted, both physically and mentally. The other medics also failed to persevere. Only Dr. Honjo Micho, the Konoha Chief of Medicine, was an inspiration. Micho was a whirlwind of strength and force. The old doctor attended to the refugees with the energy of ten younger men; that day he healed thousands without stopping at all. Watching him Sakura was moved to redouble her own efforts.

But Sakura was glad when the Hokage ordered that the Embassy leave the camps behind.

The Embassy continued along the road west and south. They called this place the Weeping Lands, for everywhere, it seemed, there was rain. The storm never ended. Here the flooded Haven River had become a sea, a black sloshing tide of mud and sewage and cold rainwater that stretched for kilometers in every direction. Sometimes the Embassy could wade across it in the shallow places, but more often they were forced to erect bridges and roads and ferries in order to cross. Horses died, whole wagon trains collapsed, but day by day they ground on.

At last the road reached a conclusion. Through the pouring rain they could make out the faint outlines of metal towers in the distance, dozens of them, near as high as the skyscrapers of Ashwarren. The metal city stood by itself on a high island hill, and the rain down ran from the city in curtains to the vast black sea which surrounded it.

The city had two names. The first name was old: the name it had when it was first built, decades ago, before the endless storms had come, by the idealists who had come to this place to found a glorious new republic. They had named the city Bliss. Now the city had another name.

Amegakure, the Village Hidden in the Rain.

The Embassy marched across a rusted drawbridge onto the island, then up the hill into Ame. Walls and masked sentries circled the city. The gates of the city opened into a maze-like fortress of metal. It was a technological wonder: thrusting skyscrapers and twisting alleys, tunnels and levels of bewildering steel. But the steel was rusted, decaying. And there were very few lights. It was both capital city and hidden ninja village, the greatest city in the heartland of the North, but somehow it reminded Sakura of the refugee camps they had left.

The rain-nins were out in force to welcome the Embassy. Files of ninjas in ceremonial dress, which in Rain consisted of straw hats and white robes and red umbrellas, lined up on either side of the main boulevard. Behind them thousands of young men beat drums and chanted ritually, filling the air with deep, shrieking rumbles that overwhelmed the otherwise constant patter of rain. It was an impressive ceremony.

There were crowds of villagers, too, who appeared to be kneeling on the ground and praying. At first Sakura thought the prayers were directed toward the Embassy, until she realized the villagers were facing in the wrong direction. They were facing forward.

The villagers looked forward to the end of the boulevard. There, on the highest point of the city, was a tower even larger and taller than the others, a gigantic black vertical spire that thrust against the
endless storm clouds themselves. It was at the center of Ame.

"What's that?" Sakura asked.

"That," said Maito Gai, "is the place from which Hanzou the Reaper rules over the Rain Country. He calls it the Asylum."

Now Sakura understood. The villagers were praying to Hanzou. She could just make out what they were saying. "Hanzou," they prayed. "Oh Lord Hanzou, save us. Deliver us from evil. Save us. Oh Lord Hanzou, deliver us from evil…"

The Embassy marched along the boulevard up the hill until they came to the Asylum. The prayers and the drums were even louder here. The black face of the tower loomed down over them. Finally, at the very top of the tower, there suddenly shined a blinding red light. The light grew brighter and brighter until it was like the sun itself.

The light spoke, and its voice was godlike.

"SENJU TSUNADE… THE QUEEN OF TORMENT…"

"…WELCOME… TO BLISS…"

"It has been too long, Hanzou," the Hokage said.

"INDEED."

"I am here as a representative of the United Countries, the last, best hope for peace in our time. Will you join us, Hanzou?"

"COME… LET US TALK…"

Two rain-nins opened a door in the bottom of the tower of the Asylum. Inside the door Sakura could only make out darkness. But the Hokage walked in without hesitation. The rain-nins shut the door after her.

The red light at the top of the Asylum went out.

The prayers of the villagers of Rain crescendoed to their greatest height, a deafening orgy of ritual chanting. ""Oh Lord Hanzou, save us. Deliver us from evil. Save us. Oh Lord Hanzou, deliver us from evil…"" Then all at once the ceremony was over. The rain-nins were silent and the drip-drip-drip beating of rain filled the city once again.

The Embassy dispersed. Some went to mingle with the crowds of villagers, while others went with their Ame guides to find their living quarters. Sakura was eager to go with them—she definitely needed a nap—but something was wrong with Maito Gai. Gai stared up at the Asylum and didn't move. He seemed to be locked in some sort of trance.

"Are you okay, Gai-sensei?" Lee asked. The boy frowned.

The man was slow to speak. "I'm fine, Lee. Just remembering… something…"

"What is that place?" Neji asked. "You said it was the Asylum. What does that mean?"

Gai hesitated. But at last when it looked like he was about to tell them a group of rain-nins approached.
There were four of them, three genin and a jounin sensei. The genin were dressed in some sort of armored black wetsuits. Their teacher wore a straw hat and a thick reed cloak that rippled down to his boots; he was taller than Gai by half and muscled like an elephant. In his hand the man clutched a thick bamboo staff studded on both ends with spear points.

"Maito Gai the Butcher Beast," the man said. "I did not think you would dare show your face in Bliss again."

Gai didn't smile at all. "Not happy to see me, Tosuken?"

"No," the man said. "I am very glad to see you. Because it means you will not leave this city alive."

"The Embassy is here under a diplomatic truce," Gai said.

"And so I did not snap your neck the moment you walked in… but that is only a technicality. If you have any honor at all, Butcher Beast… if there is any part of you that is not spineless… you will not run away. Not this time."

Lee couldn't hold back anymore. "What the hell are you talking about?" he shouted. "Who the hell are you?"

Now one of the Ame genin laughed. "He's Densuke Tosuken the Chameleon, the second strongest ninja in Rain, after my grandfather. And he's going to kill your sensei."

"Shut up!" Lee shouted, outraged.

"Mamoru wouldn't have wanted it to be like this," Gai said.

Tosuken slammed his staff into the ground. The concrete pavement exploded into webs of craters. "You dare speak his name!… you murdered Mamoru in cold blood… do you think that we would forget? Do you think that you could come back here and ask for our help? The treachery of Konoha destroyed this country… only the power of Lord Hanzou keeps what remains of Rain from falling to the Akatsuki terrorists. I do not know what kind of deal the Queen of Torment thinks that she can make with Lord Hanzou. But we will never join your ridiculous United Countries. Not until Mamoru… and every other Rain ninja… is avenged! Maito Gai… I challenge you to a duel to the death!"

Lee yelled and started to rush forward to defend his teacher. But Gai pressed his hand against Lee's chest and pushed him back. "This has nothing to do with you. Be quiet!"

Gai turned back to look at Densuke Tosuken. For a while they just stared at each other. Sakura thought they would stare forever when somehow, for some reason, Gai grinned. It was the first time in days. He gave Tosuken a thumbs up. "I accept your challenge!" he said.

The rain ran down Tosuken's straw hat onto his face. "Then tomorrow you shall die."
Eye of the Storm

Past midnight Rock Lee found her in the ruins of a collapsed metal tower on the outskirts of Bliss.

The tower had fallen a long time ago, but a part of the steel walls still stood, and here the rainwater collected, making a large pool tens of meters deep. It was an unlit place, forgotten and lonely. It was hard to see what it had been before. Maybe a school, or a library. Faded copies of books still floated in the cold water. Sakura thought it was a good place to train.

"Sakura-chan!" Lee said, dropping down alongside her, onto the surface of the water. "I found you!"

"Hey, Lee," she said.

The boy smiled. It was hard to see him in the darkness, but she thought he looked a little nervous. "Do you know how I found you?" he asked.

She shook her head. "How?"

"Don't you remember, Sakura-chan? I will always appear when you are in trouble."

Lee had last said that line to her during the Konoha chuunin exam, when she was about to killed by Orochimaru's sound-nin flunkies and he had saved her life. The second time wasn't quite as romantic.

"I'm not really in any danger right now, Lee," she said.

"It is true your body is not in danger… but your heart is troubled." Lee grinned. "That is most dangerous."

Sakura had to laugh. "Yeah, okay. I guess you got me. I couldn't sleep tonight." She paused. "What happened between Gai-sama and those Rain ninjas yesterday… this place, Lee. It doesn't feel right. I tried to talk to Gai-sama, but he wouldn't listen." She trailed off. "All I can do is train."

She thought Lee would say something like, "Don't worry about Gai-sensei!" or "Gai-sensei is the greatest!" Instead the boy was silent. After a pause he spoke.

"You're right, Sakura-chan!" he said, very seriously. "The best cure for a troubled heart is hard work."

There was nothing really for them to say after that. Instead the two of them trained.

Sakura was still working on Walking With Water. Now she sunk herself beneath the surface of the pool in the ruined tower for the hundredth time that night. For the training she wore only a simple white kimono, drenched by the rain and failed walking with water attempts. But as she submerged herself in the water she used her chakra to push the water back into a bubble that wrapped around her body, so that the kimono still clung flat to her skin. When she breathed the air blew from her lips into the bubble, rising in tiny ripples across the curves of her face to the top of her head. There they broke through the bubble and popped on the surface of the pool. The chakra projection field was complete.

But it was taking all her concentration just to keep up this one field. To maintain the chakra projection field she had to constantly eject chakra at just the right levels from all the tenketsu over her body. It wasn't much chakra, since all she was pushing back was water… but the problem was one
mistake and the whole field would collapse. In motion maintaining the field was exponentially more difficult.

Could she move? Very slowly she tried to push her hand forward. The water gave way, the bubble held. The other hand. Then her feet... one over the other... yes! She started to walk, ever so slowly, walk with the water... she was doing it.

"Beautiful movement, Sakura-chan!" Lee called from above the pool.

Sakura smiled, but just as she did so she pushed her chakra field a little too far and the bubble collapsed. Water rushed in, and all of a sudden she was swimming. Sinking. Her kimono billowed in the water. "Fuck!" she said, and that all came out of her mouth was a stream of bubbles.

"You almost have it, Sakura-chan!" Lee shouted from above in encouragement. "Hold on, let me show you!"

Lee dove beneath the pool with practiced ease, using his chakra field to push against the water and speed over to where she was. The boy took Sakura's hands in his own. "Now remake the field," he said.

Lee's chakra field extended over to encompass her, slowly rippling along her hands, up her arms and then over the rest of her body. Sakura helped him as best she could, and then when she had recovered her balance she concentrated and recreated her body's own field, taking it back from Lee. But now, with Lee still holding her hands, the two chakra projection fields touched and flowed into each other, mutually reinforcing. It was one chakra bubble that extended around the two of them in the water, a rippling pocket of air in a dark wet sea. It was like their own private universe. Like the eye of the storm.

Lee smiled. "Move with me," he said.

He took a step backwards, and Sakura followed. Two steps. Three. His hands were calloused, rough with constant training, but the touch was gentle. It was easy for Sakura to let him guide her. Lee would strengthen Sakura's chakra field whenever she made a mistake. Soon they were moving faster and faster. Lee led her in loops and twists and turns, back and forth.

Sakura giggled. "It's like we're dancing."

Lee giggled too. "Rock Lee, the Handsome Green Flash of Konoha, will show you dances you have never imagined before!"

As they slow-danced in the water Sakura began to notice how the chakra field Lee was projecting was different from hers. It was stronger, of course, more dynamic, but there was a more essential distinction. She hadn't noticed it until they had begun moving together. What was different was the rotation. Sakura and Lee basically ejected chakra out of their tenketsu in the same pattern, but the chakra Sakura ejected didn't rotate much, while Lee's chakra spun aggressively, rotating in thousands of tiny circular loops along the edge of his field.

"The way you're spinning your chakra in circles. How are you doing that?" Sakura asked Lee.

"Um, just like I told you before. Feel the chakra field. Like, really feel it. And then, uh, follow the chakra back inside you. But it has to be all the way inside. Then, uh, move it. Do you understand? Sorry, I'm not good at explaining stuff." He made an apologetic face.

The explanation had been nonsensical before, but now Sakura thought she had a glimmer of understanding—it matched with the jutsu theory that Neji had described to her at the beginning. Feel
the chakra field… follow the chakra back inside you… Sakura tried to imagine the chakra as an extension of herself. No, it was herself. And herself, then, was also the network of tenketsu and chakra vessels through which the chakra flowed. Now she saw that it was the rotation of the chakra, not just the quantity or power, which was keeping the water back. The rotation multiplied the field’s repulsive force and made the field more stable. But where was the rotation coming from? From the tenketsu? No … *all the way inside*… from the Chakra Gates! The Gates were like the master control centers of the chakra circulatory system. Not only did the Gates limit the flow of chakra, they also shaped its spin and direction. She had to move them—move the Gates… just slightly, just enough, to change the chakra's rotation… and the rotation would have to be different for each part of the body…

Suddenly everything clicked. One very long moment of intense concentration…

… and suddenly Sakura had it.

Sakura's chakra field rippled outward with strength, matching Lee's field motion for motion. "Whoa!" Lee said. "You really got it this time!"

"Dance with me," Sakura said.

They danced. Truly danced, not like before, when Lee had been leading her at every step. Before it was like she had been in a wheelchair. Of course Lee was still far more skilled, far more practiced. But now she had legs too, just the same as him.

The combined chakra field became taut around their bodies, so tight the water rippled and wrinkled along their bare skin. Then the water turned aside at their command, parting as if air, and the surfaces they moved on were sometimes flat, sometimes twisting and turning and making loops, at the whim which they choose. Under the dark pool of rainwater, in the ruined tower, it was like everything else had disappeared; and there was only the two of them. There was only the chakra field. There was only the dance.

In the darkness they could barely see, but they could feel each other by touch, both physical and spiritual. At first Lee led, then after Sakura gained confidence she started to lead, drawing him into a whirlwind of living motion, the dance called the Giving of Fire, the traditional thanksgiving ritual of Konoha. But it in the water it was another thing; magical, miraculous. Lee's hands were twined against Sakura's own, then around Sakura's waist, and once he picked Sakura up and threw her up in the water, so that she came down a spinning whirlpool and he caught her in her arms. "You look like an angel," Lee had time to whisper, and Sakura laughed. Far into the night they danced. They danced until they were breathless and they had to pop up for an instant to the surface to collect air, before going under the water again.

At last, dead tired to the bone, drained of chakra, Sakura and Lee crawled out of the pool onto a rusted metal shelf that ran into the center of the tower base. Sakura fell backwards onto the floor of the shelf, lying there exhausted. "That was… that was great…" she managed.

"Yes. Walking With Water. You did it in three weeks. You really are a genius, Sakura-chan." Lee shook his head. "And also a very good dancer. Even better than Gai-sensei!"

"Thanks," Sakura said.

The two of them lay there for a while, not saying anything. Cold drops of rain fell continuously onto Sakura's face. She closed her eyes and let them fall. Then a thought occurred to her.

"Can I ask you something?" Sakura said. "Your chakra control is so good… why can't you use
ninjutsu? I don't understand."

Lee sat up to look at her. "Well, I can, sort of. At least there's nothing wrong with my body. I'm just… too dumb." He poked his head. "Just too stupid to learn how to use ninjutsu, I guess. You know… it was hard… for a long time. In the ninja academy everyone always made fun of me. But then I found Gai-sensei. Now I don't care. I'm going to prove to the whole world I can be a strong ninja without ninjutsu! With just my arms and legs!"

Again they lapsed into silence. Long minutes passed. This time it was Lee who broke the quiet of the falling rain.

"Oh! I almost forgot. I made a gift for you. Here, look…"

Sakura half-cringed, remembering that Lee's last gift to her had been a jar of insects. But this time Lee slipped his hand into his ninja bag and pulled out a strange-looking kunai.

The kunai looked like it was made of layers of folded glass, brilliant mirrors within mirrors of white crystal. In the darkness it almost seemed to glow, a pure white light. Beautiful, Sakura thought. Carefully Lee put the kunai into Sakura's hands.

It was hot to the touch, and a sense of power, of life, pulsed from its every surface.

"What is it?" Sakura asked, enchanted.

"It's chakra!" Lee said. "All of it is pure chakra." He grinned. "See? It's called a chakra-cast kunai. I made it from my own chakra. Neji helped, too. Um, there's like a theory behind it and stuff, but basically I used chakra field projection to push my chakra out and made it hard and shaped it into a kunai. It is very difficult, I spent a month making it! Anyway Neji says it is way faster and sharper and stronger than a regular kunai. You can use it during the chuunin exam!"

Lee paused. "Um, well, do you like it?" He wrung his hands nervously. "It's, uh, better than the jar of fireflies I gave you before, at least? I really tried this time you know! I tried not to make it 'totally disgust—"

"Lee!" Sakura interrupted. "Rock Lee… listen to me… I love it!"

"You do?"

She nodded her head. "Really, I do. You are the #1 most romantic ninja!"

The boy stared at her, eyes wide. For a moment he was stunned speechless. Then he giggled. "Haha! Yes, I am!"

"You are," Sakura said. "Thank you, Lee."

Lee's eyes were bright in the darkness. "For you, Sakura-chan… anything. Even my life."

Sakura stared at the boy. He was so… so pure, Sakura thought. So innocent. So unlike Sasuke. Even when they had first met, when she had told him that he was gross, and he had sworn to protect her with his life. He would, Sakura was sure. No matter what happened, no matter what changed. Because Rock Lee loved her. He would never forget.

"I know," she said.

Lee reached his hands over to grasp her own, hand holding hand, with the chakra-cast kunai shining
between. Then he moved in close. Their gazes locked. Sakura stared into Lee's eyes, and there she saw all the desire, the pain and the longing. She tried to see her own reflection, but she could not. Slowly the boy bent down his head.

His lips almost touched to hers—

"OH YEAH! Let the passion of youth explode!" a booming voice suddenly shouted. At the same time there was a bang and a large cloud of white smoke appeared beside them.

The smoke dissipated, revealing a man wearing a ridiculous green jumpsuit standing on top of a large turtle.

Maito Gai made a pose. "Well, go on, you two, make out already! The tension is unbearable!"

Sakura's mouth fell open.

"Gai-sensei! What are you doing here?" Lee shouted, spluttering. His face was beet red with embarrassment. "Shouldn't you be preparing for your duel to the death or something?"

Maito Gai grinned. "Pah, don't worry. I'm gonna kick Tosuken's ass!"

"You were spying on us!" Sakura said.

"I was keeping an eye on you." He wagged his finger. "Ha! You guys are such the epitome of adolescence." The leaf jounin looked up at the night sky, sighing, and tears actually flowed down his eyes. "It brings back such precious memories of youth…"

"Go away, Gai-sensei!" Lee shouted. "Please!"

"I ought to punch you in the face for that remark!" Gai declared. "You're lucky that I, too, have known what it means to be in love in my glorious youth. Haha!"

Lee sagged to the floor, utterly deflated. "I was about to kiss Sakura-chan…" he mumbled.

"Buck up, Lee. If you're not going to be a man, then you'll just to follow me. Watch Gai-sensei in action! Yeah! It's finally time!"

"Time for what?" Sakura asked.

"Why, time for my fight against Tosuken, of course!" Gai pointed high in the distance. Across the steel towers of Ame, one tower loomed over the rest, breaking against the never-ending storm. But even through the thick layer of storm clouds a faint light shone through, a glimpse of the blinding heaven beyond.

The spire at the top of the Asylum flashed gold in the rising sun.

It was dawn.

"Come on, you two lovebirds. Let's go! Youth never waits!"
In the dawn Maito Gai ran towards the Asylum for his duel to the death.

Gai was back to his usual self; he seemed to be entirely recovered from whatever had been making him depressed in the Rain Country before. This despite the fact that he was about to fight one of the most dangerous ninjas in the world to the death. He ran through empty streets toward the Asylum, pumping his fist about "burning with the flames of youth" and how "youth never waits!" Lee and Sakura could barely keep up with him.

Neji and Tenten met them at the gates of the Asylum. Sakura noticed the blood vessels around Neji's eyes were already pulsing with chakra. He had activated his Byakugan. Sakura gripped the chakra-cast kunai more tightly and rested a hand on her shuriken pouch. Somehow she was glad she had brought her ninja gear along with her.

There were rain-nins waiting for them at the base of the Asylum. When they saw Gai they pulled open the sliding doors which led into the bottom of the black metal tower. The five of them went in, and the rain-nins closed the doors after them.

Vertical columns of dim electric lights washed over the inside of the Asylum. The Asylum was a giant hollowed out shell; Sakura could stare all the way up from the base to the roof of the spire at the very top. In the roof there was carved a golden symbol, the four parallel lines of Amegakure laid within a larger pictogram, an eye shaped into a snake eating its own tail. Sakura recognized it as the personal standard of Hanzou the Reaper.

The hollow of the Asylum tower was crisscrossed by various platforms, walkways, and what seemed like giant metal tanks and tubes and bundles of electric cables. A staircase spiraled along the edge of the tower, and in one wall there was also an elevator. The Leaf ninjas walked toward the elevator now, on a raised walkway above large pools of water. In the water there were—

"My god, look," Tenten whispered. "Look."

In the water there were hundreds of insane people.

They appeared to be catatonic. They hung half-sunk into the pools, suspended by cables, or knelt motionless on metal platforms in the water, their limbs and heads dangling limply. Feeding tubes ran into their stomachs. Their eyes and mouths stared forward, open and empty and blank. The insane people were naked, but here and there richly-livered Rain Priests threaded their way among them, attending to them, speaking to them in muttered prayers, or sprinkling them with holy water, or cleaning their defecation. The priests were old men. The insane were men, women, and children.

"Are they dead?" Lee whispered.

Sakura shook her head. "No. They're soulless…"

"What is this place?" Neji asked. "What is the Asylum?" Even he seemed shaken by the ghastly spectacle. For once Sakura was glad she could not see with his eyes.

Maito Gai's voice was soft, and serious again, but this time he told them.

"The Asylum is the place where Hanzou the Reaper keeps the insane victims of those whose souls he has sacrificed to the Death God. In return for these sacrifices, the Death God has granted him… a terrible, forbidden power."
Sakura knew. "Death Demon Seal," she said. The forbidden jutsu that summoned the Death God to harvest your enemy's soul, at the cost of your own…

Gai nodded.

They entered the elevator and took it up. The elevator rose clanking, slowly toward the top of the Asylum. Now Sakura could see what were in the suspended metal tanks: more pools of water, more victims, naked and insane and soulless. Thousands of them. Maybe tens of thousands. The horror was almost beyond comprehension.

Gai continued. "Death Demon Seal is the forbidden power which the Third Hokage tried to use to seal Orochimaru's soul, the power which the Fourth Hokage used to seal the Kyuubi, and the power from which the Torment genjutsu of the Fifth was originally developed. It is the power of Shinigami, the God of Death! It is absolutely forbidden because any who uses it must sacrifice their soul in return—that is the fate of all who make deals with the Death God. But Hanzou… somehow he found a loophole. Instead of sacrificing his own soul… Hanzou created a jutsu to transfer the sacrifice to someone else. Sacrifice someone else's soul. In exchange for immortality and the ability to use Death Demon Seal, Hanzou gives to the Shinigami a constant supply of fresh souls… thousands and thousands of them…

"However, Hanzou's soul transfer jutsu has a weakness! In order to keep the souls of his human sacrifices sealed within the Shinigami, the bodies of the sacrifices must remain alive in the physical world. If they die, the souls are released, and Hanzou will no longer be able to command the Death God's favor. This is the reason Hanzou built the Asylum. Here Hanzou holds the thousands of human sacrifices which are the source of his power. As long as the Asylum stands, Hanzou is invincible. In Amegakure Hanzou is worshiped as a god… but to those who hate him, to those who have flocked to the banner of Akatsuki… he is the devil himself. And to his enemies this place, the Asylum, is hell on earth!"

As Gai finished his story the elevator had already reached the top of the Asylum. It opened out onto a short staircase which led to the roof, a slick black metal plane without railings or walls. The wind wiped at them violently, and below them the dark towers and spires of Amegakure shot out like arrows driven into the ground. Sakura took a deep breath, and let the cold rain fell on her face.

Tosuken the Chameleon and his three students were waiting for them.

Gai and his Leaf students lined up on the side of the roof opposite from the rain-nins. In between the two groups was nothing but the flat metal ground and the rain.

Tosuken spoke. "So you came. I half-thought you would run away again… like the coward you are…"

Maito Gai flashed a grin. "I never ran."

"Stop lying!" Lee shouted. "Gai-sensei is the greatest, bravest ninja in the whole world! You're the ones who sacrifice innocent people to the Shinigami to get power! You're the weak ones! You're the cowards!"

The Ame genin who had laughed before—he was the grandson of Hanzou, Sakura realized—grinned with malice. "Close your mouth. It is unseemly to perform blowjobs on your sensei in public."

"What—…" Lee sputtered.
The genin continued. "We're not cowards, and we don't sacrifice innocents. Every single one of the people you saw in the Asylum willingly volunteered to give their lives in order to protect their country. They are heroes of Rain. Martyrs."

"Martyrs?" Neji asked. "Or fools?"

"Save your breath, Aumono," Tosuken said. "They don't understand. How could they? Pampered leaf-nin children… they could not know what it is like to live in our world… what war truly is…"

"Too much talk," one of the other Rain genin said. The girl. "Not enough blood."

Maito Gai laughed. "So the flames of youth still burn in your students, Tosuken! Doesn't the sensation intoxicate you? But no… you're an old man now. What happened to you? Where's your youth? Eh, Tosuken?"

"Don't talk to me about youth!" Tosuken screamed. "You dare… in the very place you murdered Mamoru… to use that word! Prepare yourself, Butcher Beast…"

Tosuken stepped forward, throwing back his reed cape and brandishing his bamboo staff. He took off his straw hat and tossed it to Aumono, letting his long dark hair flap in the wind.

A chilling thought had occurred to Sakura then, but it was Neji who voiced it. "Gai-sensei, I must object to this duel. Tosuken the Chameleon is the former student of Hanzou. If Hanzou uses Death Demon Seal…it is likely that your opponent can also use that jutsu."

"No, boy," Tosuken said. "That would be too easy. I will break Maito Gai's neck with my bare hands."

So saying Tosuken threw his staff in the air like a javelin. It plunged with shattering violence into the ground halfway between the two groups.

Gai nodded. "Enough talk! Let's get on with it!"

The two ninja leapt forward at each other.

Their speed was incredible, far too fast for Sakura to even follow with her eyes. It was as if one moment they were standing still and the next they had met halfway on the roof, where the staff was jammed. Gai punched. Tosuken caught the punch with one hand. There was a tremendous noise upon impact, like a thunderclap. A shockwave exploded outwards from the force of the punch, exploding through the rain and shaking the very air. The watching young ninjas had to bring their arms in front of their faces to shield themselves from the blast. What incredible strength! Sakura thought.

"Pathetic," Tosuken said.

"I'm just getting warmed up, old man," Gai said.

"Go kick his ass, Gai-sensei!" Lee called.

"Konoha Leaf Whirlwind!" Gai shouted. He spun into a blindingly fast series of roundhouse kicks. Again Sakura could not even see the attack, or Tosuken's counter. But the impacts of their punches and kicks shook the Asylum roof itself. Tenten was actually forced back a few steps by the force of the shockwaves.

"They're moving so fast…" Sakura said.
"Gai-sensei already opened five Gates," Neji said. He could see into the dueling ninjas' chakra circulatory system with the Byakugan. "Tosuken opened six."

Already opened five gates! The fight had just begun and it had already escalated to that extreme. This battle was deadly serious. At that level even one good strike could be fatal…

Suddenly Tosuken was gone. One moment he was there, dodging Gai's uppercut, and the next he had vanished.

Neji was shocked. "Tosuken… he just disappeared! I can't see him…"

"My sensei is the Chameleon, the master of stealth and assassination jutsu." Aumono laughed. "Your Butcher Beast is dead… now!"

BOOM!

"ANGUISH STRIKE!"

There was a flash above Gai, and from nowhere Tosuken punched Gai in the face. Gai went down, slammed into the roof. The supersonic punch went off with the force of a great bomb, an explosion of not only power and sound but also deadly fear. Sakura, Lee, Tenten, and one of the rain genin were knocked off their feet. The Anguish Strike was so powerful it made a large crater in the metal roof around Gai's body.

Maito Gai lay in this crater. For a second he looked dead. Then he started to laugh.

Gai got up to his feet slowly. A steaming red chakra surrounded him, like a protective shell, hot and burning. Fire Chakra Armor, Sakura realized. Where rain touched the chakra armor it turned into hissing steam. Gai spat blood from his mouth, and there was a nasty bruise across half his face. But the taijū jounin seemed to be in a great mood.

"That was… youthful…" he said, grinning.

Tosuken stood on the edge of the crater, shaking out the hand he had punched Gai with. "Warmed up yet? You almost broke my hand."

"Haha! It's my turn now!"

Gai charged forward, the Fire Chakra Armor burning around him.

Tosuken disappeared.

"That won't work this time!" Gai shouted. He spun around—so fast it was like he was teleporting—

"SUPER DYNAMIC ENTRY!"

Gai kicked a space in the air. A massive impact, and an earsplitting crack like the sound of a mountain splitting in two. Tosuken appeared in the shockwave of the impact. Gai's kick connected brutally with the rain jounin's jaw, sending Tosuken flying upward in the air.

At the same moment one of the skyscrapers next to the Asylum blew up.

"Wow!" Lee shouted. "Such awesome power, Gai-sensei! You destroyed an entire building with your Super Dynamic Entry!"

"Uh… I didn't do that," Gai said.
Tosuken collapsed in a heap on the roof hard, grunting in pain. But almost right away he stumbled up back on his feet. "Shit!" Tosuken said. He didn't look at Gai but at the exploding skyscraper.

Another skyscraper exploded, this time on the opposite side of the city as the first tower. And even closer to the Asylum.

"What's happening?" Lee shouted.

"Damn," Gai said. "It's Akatsuki."

"Traitors..." Aumono hissed.

Sakura rushed over to the edge of the roof of the Asylum to look down. The twisted remains of the destroyed skyscrapers lay strewn on the ground, obscured by clouds of smoke and dust. But she could just make out a stream of ninjas running out from the ruins of the skyscrapers. The enemy shinobi were wearing the black and red cloaks of Akatsuki. At the same time a string of smaller explosions were going off everywhere around the city; every sector and strategic point. It was a coordinated, planned attack. The sounds of violent fighting were already ringing in the streets.

"I don't understand," Neji said. "Why is Akatsuki attacking now? With the UC Embassy in Ame the city is too well defended for a frontal assault."

"You are misinformed, boy," said Tosuken. "At this moment, neither Lord Hanzou nor the Queen of Torment is in Bliss. A few hours ago they launched a surprise attack on the main Akatsuki base in the Rain Country with a large percentage of our total military strength."

"Spineless terrorists!" Aumono said. "They're trying to counterattack..."

"The Asylum," Sakura said. "They're going for the Asylum."

That was the clear implication of the Akatsuki attack strategy. Farther out, in the lower city, a small number of Akatsuki ninjas were occupying strategic points to try to hold off reinforcements from the rest of Ame, while the main Akatsuki assault force came out from the two destroying towers near the Asylum. The terrorists were heading directly for their present location.

"Then rain will wash away traitor blood," the girl rain-nin said.

"Shit! The sky!" the third rain genin shouted. "Look!"

Sakura looked up. Ninjas were dropping out of the storm clouds above the Asylum.

They plummeted down headfirst, like a formation of hawks in dive, impossibly fast, making for the roof of the Asylum. No ordinary ninja could come down out of the sky like that and survive. *They have to be jounin, or stronger...*

Maito Gai jumped up and punched the first Akatsuki terrorist to arrive in the face. The terrorist was blown off the roof with the force of Gai's punch, screaming. It was a long fall.

"Tosuken!" Gai shouted. "We have a bigger problem right now!"

Tosuken nodded. "So it seems... I'll have to break your neck later..."

Now Tosuken picked his bamboo staff back up and spun it. "Bamboo Hurricane!" he cried. The staff suddenly extended out twenty meters in length. He thrust it up and impaled another of the plummeting Akatsuki terrorists through the chest. Then he swung the long staff like a bat, crushing...
yet another ninja in its arc and slamming them far off the Asylum roof. The Akatsuki screamed horribly.

A fourth terrorist was extremely unfortunate to pick a landing spot in between Tosuken and Gai. Tosuken and Gai’s punches both connected at the same time, squashing the man’s head between them like an overripe peach.

But the shinobi who followed were stronger, and they were able to dodge or counter Gai and Tosuken’s attacks. "Water Release: Exploding Darkness Wave!" one of them shouted while still in the air. A giant blast of black water poured out of his mouth, flooding the entire roof. The defenders were blown off their feet, carried away in the immense current. Sakura barely managed to cling to the bottom of the roof as she thrust her chakra-cast kunai into it.

"Sakura-chan!” Lee shouted, his voice faded in the water.

"Damn!” Sakura shouted back. "We got to get out of here!"

Out of the blue Gai was there, a rocket in the water. Gai picked up both of them under his arms as he ran. Neji was carrying Tenten at Gai’s side. "Get down into the Asylum!” Gai said. "These Akatsuki freaks are too dangerous!"

As he was speaking some sort of arm segmented by black tentacles shot out at them. Gai had to throw Sakura and Lee away in order to block the attack. More tentacles, a web of them, rushed at Gai. "Maito Gai the Green Beast, so we meet again! Do you remember my name?” a voice laughed in the murky depths of the water. "It’s Kakuzu!"

"Go!” Gai shouted.

They went. Finally now the water from Kakuzu’s water jutsu drained off the sides of the roof, and they could see properly. The four of them ran as fast as they could toward the stairs in the center of the roof which led down into the Asylum. Unfortunately, Akatsuki was also trying to get to the same location. One of the terrorists was already there, blocking their way through the stairs. "Kaiten!” Neji shouted, going into a superfast spinning rotation of chakra. The terrorist fell back before the Kaiten, and the way was open for a single moment.

Then Tosuken was there, appearing in a flash from thin air. The three rain genin appeared next to him, also protected by the camouflage jutsu. Tosuken whirled his staff, keeping the Akatsuki at bay. The opening was sustained.

"Aumono!” Tosuken said. "We have a greater enemy now! Fight together with the Leaf-nins.”

"I understand, Tosuken-sensei,” the rain-nin said.

"Then this is your mission! Protect the Asylum at all costs!”

The six young ninjas, plus Sakura, dove down through the stairs, away from the pouring rain.
"Protect the Asylum at all costs!"

The voice of Tosuken echoed after them as they fled into the depths of the Asylum. There were other sounds as well: one faint, through the tower walls. The sound of ninjas killing each other outside. And another sound coming from inside the Asylum.

It was prayer. Rows of Rain Priests kneeled on the spiraling rings of metal platforms and walkways, their hands clasped before them, begging their god to protect them in their time of need. "Oh Lord Hanzou," the Rain Priests prayed. "Oh Lord Hanzou, save us. Deliver us from evil… Save us. Oh Lord Hanzou, deliver us from evil…"

The soulless insane human sacrifices of Hanzou's death jutsu lay motionless and naked atop dark pools of water, paying no heed to all the activity around them.

Ninjas joined around them as they leaped down the shaft of the Asylum from platform to platform. There were many defenders in the Asylum itself, including multiple teams of ANBU from both Rain and Konoha. Hanzou and the Fifth were no fools. They had not left the Asylum unprotected.

"Lord Aumono!" one of the Rain ANBU said, bowing down to him. "The walls are soon to be breached!"

"And the roof as well," Aumono said. "Tosuken-sensei and Konoha's Butcher Beast are holding them back… though I don't know for how long." He grinned, and his eyes were dark and cold. "Let us make sure they are welcomed appropriately."

The ANBU nodded. "We shall, my lord." Now the ANBU regarded the three Leaf genin, plus Sakura. "So these are the Butcher Beast's prize students… and Tsunade's little pet, too."

"The Demonslayer's child," another of the Rain ANBU hissed. "It is blasphemy for her to enter this sacred place. None of them should be here."

Aumono laughed. "That's for me to determine, lieutenant, not you. I happen to think the Hyuuga and the Haruno girl will be quite useful." Aumono turned to the Leaf genin. "Now, do you all understand the mission? I am especially referring to the mentally disabled ape in the green jumpsuit."

"Stop insulting me, damnit!" Lee said. "Protect the Asylum! I understand!"

"Lee, listen," Neji said. "Akatsuki is attacking the Asylum for one reason only. They want to kill as many of Hanzou's human sacrifices… martyrs, if you prefer… as possible. The more martyrs they kill, the weaker Hanzou becomes. Our mission is to protect the martyrs. Since the martyrs are spread all throughout the Asylum, the defending forces will have to spread out as well. Each team of defenders will be responsible for protecting one specific sector of the Asylum. Get it?"

"Oh," Lee said.

"We'll go to the main pool on the ground floor," Aumono said. "It should be more… exciting."

The seven of them jumped and dropped down to the base level of the Asylum. Here the main pool stretched across most of the level. On various raised, interconnected platforms above the pool there kneeled hundreds of martyrs. Many teams of Ame and Konoha ANBU were already in place, ready to defend the martyrs. But there were clearly holes in the defense—a consequence of being
undermanned from the attack Hanzou was leading on the Akatsuki base. The genin took a spot in one of these holes.

At last Sakura learned the names of the three rain genin. The leader was Mukai Aumono, the only grandson of Lord Hanzou, tall and aristocratically handsome. The other boy genin was Junichiro Tenshe, a short, almost pudgy frog-like boy with splottes on his face. The bloodthirsty girl genin was Kyoroku Erima. Erima cradled a long, black knife that seemed to cast no shadow; occasionally she would lick the tip of the knife as if in a caress. *The #1 elite genin team in Ame*, Sakura thought. *And the #1 elite Konoha genin team. And me. A fine company.*

The seven of them waited, but not for long.

The Akatsuki attack was well organized. The sounds of fighting outside quickly grew loud, deafening. Only minutes had passed and already the terrorists had made it to the Asylum gates. Sakura brandished her chakra-cast kunai in one hand, and reached her other hand into her shuriken pouch. Her eyes were wide, her heart pounding.

*Damnit... can I... can I be strong this time? Is this part of the test, Tsunade-sensei? Is this my second chance?*

*Is this what I wanted?*

"Akatsuki has the gates," Neji said. He could see through the Asylum walls with the Byakugan. "Thirty seconds to breach."

**CRRREEEKKKK!**

One of the walls of the Asylum shook madly, rippling and cracking even though it was made of five-meter thick steel. A giant vertical gash was hacked into the side, from the base, streaking upward.

Lee was crouched next to her. "Sakura-chan!" he whispered. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah," she said.

**CRRREEEKKKK!**

Another gash was cut into the wall, a vertical line parallel to the first. The Akatsuki outside were trying to cut open a hole, a door, into the Asylum.

"Don't worry!" Lee said, smiling. "I'll protect you!"

**CRRREEEKKKK!**

A third gash was cut into the wall, horizontal to the first two lines, so that the wall was now cut apart on all three sides. The door was complete. Now Akatsuki only had to open it. All the defending ninjas prepared themselves for the onslaught. For a moment there was complete silence in the Asylum, except for one sound. One prayer.

The prayer of the Rain Priests had reached their greatest fury. "—Oh Lord Hanzou, save us! Deliver us from evil! Save us! Oh—"

**BOOM!**

The wall fell forward, a giant slab of metal, blasted into the Asylum.

A dozen destructive jutsu exploded at once from both sides.
"Water Release: Great Waterfall!"
"Water Release: Water Dragon Bullet!"
"Water Release: Rising Water Slicer!"
"Water Release: Tidal Shield!"
"Fire Release: Dragon Fire!"
"Fire Release: Great Fireball!"
"Earth Release: Bedrock Coffin!"
"Earth Release: Sinister Spikes!"
"Wind Release: Vacuum Wave!"
"Wind Release: Beast Wave Palm!"
"Lightning Release: Air Static Charge!"
"Lightning Release: Electromagnetic Murder!"

The jutsu collided halfway in the middle of the doorway, a giant roiling furnace of nightmarish elemental destruction, steam and storm and quake and lava and thunder. Blinding, indescribable power. But both sides were evenly matched. The jutsu neutralized each other.

Into the breach rushed Akatsuki.

"Kill them all!" Aumono roared to the defending shinobi.

From their perches within the maze of walkways and platforms and tanks, the defenders threw a furious hail of weaponry—senbon needles, kunai, shuriken, spears and arrows—to meet the Akatsuki attack. Most of the first wave of Akatsuki was ripped apart by the assault, falling where they lay in horrible disfigurement. But more rushed in immediately, dodging the weaponry now that they had seen the location of the defenders.

"Exploding Needle Shower!" the Akatsuki ninjas shouted. Spinning bamboo tubes were launched into the air, into the defenders' midst, and from the tubes thousands of long, thin senbon needles burst out in all directions.

It wasn't hard for Sakura to take cover, but that wasn't the point of the attack. The defenders could dodge the needles, but they couldn't stop all of them. Many of them hit the human sacrifices, the motionless martyrs. When the martyrs were hit by a senbon, even if they were just grazed, they collapsed immediately, falling dead to the floor. Poison! Sakura realized. The senbon were poisoned.

"Everyone cover a side!" Aumono yelled. "Don't let the senbon through!"

Sakura threw shuriken as best she could. The Akatsuki needle tubes were everywhere, hundreds of them, and needles shot through the air like sand in a sandstorm. By her side Tenten was throwing kunai at a blistering rate. Lee used his taijutsu speed to parry the senbon with his arms and legs. Aumono, Tenshe, and Erima used senbon themselves, controlling multiple senbon via barely visible chakra strings, weaving an impenetrable curtain of razor needles. Neji used Gentle Fist taijutsu and at the same time threw kunai enhanced with his chakra in opposite directions. With perfect accuracy the earth chakra-flow kunai hit the needle tubes closest to them and exploded, destroying the tubes.
Somehow the seven of them managed to stop the blizzard of needles from hitting any more martyrs.

"Exploding Needle Shower!" the Akatsuki shouted again. A second wave of senbon burst outward. But this time the needles were much more dangerous.

They were wrapped in explosive tags.

Wherever the senbon touched anything they exploded. Explosions ricocheted around the Asylum, causing chaos and havoc among the defenders. Platforms and walkways were blown in half and started to fall down through the hollow of the Asylum. From the level above a broken walkway swung down upon them with an earsplitting screeching of metal on metal, sparks flying.

"Shit!" Lee cried.

"Sakura!" Neji said.

"Earth Release: Earth Wall!" Sakura shouted. She flashed through the seals and pressed her hands to the platform. A wall of earth erupted from the metal, covering the martyrs on her platform. The walkway crashed down, breaking on the wall of earth. Senbon needles with explosive tags slammed into the wall and exploded, but the wall held, barely. Sakura tried to reinforce the wall with more chakra.

"Four Akatsuki from behind!" Neji shouted.

They turned just as three ninjas leapt from behind them.

Standing in place, Erima silently reached out and flicked the strange black knife in her hand. Somehow, the shadow of the knife fell on the throat of the Akatsuki ninja in the center, even though he was far out of reach, and a bright red slit appeared there. The Akatsuki fell, blood gushing out.

Lee leaped up to meet another ninja, the one on the left. "For all those who died on December 7th!" Lee shouted. He attacked in a blur of taijutsu.

Tenshe met the third ninja from the side, throwing a web of poison needles of his own.

But immediately behind the first three Akatsuki leapt a fourth ninja. "Exploding Needle Shower!" the ninja screamed. This time the bamboo tube shot out directly above them. It spun, sending out a blizzard of poisoned senbon at point blank range.

"Kaiten!" Neji said, going into a massive blue-white chakra spin that protected them from the needles. But he couldn't deflect the ones not headed in his direction. Multiple martyrs were hit directly by the poison needles; the senbon embedded in their flesh. And the other senbon—

"Explosive tags!" Tenten yelled. All the senbon had explosive tags on them.

"Goddamnit, run!" Aumono yelled.

They ran. Sakura and Tenten leapt to the left just as the martyrs that had been hit by needles exploded, destroying their original platform. Sakura and Tenten jumped onto the platform next to the one that had sunk. The martyrs on this platform were still alive. It was up to the two kunoichi to protect them now. They moved to opposite ends of the platform, watching carefully for any sign of attack.

"This is bad," Tenten said. "I can't even see anything."
"Neither can the enemy," Sakura said. *But the enemy doesn't need to see us, do they?* That was a bad disadvantage for the defenders.

The Asylum was all in darkness. The power had been cut, and the hole the Akatsuki had entered through had somehow been sealed up, too; Sakura guessed to prevent reinforcements from coming. Though whether it was rain-nin or Akatsuki reinforcements she couldn't say. Now only the faint light of momentary explosions allowed them to see. If any attack came they would have to listen for the sound in order to detect it in time. The noise of battle was all around her, above and to the sides. Sakura strained her ears to their limit.

*There!*

Through the smoke the Akatsuki ninjas attacked.

One leapt at Tenten, and Tenten threw ranged weapons at him, but he blocked them in midair and took Tenten in the chest with a kick. Sakura made to help her but another ninja attacked her simultaneously. Sakura blocked the ninja's kunai with her own chakra-cast kunai. The super sharp edge of the chakra kunai bit into the metal kunai deeply, catching it. Sakura immediately brought her other kunai up for a counter-thrust, but the Akatsuki blocked her thrust with his own kunai. For a moment they struggled as their weapons locked on each other. But the Akatsuki's strength was greater than her own, and he forced her down on one knee. Behind her she heard Tenten scream in pain. *Damn!*

"Sakura-chan!" the voice of Lee called from somewhere near her.

"Here!" she shouted.

An explosion occurred above them, a flash of light, and for an instant Sakura stared into the Akatsuki ninja's face. He was a young man. On his forehead he wore a metal forehead protector etched with four parallel lines, the symbol of Rain, except with an additional horizontal line slashed through it. A Rain missing-nin. An expression of utter hatred was twisted in his baby blue eyes. *"Go to hell, you damn fascists!"* he spat.

"Binding," she whispered. For a split second the genjutsu worked again, freezing the Akatsuki's muscles. Sakura attacked with all the force she had, whipping around her chakra-cast kunai to stab the ninja in the throat. But the ninja reacted too fast, breaking the genjutsu, flipping backwards and kicking brutally Sakura in the stomach. Sakura, off-balance, went flying down hard to the metal platform, the breath knocked out of her. She cried out in pain.

The Akatsuki stabbed down with his kunai at Sakura's head. There was no way Sakura could dodge or block it, but somehow Sakura managed by pure instinct to throw her own chakra-cast kunai at the ninja's face. She didn't think it would work but it was extremely fast—twice as fast as an ordinary kunai—and the ninja had to dodge the kunai, interrupting his otherwise fatal thrust. The kunai whistled upwards into the smoky darkness. Sakura rolled to the side, avoiding the ninja's next kunai attack, and jumped back up to her feet.

"Stay away from Sakura-chan, terrorist!" a voice shouted from behind her. Rock Lee entered the fight with a flying dropkick. *"Dynamic Entry!"* His weights were off and from his speed he looked like he had opened at least one Chakra Gate.

The Akatsuki blocked Lee's kick. He threw his kunai at Lee, who dodged and immediately engaged again. But the attack gave the Akatsuki an opening to pull senbon out of his robe. He started to throw them at an incredible rate. Even as the two of them fought hand to hand he was throwing senbon. None of them hit Lee, but the ninja wasn't aiming for Lee. *Fuck!* Sakura noticed.
"Lee!" Sakura said. "He's killing the martyrs with the senbon!"

"Fascist fools!" the Akatsuki cried. "You can't stop the New Dawn! We will destroy this place of abomination!"

Sakura ran in front of the martyrs, whipping out her kunai and shuriken to try to intercept the needles. But it was too hard to see in the darkness. Some senbon shot past her and stabbed into the martyrs behind. The martyrs died, poisoned, collapsing to the floor. There were now only about five left. Damn! This is bad!

Sakura didn't want to use this jutsu, because it took so much chakra, but it looked like she had to. "Mud Clone!" she shouted. Two clones created from her chakra, shaped with the element of earth, sprung up around her. She hoped two would be enough. She didn't control the clones directly—they weren't her—but they could act with her original intentions. One of the clones leapt in front of the remaining living martyrs, just in time to block another wave of senbon. A dozen needles pierced and stuck in her clone body. The clone turned back into mud upon taking such damage, but it had served its purpose.

Meanwhile she and her other clone attacked the Akatsuki ninja with Lee.


Sakura and Lee dodged to either side of the Water Shark Missile, while one of Sakura's mud clones blocked it directly in order to keep the martyrs unharmed. The attack dissipated.

Yet the Akatsuki ninja did not stop there. He threw a hail of needles at the martyrs. Lured to opposite sides of the platform, on the wrong bank, neither Sakura nor Lee was in a position to block them. "For the New Dawn!" the Rain missing-nin cried out.

The five or so kneeling martyrs still alive on the platform fell to the senbon needles, like bowling pins, row by row. In the blink of an eye there was only one martyr still alive on the platform. She had survived because she was shorter than the rest, and had been protected by the height of the martyrs around her. A girl, a little girl. The girl was kneeling with her hands on her knees as if in prostration. She was completely motionless. There was another explosion above them, and for the first time Sakura saw her clearly. The little girl's face was twisted into a grotesque expression of hell. Her mouth was gaping wide open, as if she was screaming, but no sound came out.

The Akatsuki ninja threw a single needle at the martyr to kill her.

Out of nowhere, in the darkness and the shadows of the Asylum, a man stepped out. It was one of the Rain Priests. Sakura had no idea where he had come from. He stepped between the poisoned needle and the girl martyr. The needle pierced him through the stomach and stuck there.

"Lord Hanzou… save us… deliver us…" the priest whispered as he sunk to the floor.

"You brainwashed cult fascists!" the Akatsuki ninja screamed. "We're trying to release these people from their torment, why do you stop us?"

He threw more senbon, a storm of them, enraged.

Suddenly Neji was there, jumping down in front of the martyr from a higher level above. With the Gentle Fist taijutsu style he easily parried every one of the senbon.

At the same time Mukai Aumono emerged from the water behind the ninja. He pointed his fingertips
at the Akatsuki, and thrust them forward slightly. "Reap," he said.

Instantly the young ninja was split in two at the chest. It was an invisible cutting attack—like a knife through butter—that went straight through the ninja's flesh. The Akatsuki missing-nin just had time to gurgle a gasp, which was full of red liquid. Then the top half of his body, the chest and head, slid down into the water, bobbing, and the bottom half followed. Blood stained the pool.

"We saved one martyr," Neji said.

Aumono laughed. "And we killed five traitors."

Now the other genin arrived at the platform, together. Erima, Tenshe, Tenten. They were all alive. No, something was wrong. Tenshe was carrying an unconscious Tenten in his arms.

"Tenten!" Lee shouted.

Sakura and Lee rushed over to her. Tenshe laid Tenten's body on the floor. Sakura saw that a senbon had grazed Tenten's neck, leaving a slight red line of blood. Poisoned.

"Is she alive?" Lee cried.

"For now," Sakura said. She moved her hands over Tenten's body, using the Mystical Palm medical jutsu to feel out her condition. "What kind of poison is this?" she asked Tenshe. "You must know."

"It's a neurotoxin distilled from the Kokaeo tree of Rain," said Tenshe. "It attacks the muscle nerves… it'll stop her heart…"

That was bad. It was impossible to extract the poison; it had already attached itself to Tenten's nerve cells, like ink staining over paper. What could she do? Think, Sakura! If the poison attacks the nervous system...

Inspiration struck her. Sakura could use the chakra circulatory system as a workaround instead. It was like the opposite of the Binding genjutsu, using the same principle to stimulate instead of freeze the muscles. She could supercharge Tenten's chakra circulatory system, which was unaffected by the poison, and use it to temporarily stimulate Tenten's vital organs. The procedure would require a surgical bypass to connect the systems together. She concentrated, and a chakra scalpel formed in her hand. She worked as quickly as she could. There… yes, done…

"I stabilized her," Sakura said. Lee, who had been very tense, gave her a thumbs up. Sakura smiled back, but she was very tired. She slumped to the floor, breathing hard. The healing had taken most of her remaining chakra. Only a couple minutes had passed since the battle had begun, but it felt like forever.

Elsewhere, the defenders in the Asylum seemed to be holding their ground and driving the Akatsuki back. It was still so dark she couldn't really tell. At least no one was attacking them.

"What's happening?" Sakura asked Neji.

"Battle's dying down," Neji said. "The ground level is secure, though there's still some fighting on the higher levels. I don't know what's happening outside."

"The strongest Akatsuki are still—" Aumono said.

SHHHKKKKREEEEEETTTTTT!
The roof of the Asylum blew up.
The roof of the Asylum blew up.

The roof exploded, shattering into a thousand pieces. Through the massive hole the light of the dawn spilled into the tower; and something else as well.

Rain fell down into the Asylum.

Four black-and-red robed Akatsuki dropped down with the rain, onto a large platform almost directly in the central nexus of the Asylum. All eyes turned to look at them, all the ninjas in the tower, and the fighting stopped for a single moment. There was silence.

Standing in the center of the team of newly arrived Akatsuki was a small, slight-looking man, barely taller than Sakura herself, but somehow clearly the leader. His face was covered completely in scarred, burned skin, dead and black. It was horrifying to look at.

The man spoke. "Look at you cowards… hiding behind this pathetic shell of a tower… sacrificing these helpless innocents to protect you. An abomination… a blasphemy! But this dawn the Lord Pain has spoken. The innocents… shall… be freed! The Asylum… shall… BURN!"

The rain lit on fire.

"Fuck!" Aumono screamed. "It's Mizuho! The demon fire!"

The whole Asylum was suddenly flooded in a hellish light. It was the light of burning water. The rain was on fire. Every drop, a blazing flame. Where the rain touched a person, it burned through them, on Akatsuki and rain-nin and leaf-nin and martyr alike. Everyone. The martyrs died mutely, but the living victims of Mizuho screamed. They rolled on the ground desperately, screaming, shrieking, trying to stamp out the fire, but there was no escape. The fire consumed them to the bone. Sakura could only stare as a torrent of burning rain fell on her from the sky—

"Kaiten!" Neji shouted at the last moment. A whirlwind of concentrated chakra burst from his body, holding back the burning rain from hitting the genin. But Neji could only keep up such an intense spin for a few seconds.

"Get away! Run!" Aumono shouted. "That's demon fire, it burns on water itself, it'll burn through anything!"

Sakura ran. She grabbed Tenten's unconscious body to her chest and leapt into the main pool of water under her. She meant to escape the burning rain by staying under the surface of the pool. But Mizuho was even more horrible than she imagined.

The fire burned under the water.

The Mizuho rain splashed against the surface of the pool, lighting the surface on fire. But it did not stop there. The main pool was large, dozens of meters deep, filled with cold dark water. Sakura tried to swim downwards, towards the bottom of the pool, but the fire chased her down. Combustion requires oxygen, she thought. The fire should weaken the further away it gets away from the air. But the demon fire only seemed to get stronger the more water it devoured. Huge billows and flames of red-orange fire danced through the pool.

I have to use Walking With Water! Sakura thought.
It was her only chance. If she could push the water back, the Mizuho fire would be held back, too. She wedged herself into one of the bottom corners of the pool and tried to concentrate… tried to form the chakra projection field she had just learned a few hours ago. Tenten, she remembered. The field would have to include her. It would have to be larger, then. Not just like a cloak but a spherical bubble, extended outwards from her body.

Sakura made the chakra projection field just in time. The Mizuho waterfire was stopped bare centimeters from her body. Everywhere an ocean of fire surrounded her, so bright she had to cover her face with her arms in order not to go blind. The heat was immense, and she could feel her skin start to blister. It wasn't easy to hold back the waterfire. The water pressure was greater at the bottom of the pool, and it felt like all the weight of the water was pressing down on her little chakra bubble.

She could only hope someone would come and rescue her and Tenten before she ran out of chakra. *Or just kill that scarred Akatsuki bastard.* Sakura had heard tales of the Mizuho bloodline was the infamous bloodline power of the Misain clan of Rain. *Demon fire,* they called it. The ability to burn water itself, lighting any source of water on fire with a single thought. The resulting fire was unquenchable. The only way to stop the Mizuho was to stop the user himself.

With her eyes closed, all she had for warning was the sound. The faint, faint sound of a whistle through the water.

Sakura opened her eyes to see a long poisoned needle come shooting through the waterfire. *Fuck!* Its speed was greatly slowed down by her own chakra projection field, but Sakura couldn't move well with all her energy being used to hold back the water. Still, she managed to dodge it.

The dozen needles that followed were another matter.

Sakura had no time to react to the surprise attack except by pure instinct. Clutching Tenten she tried to escape upwards in the water, but the senbon seemed to come from all directions at once. One senbon came directly for her face. The thin kimono she was wearing, not changed from her training during the night before, afforded her no protection to block the senbon. Sakura brought her free left forearm up to protect her face instead. The senbon shot through the forearm with the force of a hammer, puncturing right through the bone. Blood spurted out over her face.

Sakura shrieked, reeling in the water. The pain was hideous. Another needle slammed through her thigh, and yet another into her lower abdomen, right through a kidney. Three needles. Three poisons. She felt the poison immediately. It was a numbness that spread through her body, taking away the pain but worse than it, because it meant death. *My muscles…* The poison from the senbons was shutting down her nervous system. As soon as she fell unconscious her chakra projection field would collapse and the Mizuho would burn her away. She was already blacking out. The Mizuho waterfire rushed in, lapping at her exposed skin. *Damn it... it can't end like this...*

A body brushed against Sakura’s face.

Tenten. She had forgotten about her. The other girl was badly burned, and a senbon needle stuck out of her shoulder. Tenten floated limply in the chakra field, like she was sleeping. The sight of Tenten woke something within Sakura's fading consciousness. *Tenten... I can't die now... I have to save her…*

There had to be a way.

*... I have... to make up for what I did—*
And there was.

On the edge of death Sakura reached deep, deep inside herself, and by sheer willpower did the only thing that she could.

Sakura opened the First Chakra Gate.

Then she opened the Second Chakra Gate.

It was like turning a damn switch. It wasn't hard at all, once you knew how. Once you found the switch. It was finding it that was hard. But she had found it when she learned Walking With Water. She had found it and now she used the forbidden jutsu, the kinjutsu that released the protective limits on her own body, because she couldn't fail again, she wouldn't allow herself to do so, not ever again.

A tidal wave of chakra flooded through Sakura. She felt completely alive. The strength, the energy, the power. The poison faded away in her consciousness. It was still there, of course, but temporarily overpowered by the overwhelming surge of chakra from the two open Gates. Chakra overflowed from her tenketsu pores, more than she could blast out. Her muscles bulged, multiplied in strength and speed. With her bare hands she grabbed the poison senbon and pulled them out of her body.

Sakura felt invincible.

More poison senbon came shooting at her through the waterfire, but this time Sakura dodged them easily. And Sakura did not only dodge. She attacked. *I'm gonna kill these Akatsuki bastards!* Carrying Tenten under her arm she surged through the Mizuho waterfire, running on a field of swirling chakra. The waterfire rippled around her as she cut through it, hot and blinding. She still couldn't see anything, but now she could hear the needles as they were moving through the water, and trace them to their source. It seemed there was one ninja attacking her, a few meters away. Sakura adjusted the chakra discharge from her tenketsu and changed directions to meet her attacker. She could hear the ninja swimming toward her as well.

They met in the midst of the burning water.

"Die, terrorist!" Sakura screamed.

"For the New Dawn!" the Akatsuki ninja shouted.

Fighting in the water wasn't like on land, not with chakra projection fields. It was a three-dimensional battle. And now there was no visibility in the blinding waterfire. Only sound and feeling, instinct. The ninja rocketed below Sakura, going for an upward strike. Their respective chakra fields clashed, like two opposed electromagnetic currents, and Sakura felt the point of the ninja's senbon enter her chakra field. The senbon wasn't thrown this time, but was still in the ninja's hand. He was going to try to stab her with it.

Sakura twisted to her left, out of the path of the Akatsuki's attack. Unfortunately she was still holding Tenten, which was slowing her down. Sakura threw one of her poisoned needles at its original owner. The ninja dodged, too easily. "You can't win, girl!" he shouted. "Don't make your death so painful!"

"I'll rip your heart out!" she screamed back. Sakura attacked him with a spinning kick. The ninja dodged again, and counterattacked with a thrust of his senbon as he jetted down her right flank. The needle stabbed her through her left arm. Searing pain shot through her body, and a new flood of poison.

The terrorist was faster than her, even with two Chakra Gates open. He attacked aggressively,
sensing weakness. Another senbon needle shot through Sakura's back and out the front of her chest, through the lung. Intellectually Sakura knew she was losing. Losing blood, losing chakra, losing time. But by now she was not thinking intellectually.

Instead there was a voice screaming in her head. The voice was screaming at her to kill. *Kill him, cut his throat!* A frontal assault on the Akatsuki terrorist was the only chance she had. With a final burst of chakra Sakura rocketed at him through the burning flames, using Tenten as a shield. "Die!" Sakura shrieked.

The Akatsuki shinobi attacked her with another senbon. The needle stabbed through Tenten's body and into Sakura's chest, just missing her heart, deflected by Tenten's ribcage. Sakura felt a wrenching agony and almost lost consciousness, her chakra field flickering, collapsing. But her momentum carried her forward.

Through blinding Mizuho fire, she just managed to make out a Rain missing-nin forehead protector, and a black cloak embroidered with red clouds, and the face and the neck of a man.

Sakura opened her mouth and bit down on the man's throat.

The man cried out as Sakura's teeth chomped down on his throat, gnawing on insanely and not letting go. The taste of hot, roaring blood was in her mouth. "Crazy bitch!" the man gasped. He brought his fist about and punched Sakura viciously in the face. She blacked out for a second, dazed, but somehow held on to his neck. Somehow not letting go was the most important thing in all the world. *Cut his throat! Drink his blood!* She imagined the man screaming, face twisted in a grotesque expression of hell, mouth gaping wide open, but no sound would come out.

The man punched again and Sakura's jaw broke. Finally now Sakura was forced away from the man's throat. Dazed by the Akatsuki's blows, she was blown back aimlessly in the Mizuho. Before the fire closed in between them she saw the man make a hand seal.


The water came lancing out of his hands, a missile shaped like a shark. And as the Water Shark Missile went through the Mizuho it caught fire. And the water became death. There was no way to dodge it—

Suddenly there was a man there in front of her. A powerful cloak of golden chakra billowed around him. The man raised his leg and, very simply, kicked the waterfire Water Shark Missile. His kick was so strong that he reversed the missile's direction, blowing it back toward the original location from which it had come. Sakura could not see past the wall of fire, but as the Water Shark Missile returned to its source she heard a voice scream horribly for a moment. Then the voice didn't scream.

The man turned to her. "$\text{Are you all right, Sakura?}$" the man asked.

Sakura attacked him. "$\text{Die!}$" she screamed. *Kill him, cut his throat!* Her vision was red, drenched in blood and blind with afterimages of flames. She tried to stab the terrorist with the senbon she was still holding so tightly in her hand. The terrorist grabbed her limbs, captured her.

The man shook her. "$\text{Sakura... what are you doing? It's me! It's Maito Gai!}$"

Sakura did not hear him. "$\text{I'll rip your heart out!}$" She tried to bite down on the terrorist's throat, but the terrorist pressed her down against him.

Gai held her tightly. "$\text{Sakura, listen to me! It's Gai! You opened too many Gates, you're not in your right mind!}$"
As he spoke everything shook. The pool, the whole Asylum, rocking from side to side, as if it was going to collapse. But then the shaking stopped. Suddenly it was dark. Sakura didn't understand why. Then she saw that the water wasn't burning. Not… burning? No, it was just water again. Normal water, cold, silent. No more waterfire.

No more Mizuho.

The darkness shook Sakura out of her temporary insanity.

She looked up at Maito Gai. Now Sakura actually saw him for what he was. He wasn't a terrorist. He wasn't the enemy. He was the man who had just saved her life. "Gai-sama..." she whispered, trailing off.

"It's all right, Sakura," Gai said gently. "It's over now. The battle's over!"

Sakura nodded numbly.

Gai took her and Tenten in his arms and leaped out of the water. They landed back on the main platform. Sakura sank to her knees, but she forced herself to look around. She had to see what had happened. Tosuken the Chameleon was there. Neji and Aumono were there, too. Erima. Tenshe. Lee. All burned, she saw, badly burned. But alive.

"Sakura-chan!" Lee shouted. He rushed over to her side.

The battle was truly over now. Light spilled into the Asylum from the broken roof. The inside of the Asylum was mostly destroyed, but still standing. From the looks of it at least half the martyrs were dead. Dead ninjas, too, hundreds of them, their charred corpses and body parts scattered everywhere. There was still some fighting going on, some remnants of Akatsuki, but the defenders were in clear control. The few remaining Akatsuki did not attempt to escape. In front of her Sakura saw a missing-nin run himself into the blade of an Ame ANBU in order to get into a position to kill the martyr behind the ANBU. But the missing-nin's senbon was blocked by another defender. His attack failed, the Akatsuki terrorist sunk to the floor, dead. Suicide. It had been a suicide mission all along.

Suddenly Sakura had a strange thought. Erima had been right, she thought, but wrong as well. The rain washed away the blood of the dead, both traitor and loyalist alike.

In front of her she saw something familiar, fallen on the platform. Something that glittered in the dawn light, and glowed silver like a folded mirror. She picked it up. It was the chakra-cast kunai she had thrown.

"Lee..." she whispered.

"Sakura-chan?"

Now the effects of the Gates wore off. She felt an immense pain, a burning in her muscles, as if they were breaking apart. And then a blank numbness. The poison was overtaking her. Lee clutched her, caught her in his arms. She felt tired... so tired...

"Lee... I..."

There was only darkness, and it was cold as snow.
For the first time in five months, the dream changed.

It was cold again, and snow covered the ground in heaps and drifts. The sickle moon hung high in the pale sky, and naked trees stood solitary against the horizon dark. Everything was so still and silent. Even the little bubbling brook was frozen, and the wooden bridge over it deserted, except for her and him.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" she says. "I never noticed it before."

"No. You're a spring girl," he says.

She laughs. "And what season are you, Uchiha Sasuke?"

He doesn't say anything, but draws her close. His breath is hot on her face and his mouth tastes like fire. But the kiss ends. Then he draws back, as if frightened of her.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

He pauses. "You can't come with me," he says.

"Come where?"

His voice is hard. "Don't you get it? I'm different from you. There's something… something I have to do…"

With horror she understands. "The White Snake… you can't. That's treason!"

"Is it?" he asks. Suddenly he turns, and his black eyes are red with swirling flames, like blood.

"You're the traitor!" a voice screams behind her. She spins around, and sees the girl. A girl, a little girl. The girl was kneeling with her hands on her knees as if in prostration. She was completely motionless. There was another explosion above them, and for the first time Sakura saw her clearly. The little girl's face was twisted into a grotesque expression of hell. Her mouth was gaping wide open, as if she was screaming, but no sound came out. "You're the traitor!" the girl screams. "They're trying to save me!"

"No," Sakura says. "No." It was raining, and the rain lit on fire. Every drop, a blazing flame. Where the rain touched the girl, it ate through her, consumed her to the bone. "Sasuke! Please!" she cries. "Don't!"

Sasuke laughs, and his face was scarred, burned skin, dead and black. It was horrifying to look at. He spoke. "An abomination… a blasphemy! But this dawn the Lord Pain has spoken. The innocents… shall… be freed! The Asylum… shall… BURN!" The rain poured down in torrents now, drowning the world. She was swept away in a flood of burning water. Through the blinding fire she just managed to make out a black cloak embroidered with red clouds, and the face and the neck of a man. Sakura opened her mouth and bit down on the man's throat. The taste of hot, roaring blood was in her mouth. "Crazy bitch!" the man gasps, and then she sees the man is Sasuke.

Sasuke brings his fist about and punches Sakura viciously in the face. She blacks out for a second, dazed. Suddenly she was in a cave filled with ice, glittering limestone icicles that dripped from the ceiling in long daggers. And in the middle of this cavern there was a terrible thing. It was immense,
frozen, a gigantic metal and flesh construct covered in ice, fed by huge, black cables that burst from the floor and which thrust deep into its chest—like a giant frozen incubator, a metal and flesh womb. The thing shrieked, as if damaged, and then Sakura saw it—glittering there, gleaming, within the gaping hole ripped open in its side—the crystal, the fetus, at the core of that womb. The Annihilation Heart. And in her hands the fetus heart seemed as if it were a face, an eyeless mouth. The mouth screamed. "'Fool,' the mouth whispers. 'That is what war is. That is what this life means.'"

"No!" she screams. "No! You damn liar!" But the heart was melting in her hands, turning into something red that poured over her hands like a hot bath. Blood. Now it was dry, cold. Her hands shook. "Sakura!" someone yells. She looked for the voice, but all she saw was the forest. The forest burned. Wild tongues of flame leapt from trunk to trunk, lighting up trees like chandeliers in the dark. Something hit her hard in the chest. She flew back into a tree trunk and cried out in pain, falling, crashing to the forest floor. On her hands and knees in the dirt, dazed, Sakura could barely manage to raise her head to see her attacker.

"I didn't lie," Sasuke says. He wears the cloak of Akatsuki, and his face is a mask of black cloth. "But you did. Twice you lied and then twice more. Don't you get it? Don't you get it?"

"Don't leave!" she screams, desperate, pleading. "I won't let you!"

She rushes at him with balled fists. But he catches her up easily. She's so weak and helpless. All she can do is cry. Through a haze of blurry tears she sees him silhouetted black against the burning forest. He stretches out the palm of his hand toward her, and then his eyes are golden flames.

"Forget me, Sakura," he whispers—

"NO!" the girl screamed, bolting up in her bed. She almost jumped out of the bed altogether, so horrible was the nightmare. But a firm hand stayed her.

"It's all right, Sakura," said Honjo Micho, Konoha Chief of Medicine.

"Micho-sama..." Sakura whispered. For a moment she could not figure out where she was. Then she remembered. The Asylum. She had fought in the battle in the Asylum, and she had passed out afterwards. She must be in the hospital in the Rain Country. Groaning, she wiped the sweat off her face with a bed sheet and tried to calm herself.

"Nightmare?" Micho asked.

She nodded.

Sakura lay back on the hospital bed. The metal ceiling was just clean enough to make out her own reflection in it, and it wasn't a pretty sight. She was covered in bandages from head to toe. No wonder, she must have been stabbed a dozen times by poisoned needles. Oh, and burned by Mizuho waterfire. Oh, and used a kinjutsu by opening the Chakra Gates. Her head still swam from the aftershock of the battle.

"What happened?" she asked Micho. "After?"

"You almost died. Sucked up enough poison to bring down the whole civilian population of Konoha. We had to take it out of your chest with a pipe. As damned a thing as I ever saw. You've been out for three days."

"And the others?" Sakura asked. "The battle... my friends..."

"They're fine. At least in a physical sense. Your friend Ino and especially that Rock Lee boy seem to
be very upset over your injuries. They've both been staying by your bedside around the clock. I just shooed them out, in fact. Told them you wouldn't wake up for another few days at least." Micho smiled. "But it seems that nightmare of yours has made me into a liar."

Sakura nodded. The two of them retreated into silence for a while. Micho stared at Sakura from his seat by the side of the bed. The old doctor looked even more weary than usual, and his hair was positively scandalous. His craggy face was grave.

At last he cleared his throat and spoke up. "Sakura… pardon me if I am getting too personal, but I... I still cannot forget your face from that night."

"What night?" she asked, though of course she knew.

"The night that Sarutobi Saisen died… and you came into the hospital with Asuma's unconscious body. Your face was covered with blood. You looked—so young, so frightened. But it was your eyes that were the most horrible. They were filled with pain. Dying like trash… never-ending hatred… the pain that never heals… that is what I saw in your face. No child should ever have that face! It's monstrous! Taking children and training them to—to become weapons… to kill other human beings… and to be killed…" Micho trailed off.

"That is the way of the shinobi," Sakura said.

The old doctor looked away. His voice was soft. "Yes. But you're not a shinobi, Sakura. The Hokage took away your forehead protector. She freed you… you don't have to fight anymore. You can leave all this torment behind… I don't understand. You're such a promising medical talent. You can go to Ashwarren, enter a civilian medical school, become a doctor. You can save, Sakura, not kill. Isn't that what you want?"

What do you want, girl? a voice echoed in Sakura's memory. What, exactly, do you want?

Just then the door to the hospital room slammed open. Yamanaka Ino burst in. "Hah!" she said. "You cactus! I knew I heard your voice. Welcome back to the world of the living. Thank god, just in time too. I was getting tired of taking care of your stupid pig. Even though you're supposed to be the caretaker!"

Tonton was in Ino's arms. The fat pink pig squealed and burst onto the bed, crawling onto Sakura's chest and snuggling up to her. Tonton was very excited to see her. Sakura giggled, feeling the pig lick her face with her little tongue. "Ow, that hurts," she said.

"Be careful she doesn't poop on you," Ino said. "Yes, that did happen to me yesterday!"

Sakura giggled. "Tonton only does that to people she likes."

"How charming... what would the pig do if she didn't like me, I wonder? This is all your fault, anyway. First running off to some majorly epic battle against Akatsuki—without telling me!—and then for getting knocked into a coma in said battle. Jeez… sounds fun. Can't believe I missed it." Ino swished her long ponytail. "I would have kicked Akatsuki ass!"

Sakura had almost forgotten about the attack. "The battle… the attack on the Akatsuki base. Did we win?"

"Of course we won, duh!" Ino said.

Micho smiled faintly. He didn't mention what they were talking about before. "The Akatsuki base was destroyed in the Battle of Darkness Barrier with only minor causalities. Akatsuki was routed,
and the Akatsuki counterattack on Ame failed. And there's one more thing." He paused. "The Hokage has reached an accord with Lord Hanzou. Rain shall join the United Countries."

The United Countries Embassy left Amegakure three days later.

The departing ninjas and functionaries gathered at the gates of the city, by the rusted drawbridge which led out of it. Sakura tried to look forward, tried not to look back into the city, but was unsuccessful. In truth Amegakure was not much different than before. It was still raining. Warrens of metal towers still rose against the sky, and the immense black face of the Asylum still stood in the city center. The city went on.

It was the Embassy which was different. Rumors flew about the deal that the Hokage had struck with Hanzou over the UC. Publicly, of course, both sides claimed their joint attack on Akatsuki had been highly successful and, as a consequence, they resolved to continue and deepen their military cooperation through the United Countries organization. But many speculated that Konoha had secretly other concessions to Rain. Promises of vast monetary aid. Territorial gains along the border between Fire and Rain. Even a trade of secret jutsu and bloodlines, including the Byakugan. Sakura didn't know what was true or not.

However the deal had been struck, the effect was dramatic. The addition of Rain completely transformed the atmosphere of the Embassy. It was not just the United Countries Embassy in name now, but in practice. As they gathered at the gates hundreds of rain-nins joined them, along with thousands of assorted other Ame personnel and trains of material-laden horses and wagons. They would travel together to Iwa.

Bad feeling between the two villages still ran high, but now they were bonded together, at least in part, by a common enemy. Both the attack against Akatsuki and the counterattack had forced them to trust and rely on each other in the heat of combat. The price for that new-won mutual trust had been the dead. Hundreds of leaf-nins and rain-nins had died in the battle. That, too, was something different about the Embassy. It had gotten larger and smaller at the same time.

Team Tosuken found Sakura and her friends by the storage wagons. "So it seems my grandfather has seen fit to make an alliance with Konoha," Aumono said. He grinned. "Too bad… I'd rather kill you."

"You may still get that chance during the Iwa chuunin exam," said Neji. He paused. "As we will."

Erima's fingers stroked the tip of her strange black knife. Her voice was sad, and soft as water. "You do not know how right you are."

But Aumono only laughed. "Until then, Hyuuga."

The three rain genin turned and walked away. Meanwhile the Embassy began to move. All the ninjas were there, as was the Hokage, who was riding on her white horse. In the fog of the constant rain the Hokage seemed almost like some sort of white wraith, ethereal, otherworldly. She spoke a few words and gave the order to march. Then the Embassy was rolling out of the city gates. But Sakura didn't see Densuke Tosuken, nor Maito Gai. She hadn't seen Gai since the Battle of the Asylum.

"Where's Gai-sama?" Sakura asked.

Lee shook his head. "I dunno. Gai-sensei is never late. It is very strange." He perked up with a sudden thought. "Maybe he's on a secret S-rank mission or something!"
"Exactly right, Lee!" a voice boomed, laughing. The incomparable visage of Maito Gai appeared in a cloud of white smoke next to them. He gave Lee a thumbs up and grinned.

"Gai-sensei!" Lee said.

"I've been given a secret mission in the Rain Country," Gai said. "It may take a long time to complete. I'm afraid I won't be able to join you on the Embassy right just now!"

Lee was shocked. "Gai-sensei! But our team! How can we pass the chuunin exam without you?"

"Don't worry, Lee. I have complete faith in each and every one of you! Remember the springtime passion of youth!"

"Please join us again as soon as possible, Gai-sensei," Neji said. His huge white eyes stared up at the dark towers which surrounded them. "You must not stay too long in Bliss. This is no good place."

Gai smiled sadly. "No, Neji, it is not. This place…this place is old. There is no youth here. Only war… war and death. But it does not have to be this way! The dream of Bliss, of the idealists who founded this city, still lives on. It's the dream of the Fifth Hokage! The dream of the United Countries. A dream… a hope… of peace!"

He paused, and Sakura saw that tears had formed in Maito Gai's eyes. The salt water ran down his cheeks, mingling with the rain. He bent down to Lee, to the smaller boy who so worshiped him that he had even adopted his ridiculous outfit. The man hugged him fiercely. "Lee… I told you that since the day I met you, the purpose of my life has been to train you to become the strongest ninja possible. And I've tried to teach you about what makes a ninja truly strong."

"It's about protecting the people precious to us!" Lee said. "A spirit that never gives up! The Will of Fire!"

"Yes. The Will of Fire… it just as the Hokage said. We are the kindling… and we shall spread fire! A fire of hope. As hope kindles hope, millions more will find it. And one day this untamed fire will reach the darkest, most wretched corners of our world. One day… one last day… the passionate flames of youth will burn even here! There will be peace in the Rain Country. To that splendid purpose, a ninja must gladly give his life!"

"Right!" Lee said. "I understand, Gai-sensei!"

Gai laughed deeply. "Alright. Now go along, all of you!" The Embassy was almost finished moving out of the gates of Bliss. Maito Gai remained within the city, watching them go and waving. The young ninjas made their goodbyes to him.

"Thank you, Gai-sama," Sakura said.

"Haha!" Gai grinned. "No problem, Sakura! Go kick ass!" He shouted after them, his figure gradually receding into the dark pouring rain. "Remember, youth never waits! Don't let anything turn you from the way you have made for yourself! Forge ahead in the end! Make me proud!"

Where the road had reached a conclusion it began again. The road ran back across the Weeping Lands, then downhill and south, toward the border with the Wind Country. After the fierce fighting of the week before, the ninjas of the UC Embassy were wary of possible Akatsuki ambushes or attacks. But they encountered nothing except the rain. At last the storm clouds overhead began to thin, and in the far distance there was a faint haze of golden light. Soon the Embassy would cross over into Wind.
In the Wind Country, Sakura thought, there would be the thing that Rain did not have. There would be the sun.
"Hey, I thought the Wind Country was a desert!" Rock Lee said.

The Embassy had crossed over the border from Rain into a rich, fertile river valley. Horses and buffalo and enormous flocks of birds grazed on tall grass that grew as high as a man. Ancient Kokaeo trees twisted up from the muddy rushing water, and golden monkeys scampered between the exposed roots of the trees which were like tendrils of floating rope. It was no desert. Sakura imagined the sight was what Rain had been like before, before it was cursed.

In truth most of the Wind Country really was a desert, but there was also a river. The Haven River. It continued to rush southwards from the Rain Country. Swelled with the storms of Rain the Haven River cut a straight path south through the otherwise arid land, bringing with it the vital resources of civilization: water, minerals, life. For a time the Embassy followed its path. They passed the major cities of Wind—Sagehall, Yayoi, Soruto—which lined the river's path, and would have gone all the way to Sawara, except that they did not have time after being delayed in Rain for so long. Sawara was the capital city of Wind, sitting at the mouth of the Haven River Delta where the river emptied out into the Sea of the Sage. Sawara's beauty was famous, and many of the people on the Embassy had been looking forward to a short break.

Instead the Embassy turned away from the river and headed west. Here at last was the desert—the Hiroi Desert. Hot, dark red dunes stretched lifeless and barren from horizon to horizon. During the day the sun beat down relentlessly upon the ground, and in the night vicious sandstorms swept across the unprotected dunes. It was the heat that was the worst. Many of the civilians and regular soldiers, and even a few ninjas, succumbed to heat stroke and dehydration. Fortunately here and there were dotted oases, pockets of green life generated from the underground water which flowed beneath much of the Hiroi. The Embassy hopped from oasis to oasis as best they could.

One night, as they trudged over a particularly gigantic dune, they spotted a strange glow of orange light in the distance. As they got closer they saw it was the Candlelit Monastery. Hundreds of thousands of candles burned across every inside and outside surface of the huge temple complex. The smell of smoke and incense was overpowering. As legend had it, it was at this place that the Sage of Six Paths had written the sacred texts of the religion he had founded, Kiyome. The monks burned the candles to light the way to paradise.

They made camp by the Monastery that night. Chiriku, the head Fire Monk, led a group of priests kowtowing up the temple steps, muttering and kneading prayer beads as they went. Many on the Embassy also made the pilgrimage into the Monastery. It was one of the most holy sites in the world, a source of strength and faith for all who followed Kiyome. Sakura was not a follower. Instead she stayed outside in the Embassy camp. But as she went to sleep she could still hear the half-sung, half-whispered sounds of prayer from inside the Candlelit Monastery. Her sleep was full of dreams.

The next day, when it was still early enough to, Sakura went out into the desert by herself to train. Tonton waddled along behind her, rubbing her snout against Sakura's legs with glee. The Hokage was still going to test her when the Embassy got to Iwa. I have to prepare myself.

She decided to continue training her chakra control. Of course she couldn't practice Walking With Water in the desert, but there was something else: sand. The chakra projection fields she had learned to make could be used with any material. Water was just one of the easiest, in the sense that it didn't take much chakra to manipulate. Sand was much heavier and looser.

In the dunes away from the camp she pressed her hand to the sand. She concentrated and released a
burst of spinning chakra from the tenketsu in her palm. The sand beneath caved into a small crater, pushed aside by the chakra. At the same time a spasm of pain shot through her arm. Damn, she thought. It wasn't just her muscles but her chakra circulatory system which was still damaged from opening the Chakra Gates. Nevertheless, the pain wasn't too bad. Sakura pressed on, releasing more chakra from her body.

Now she thrust her hands into the sand and then out again, scooping up fistfuls of sand. The sand seeped down between her fingertips, but she caught it in a chakra projection field. Instead of using chakra to force the sand away, as with water, she used it to hold the sand against her fist. Then she moved it. She spun around and the sand went with her, lengthening out in the chakra field like a spiraling rope, a whip. She crouched down, pulling the field tight to her body. She released the field and then with suppressed energy the sand exploded out around her. Tonton scrabbled away from the flying sand, squealing.

"Shit," a man said. "You've gotten really strong."

Sakura looked up. Sarutobi Asuma was smoking a cigarette in front of her.

"Asuma-sama!" she said, surprised. She jumped to her feet. "You're back!"

Asuma grinned. "Miss me, I hope?"

Tonton crooned and ran in excited circles around Asuma. Sakura was more restrained. She hadn't seen Asuma since they'd left Konoha. Asuma had spent a week in the hospital recovering his strength after his near-demise in the Forest of Death, then he'd been sent on a mission. Now, in Wind, he had come to join the UC Embassy.

"I'm glad you're here, Asuma-sama," Sakura said.

"That's good. I'm glad I'm here, too. Tell me, Sakura. You're the first person I've seen in two days. How's my genin team doing?"

"Uh… well…" Sakura started. Team Asuma—Ino, Chouji, and Anake—had been without a sensei for the month they had been on the Embassy. They were expected to train by themselves, of course, but hadn't taken it seriously at all. At least Ino and Chouji hadn't. They might very well have gotten weaker than they were before. Asuma would not be pleased.

Asuma took Sakura's hesitancy as a confirmation. "Figured as much. Those lazy bastards." He took a draw on his cigarette and blew out smoke. "I'm gonna whip 'em in shape!"

He looked at Sakura. "So you learned how to make chakra projection fields. That's a high-level jutsu. Even I can barely do it. For a genin kunoichi to master something like that… it's like the damn second coming of Tsunade!" Asuma laughed. "Heh… I remember when you and Ino were rivals. You're so far beyond Ino now… it's almost embarrassing to me as a sensei."

"I'm not a ninja anymore," Sakura said.

"No? Then what the hell are you doing on the UC Embassy?"

Because I disobeyed your orders, Asuma-sama. Sakura had almost pushed what had happened to the back of her mind, to the anesthesia of memory. Now it all came rushing back. The burning forest. The masked Sougon, stretching out the palm of his hand toward her, his eyes golden flames. Pug's blown-apart body, bright blue eyes that stared out blankly of a face that seemed as young as her own. The easiest mission of her life. That mission was the reason she was still here. Because I got your brother killed.
She stared down at her hands. "Asuma-sama… I'm sorry about what happened on the mission. It was all my fault."

"No." Asuma shook his head. "It wasn't, Sakura."

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "It should have been me."

"Sakura—" Asuma started.

"And don't tell me you got people killed too! Is that supposed to be make me feel better? That doesn't mean anything." Sakura could not look the Leaf jounin in the face. "Pug's still dead."

Asuma paused for a long moment. "I loved Pug. When I found out he died that was the worst day of my life. And then I promised myself that I would find the killer, and then I would do to him what he had done to Pug. I would kill him. Aye, and I know what it feels like, too. To kill another person." Asuma reach into his belt and brought out a metal trench knife. "I'll take this blade and I'll drive it clean through his throat. He'll still be alive though, still conscious, for a few seconds. He'll still have time to stare up at me with those cursed Enshogan eyes. Then I'll bend down and squash his eyes with my bare hands. And then… I'll have vengeance. Victory. But it won't bring my little brother back. Then I'll only feel an emptiness, a blankness, deep in my soul. Just like all the other killings. And the first killing above all."

The man looked at Sakura. "Have you ever had that feeling, Sakura? Then you don't know anything about killing. Don't ever say it should have been you again. It shouldn't ever be the innocent."

Sakura didn't say anything. Over the horizon a sandstorm was brewing, huge and dark, crashing against the early morning sun like a parched wave. Behind them the candles of the Candlelit Monastery flickered in the sudden harsh wind, and Tonton cowered between Sakura's feet. It was still a long way toward Suna.

The Village Hidden in the Sand

A sandstorm blew from the west. The scalding winds which buffeted them were like whips, and they held thick cloth against their faces, pulled the reins of horses and oxen tight, struggling through the storm. Everything was in pitch darkness. It was night, admittedly, but if not for the sandstorm there should have been stars.

"There!" someone called, shouting to be heard over the dull roar of the sands. "Look!"

Then Sakura saw it too: a dim white glow, in the far distance, like a candle. As the Embassy pushed toward the light they saw it came from a lighthouse. The brilliant white light cut a path through the storm. Around the lighthouse, as if gradually receding from the darkness, they made out high stone walls stained red by the sand, huge and encircling. The snaking peaks of a great sandstone canyon jutted above the walls. Then they knew they had arrived at their destination.

Sunagakure. The Village Hidden in the Sand.

It hadn't even been a year since the invasion, since December 7th—Konoha attacked by Suna allied with Akatsuki. Sakura remembered it all. The surprise attack in the stadium, the chase through the forest, trying to fight Gaara, being defeated in seconds and then used as bait against Sasuke. Worthless during the battle. But she had been useful afterwards, in the aftermath, when all the rest of the ninja were treating their wounds. She could pick up the corpses, the carcasses of both sides, pick them up in wheelbarrows and pile them up in little hills of cold flesh. Some of they had been great ninjas, captains and generals; others, children younger than her. They were not so different in death.

Now Konoha and Suna were allies. An alliance of convenience, just as the invasion had been a war of convenience. If circumstances changed, they would be at each other's throats again as easily as they now bowed their heads in respect. It was the Hokage that had brokered the treaty between Konoha and Suna in the aftermath of December 7th. Many of the villagers had strongly, even violently, disagreed with her decision. But more understood the necessity of the alliance, and ultimately the High Council had backed the Hokage to ratify it. It was no surprise that the Hokage had chosen Suna as one of the major stops on the UC Embassy. If all went well with the visit, the Wind Country would join Rain as the third country to join the UC, and the second greater country.

Then they were here. The sandstorm only seemed to grow harsher as they approached the village walls. The entrance to Suna was little more than a narrow slit in the wall, a shadowed tunnel from desert to civilization, barely wide enough for two wagons side by side. But as the Embassy passed through the tunnel the sandstorm faded out behind them. Then all of a sudden the noise and roar, the wind, was gone. They emerged out of the other side of the tunnel into a wide canyon avenue. Strange, flickering lights lined the road, and Sakura realized they weren't electric—it was torchlight, candlelight. The smell of smoke was in the air. Dim cliffs of scarred red rock loomed around them like scattered glass.

A contingent of Suna ninjas were waiting in welcome at the end of the canyon, including the new Kazekage. Crowds of villagers had also come to see the Embassy. To her surprise, they seemed quite friendly. They cheered and clapped as the Embassy entered the village. Why? In fact, Sakura knew that the treaty of alliance between Konoha and Suna had not been well received in Suna. There had been riots. She suspected that the government had manipulated the welcoming ceremony to exclude those who opposed the alliance, probably even instructed the crowd how to act. It was a staged event.

Many people on the Embassy didn't seem to notice. They waved back, smiling. "This is cool!" Rock
Lee said to her. "The sand-nin really like us now!" "Only because they haven't seen you yet, you creep!" Ino said back. The crowd of flunkies cheered the loudest for the Hokage. She was riding at the front of the Embassy on her white horse. She waved calmly to the gathered Suna crowd, looking like a god. The crowd seemed to cheer more the more they saw her, Senju Tsunade the legendary sannin, Tsunade the Queen of Torment—

The Hokage's upper body exploded.

One second, she was waving to the crowd. The next everything above her waist was gone, her torso tumbling from the horse like a rag doll. A golden haze occupied the space where the Hokage had been. Sakura screamed and rushed toward her sensei. All the leaf-nins were doing the same. There was utter confusion and chaos. An immense uproar, the screaming of horses and men, the drawing of daggers and swords.

"Tsunade-sensei!" Sakura shouted. "Tsunade-sensei!" No—it can't be!

"It's a trap!" she heard a voice yell.

"Damn that demon Gaara!" said another.

"Suna betrayed us! Attack!"

People rushed about in a mad frenzy. The crowd of Suna villagers had turned into a riot, a mob running in all directions. Seemingly out of nowhere dozens of masked Suna ANBU appeared. Sand ninjas surrounded the Embassy. All pretense of friendliness had vanished. Somehow Sakura pushed and forced her way to the front of the Embassy. People were crying, screaming. In the background there was the sound of fighting. Fighting between leaf and sand-nins. "Oh my God, the Fifth's dead!" someone sobbed. And then Sakura saw it too, there it was, unmistakable, two legs and half a torso. She shrieked and threw herself onto the remains of the corpse.

No—no, something was wrong, something was happening. The corpse was… melting. It was slowly dissolving into mud.

"It's a clone," she whispered, then shouted, "It's a mud clone! It's a mud clone!" But her voice was drowned out in the roar of the fighting. Sakura could hear the clash of kunai and swords, the cry of jutsu. Ambush, battle. Another battle. She wouldn't shirk now. No. Where was Tsunade-sensei?

"FOOLS!" a voice called out over the crowd. Suddenly Sakura could not move. Her muscles were totally frozen. Everyone else in the canyon was also frozen in place; only the strongest ninjas, the jounin and ANBU, were able to break free at once. Mass Binding, she realized. The Hokage's jutsu! She stopped the fight.

After a few seconds the Hokage released the Mass Binding. Then everyone could turn to look up at her. She was standing on a rooftop, unharmed. A dead body was thrown behind her shoulder. "Fools," she said. "It was an Akatsuki assassin. That is our true enemy. They seek to destroy us by exploiting the divisions between ourselves. We must not let them. Remember the purpose of this Embassy!"

The fighting stopped. Ninjas that had been locked in hand to hand combat backed away from each other, vaguely embarrassed. The crowd of villagers returned to their places. It was almost like it had been before, except it wasn't. There was no cheering or clapping now. Suna ANBU jumped up onto the rooftop, and the Hokage gave the body of the assassin over to them. Then, very calmly, she walked back to the place where her clone had been blown up.
Sakura was still kneeling in the sand from where she had thrown herself on her sensei's clone, covered in the wet mud of the clone. The Hokage eyed Sakura coolly. "What are you doing, girl? Get off your knees." Sakura scrambled to her feet. In the shock of the attack she had forgotten to stand up. Meanwhile the Hokage's gaze turned away, toward another figure that had just joined them.

It was a child, a boy the same age as her. Sakura knew him. His hair was dust red, his face somehow white even in a desert where the ground itself was sunburned. On the right side of his forehead was tattooed the character for "Kindness," but his eyes seemed to have within them only death. As Sakura looked at the boy a terrible chill ran through her. They had met during the last chuunin exam. He had murdered her friends in cold blood, would have murdered her if Sasuke and Naruto hadn't stopped him. A psychopath, a demon vessel shaped by the Suna elders into a weapon that lived only for killing.

After December 7th they had made him the Fifth Kazekage.

"Welcome to Suna, Hokage-sama," said Sabaku Gaara.

"Indeed," said the Hokage.

The next morning the sandstorm had passed. The dawn sun was bright in the sky. A light breeze blew along the canyons that made up the hidden ninja village, cool and wet. "It's a perfect day to train!" Asuma declared. "And even if it wasn't I'd still make you work your asses off, you lazy bastards." He dragged Ino, Chouji, and Anake out of their beds. Ino pleaded for Sakura to tag along with them, so she went as well, for moral support.

Asuma found them a training field near the Embassy's living quarters, in the northwest district of the village. He ordered the four of them to start running laps while he leaned against a fence and smoked a cigarette. Ino was soon tired out. She collapsed to the ground, groaning. Sakura tried to pull her up.

"You can't really be this pathetic, can you?" Anake asked as he lapped them.

"My muscles are still sore from yesterday," Ino said. "And the day before that and the day before that!" Asuma had been working his genin team day and night ever since he had joined the Embassy. Yesterday had been the worst. Asuma had made them train right through the sandstorm.

"Don't give up," Sakura said. "You can do it!"

"Ah, stuff it, Sakura. You're starting to sound just like your boyfriend."

"He's not my boyfriend," Sakura said, annoyed. Ino was referring to Rock Lee; ever since leaving Amegakure the boy seemed to think that Sakura had agreed to become his girlfriend and never forgot to remind others of that dubious fact. The "Handsome Green Flash of Konoha" was out, replaced by the "#1 Most Romantic Ninja." By the second day Sakura had been forced to tell him that she was not, in fact, his girlfriend. The only problem was Lee hadn't believed her. Of course you are, he said, smiling in that oblivious way of his. Maybe you just don't know it yet!

"I know, he's a creepy stalker. But if he's not your boyfriend then you should throw away that stupid chakra kunai he gave you. It's in your pouch right now, isn't it? Girl, talk about mixed signals!"

"Ino!" Asuma shouted. "One hundred pushups!"

"Asuma-sensei! Why?"

"For being weaker than your rival! Get to work!"
"What are you talking about?" Ino cried. "I can still beat up Sakura any day!"

"Uh… can you?" Chouji asked. "I mean, she's kind of been training really hard."

Anake laughed. "Embarrassing, that. You're weaker than a pig washer."

"Pah!" Ino whipped her ponytail angrily, unwilling to admit defeat. But she started doing pushups.

After an hour or two of grueling physical training Asuma started to push his three students through a fighting regimen. He made two shadow clones and let them spar with Ino, Chouji, and Anake. He himself stood on the side and watched the fight, calling out strategies and advice.

While they sparred Sakura practiced her chakra projection fields with the sand. Even with her chakra circulatory system damaged she had made considerable progress these past few days. Now she could manipulate the sand without physically touching it, using concentrated chakra fields to shape it and hold it from a distance. The challenge was to spin her chakra in the right way to create the right type of field. She thought her chakra control was beyond Rock Lee's level now, even though she could still only open two Gates. Her body wasn't strong enough to open more.

Using her hands as a focal point—there were far more tenketsu in the hands than in any other comparable part of the body—Sakura could now eject a targeted stream of tightly rotating chakra in such a way that the chakra coiled around itself. Then she could use the chakra stream like a rope, to pull things, or flatten the stream out into a shovel-like wedge, to push them. A chakra string. Using both her hands, she could even eject out enough chakra to shape the sand itself into a wall. The sand wall wasn't nearly as strong as her Earth Wall jutsu, but since it only a manipulation of an existing material, it took much less chakra, and it was more flexible. She could raise or lower the wall and move it around her. It's a lot like what Gaara does with his sand, Sakura realized. The principle is the same. Just that his control of the sand comes to him by instinct, and I'm doing it all consciously.

"Ass-kicking chakra fields, Sakura!" Asuma called to her, grinning. "But you do realize you're making me look bad again? Stop that and come over here!"

Sakura was tired out anyway, so she went over to join Asuma. From their position on the sidelines the two of them watched Ino, Chouji, and Anake spar. Of course the three genin had no hope of actually defeating Asuma's clones, considering he was an elite jounin. But it was instructive to watch how each of the genin approached the fight. It reminded Sakura of Team 7's bell test. Anake was the cool genius, clearly the strongest despite being a year younger. Chouji was the loudmouth idiot. Ino was the weak girl. They were alike in another way, too; the three of them had no teamwork. Their attacks on Asuma were disorganized and individual. At first Sakura didn't understand, because Ino and Chouji had been on the same team for a year. But upon closer observation she realized that their fighting styles were completely different. They relied on someone to bridge their attacks to be effective. Shikamaru had been the glue that held the team together, and now he was gone.

"Pretty ugly, huh?" Asuma asked Sakura. "Their teamwork is shit."

"Yeah."

Asuma blew out a ring of smoke from his cigarette. "It would've been better if you were still on the team. You didn't do much training together, either, but you and Ino and Chouji know each other. Now it's like starting from scratch. If they're this way in the chuunin exam… they'll probably get killed."

"What do you think of Anake?"
"Shimura? Like a clone of his grandfather, Danzou the Termite. Kid's on a fast track to the ruling elite: ANBU, a leadership position in one of the general Commands, maybe even a seat on the High Council. Royal blood, you know. Always hated bastards like that, especially because I used to be one. His story is even more fucked up than usual, though."

"You mean his original team?"

"Aye. His sensei and his teammates were killed on one of their first missions. Happens sometimes, but not like this. Turns out the mission was an Akatsuki trap, a pretext to kidnap Anake. I guess they figured the kid had some sort of secret information or power—who knows, maybe he does. Anyway the other genin were killed. The sensei managed to escape and bring Anake back to Konoha, but the sensei died of his wounds. The High Council originally decided to assign Anake a new team with the next graduating class. But Anake wanted to take the Iwa chuunin exam. When you were suspended a spot on Team 10 opened up. He demanded to have it and the Council agreed. I heard Shimura Danzou personally intervened with the decision."

Sakura considered this. It was a horrible story, but nothing too surprising. "If all the genin teams are full, then… assuming I can pass the Hokage's test… who am I going to take the exam with?"

"Been wondering that myself. I imagine Tsunade has some sort of plan. She always does."

"Shit, I hope you're not gonna take the exam with us," a boy's voice said, mocking.

Sakura turned. Sabaku Kankuro and Sabaku Temari were standing on a sandstone rooftop behind them. The Sand Siblings, the #1 elite genin team in Suna. But Gaara had been promoted directly from genin to Kazekage. That left only the two of them on the team.

"That would suck," Temari agreed. "She was the weakest genin in the last chuunin exam."

Before Sakura would have shrunk back before their insults, but the words came easily to her now. "That was six months ago. I'm not the same."

Temari laughed. "Right. Your forehead is even bigger than I remembered."

"And her ninja rank is even lower," Kankuro said. "Grooming the Hokage's pig now, I hear?"

Now Asuma's three students had come over to join the action. "Shut your trap, you clown face!" Ino said, shaking her fist. "That pigwasher can kick your painted ass any day!"

"I stand corrected," Temari said to Kankuro. "The blonde one was the weakest genin."

"The name's Yamanaka Ino!"

Asuma took a lazy drag on his cigarette. "Is there something you sand kiddos want? You're blocking my view of the sun."

Kankuro looked at his older sister. "Let's not waste any more time," said Temari.

He nodded. "The Kazekage wants to see you, Sakura. He ordered us to bring you back to the Palace."

_The Kazekage? "Why?"

"Damned if I know. For old time's sake, maybe." Kankuro grinned.

"Is this serious?" Asuma asked.
"Yeah," Temari said.

"Then you better go, Sakura. Now."

Sakura looked back. Asuma, Ino, Chouji, Anake were all staring at her. Then she turned to look at Temari and Kankuro. They really did seem serious. *What could Gaara want with me?* "Okay."

"Try to keep up," Temari said.

They ran across the rooftops of Suna toward the Kazekage Palace. It would not do to keep him waiting.
The Kazekage Palace was in the eastern district of the village, built atop a promontory of high windswept rock. Sakura and the Sand Siblings entered the Palace now. A team of Konoha ANBU met them in the foyer. Sakura recognized them as the ANBU Squad 1; or at least she recognized three of the members. Saint, Rhino, Yamato. She didn't know the fourth masked ninja, the replacement for Pug. She hadn't seen the ANBU squad since the mission in the Forest of Death a month and a half ago. Why are they in Suna?

"Captain Yamato," Sakura said, bowing.

"Sakura." Yamato's carved mask, painted with the image of a forked branch, was expressionless. He gestured to the fourth ANBU. "This is Ink."

Ink's voice was a jagged rasp, his mask a torrent of black water. "The daughter of the Demonslayer. It is good to meet you."

"Follow me," Yamato said. "The Kazekage is waiting."

Sakura was not sure why a Konoha ANBU team would be escorting her to the Kazekage. She looked at Temari and Kankuro, who also seemed puzzled. They followed the ANBU deep through the recesses of the Palace into a dimly-lit room with metal walls. The walls were apparently covered with some sort of scrollwork, though not any that Sakura understood. There was no furniture in the room but a few chairs, some medical equipment, and a table.

Lying on the table was a body covered with a white sheet, and standing behind the table were two figures. One was a man, Akasun Baki, one of the strongest jounin in Suna, and the sensei of the Sand Siblings. The other was a boy with skin white as chalk.

"Haruno Sakura," Sabaku Gaara said. "I need your help."

Sakura bowed low to him as befit his illustrious rank. "Of course, Kazekage-sama."

"Kazekage. Even you call me that now. Is that what I am? But maybe only to my face. I know what they call me when I'm not looking. Demon… monster… that's all I am to them. They only made me Kazekage to better control me. They hate me. And maybe they should."

"Gaara, stop," said Temari. "We don't hate you."

"I know, sister. But she does." Gaara looked at Sakura. "Did Naruto tell you I changed? Did he tell you I'm trying to be… to be kind now?" He closed his eyes and recited a sutra from the Kiyome sacred texts, one of the teachings of the Sage of Six Paths. Sakura knew the sutra well:

There is not even a moment of calmness
In the heart of this passing life
The wind is already blowing
Through the hollow of our bones.
Oh, God, we yearn for Kindness—
Kindness at all cost.

Sakura remembered Gaara, crazed and psychopathic, trying to kill her and Sasuke. Gaara had pinned Sakura to a tree in a cage of sand. Ever so slowly the sand tightened around her ribcage, like a sadistic boa constrictor, crushing her to death. But yes, Naruto had told her that Gaara had changed.
after their fight. And Gaara had assisted in the mission to bring Sasuke back, saving Rock Lee's life. What was she to think of that? She looked now into Gaara's black-rimmed eyes, tried to find the kindness he claimed to follow. But she still saw only death.

"I'm sorry, Sakura," Gaara said. "For what I did."

Sakura bowed. "Kazekage-sama." She wasn't sure what to say.

Kankuro laughed. "Well... now that we got that touching reunion out of the way... what's this all about, Gaara?"

Akasun Baki spoke. "We have discovered a very disturbing conspiracy in the village. Look closely." With one strong motion he reached down and pulled the white sheet off of the body on the table. It was the naked corpse of a young man, dark and gaunt, maybe in his late twenties. There weren't any visible signs of injury except for one.

The corpse had no eyes.

"That's the assassin that tried to kill the Queen of Torment yesterday," said Temari.

"Yes," Gaara said. "Did you see what jutsu the assassin used to attack her?"

Sakura had seen. The sudden explosion from out of nowhere, the golden steam that lingered after the explosion, the wave of heat. There was only one jutsu that could do something like that. Of course she had seen. "It was Bakudan," she said. "One of the bloodline techniques of the Enshogan."


The Enshogan, the bloodline power of the Sougon clan that ruled over Iwa. Only the Sougon had the power to see heat itself, the power to control the temperature around them. To blow up anything within their field of vision.

But if the assassin had used Bakudan, where were his eyes?

"Did you remove the eyes?" Sakura asked.

"No," Gaara said. "Come see for yourself." He gestured toward the body on the table.

Sakura stepped forward, running her hands over the assassin's corpse with her Mystical Palm jutsu. Now she saw what had killed him. His brain had melted into a black goo, the result of activating a seal placed on the back of his skull. The assassin must have committed suicide when he realized his attack on the Hokage had failed. He had destroyed his brain and all the information in it. As for his eyes...

"His Enshogan eyes were destroyed by a seal upon death," Sakura said. "No, only one eye. The left one. The right one was... removed."

"What?" demanded Temari. "Who removed it?"

"The other two Sougon," said Yamato. The ANBU's voice was grim. "This assassin was not alone. He was part of a three man team of Sougon shinobi. Six weeks ago, the same team of three Sougon attacked Honjo Laboratory in Konoha." He glanced at Sakura. "We have been hunting them ever since."

*I saw this man before,* Sakura realized with a shiver. She had fought all three Sougon assassins in the
Forest of Death. They had been masked, with only their eyes uncovered. Slitted eyes that glowed like burning flames. Sometimes she still had nightmares about it.

"Who was he?" Temari asked.

"His name is Sougon Shune. Konoha intelligence has confirmed his identity, as well as the identity of the other two Sougon. Shune was a special jounin and physicist." Yamato looked at the corpse on the table. "The second member of the team is Sougon Nachi, a strong chuunin and strategic specialist. And the third member is Sougon Charasu, the Tsuchikage's own brother and trusted right hand."

**Charasu of the Inferno.** Sakura remembered him best of all. He had chased her through a burning forest, cornered her with taunting cruelty. Charasu had been so close she could see the inflamed network of blood vessels coiled around his pupils. "Too weak!" he shouted, and then his eyes were golden flames. He would have killed her, but the ANBU Pug had taken the Bakudan blast instead. Sougon Charasu had only laughed. "That's one ape down."

*He was the one who killed Pug.*

Sakura swallowed. "How do you know it's Charasu?"

"The leader of the Sougon team is undoubtedly an S-rank shinobi. You saw that for yourself in the Forest of Death. Charasu is the only such member of his family that the Tsuchikage trusts. Additionally, our spies in Iwa confirm that Charasu has not been seen in public for the last two months. The Tsuchikage denies our accusations, of course. He claims that the three masked shinobi are insignificant Iwa missing-nins, runaways working with Akatsuki."

"He's lying," said Akasun Baki, stating the obvious.

Temari frowned. "I don't understand. The Tsuchikage obviously wants to kill Tsunade. He's wanted to do it for three decades, from what I hear. But what is this business about a missing Enshogan eye?"

It was Gaara who responded. "It is not just the missing eye that concerns us, sister. It's how it went missing. Sougon Shune's body was secured in the heart of Intelligence Division headquarters under the heaviest security. Yet last night his right Enshogan eye was stolen—vanished without a trace. It was an inside job."

Gaara let the implications of that fact sink in.

"Traitors," Kankuro spat.

"We tracked the three stone-nins to Sunagakure a few days ago," said Yamato. "They're definitely being aided by a high-level Suna conspiracy. No doubt Akatsuki is also involved in some capacity. The conspiracy's goals are unclear, but the political situation in Suna is not. The UC is deeply unpopular, as is the Kazekage himself. If they can assassinate either the Hokage or the Kazekage, Suna won't be able to join the UC."

"They hate me," Gaara said. "They thought they could control me… but they were wrong. The only way for them to fix their mistake is with my death."

"If the conspirators already include Sougon, then why risk stealing the Enshogan? What do they want with another eye?" Sakura asked.

"Perhaps the other Sougon are leaving the village… or perhaps the Suna conspirators have their own
plan," Baki said. "In any case we believe that the eye was not just removed. It was implanted."

Temari nodded slowly. "Someone in Suna put the Enshogan in his own body. It could be anyone."

Captain Yamato spoke. "Like the other bloodline doujutsu, a non-Sougon shinobi can use the Enshogan, but they can't deactivate it. So the Enshogan eye will constantly be leaking chakra. In theory it should be possible to track the chakra signature of the eye right to the source. That's where you come in, Sakura."

*So that's what Gaara wants. I fought Sougon Shune before, so I know what his Enshogan's chakra is like.*

Sakura shook her head. "The chakra leaked will be too insignificant to detect. Maybe the chakra residue… but you'd have to wait a day for the residue to form. And in a hidden ninja village it'd be almost impossible to distinguish the specific chakra residue from the hundreds of others. Only a chakra sensor who had felt the specific Enshogan eye's chakra before could do it. Maybe one of the Suna medic-nins who performed the autopsy—"

"I don't trust them," Gaara said. "Only Baki-sensei and my brother and sister. And you."

"I'm not a chakra sensor."

Akasun Baki seemed to smile. "But I am."

"I told you I needed your help, Haruno Sakura. You're the only one who knows the stolen Enshogan chakra. With a chakra sensor, can you follow the trail?" Gaara asked.

This time she did not hesitate.

"Yeah," Sakura said.

Sabaku Gaara stared at them. "Then this is your mission," he said. "Baki-sensei... Temari... Kankuro... Sakura. Track these traitors down. And then destroy them in my name... in the name of the Fifth Kazekage of the Sand."

Kankuro laughed. "When we're through with them, they'll have flies walking across their eyeballs."
"The Hokage exploded right here," Temari said, gesturing to a spot in the ground with her Giant Fan weapon. The four of them, the investigative team, had returned to the canyon where the original attack had taken place. The Enshogan chakra residue would be the most intense here, the easiest to detect. It was almost sundown.

Akasun Baki nodded. "Kankuro, set up a perimeter. No surprises."

Kankuro twisted his hands and his two puppets, Karasu and Kuroari, sprang from his back into protective positions circling the team. The puppets segmented into multiple sections, spreading out and setting up traps. He grinned. "Perimeter secured. Like an elephant trying to sneak up on a snake, Baki-sensei."

"You should pray that is the case. The conspirators are aware we are trying to track them down—we will be targeted." Baki was a study in solidity, his face and voice and posture as if cut from rough hewn stone. The white turban cloth that covered the left side of his face flapped in the wind. "Touch my hand, Sakura. It's time to begin the hunt for the assassins."

Sakura reached her hand over to clasp Baki's own. A rush of alien chakra flowed into her arm, up through her body and into her brain. There was a sudden sharp pain—the lingering damage from opening the chakra gates—as Baki's chakra aggressively mixed with her own. The chakra coalesced into a sort of spiritual cable that bound their two minds as one. Now Sakura could sense what Baki was sensing, and vice versa.

With the connection came a new awareness.

"I see it," Sakura said. All around her she saw chakra. Not just subconsciously as all ninja sensed it, but as a visible phenomenon, palpable. The sensation was overwhelming. It was as if a new layer had been overlaid on the physical world, similar to color, but as far beyond color as it was to black-and-white. When she looked at Temari, one kind of this "chakra color" flowed through her body; when she looked at Kankuro, a subtly different, but clearly distinct, kind of chakra flowed through his. And the chakra didn't just have "color," but also a sort of "texture" and "weight" and even "sound." All these qualities together combined to form the "feeling" of chakra which a chakra sensor could perceive. Through Baki, now, she had it too.

"Can you identify the Enshogan chakra residue?" Baki asked.

Sakura looked at the spot where the Hokage had been attacked with Bakudan. Like every other place in the village it was covered with chakra residue. Of course; Suna was a shinobi village and the ninjas in it used chakra constantly. There were at least hundreds of distinct chakra residues. Which one is the Enshogan?

She shook her head. "I can't tell. There's too much other stuff."

"The residue will have formed by now. It is there." Baki's chakra surged again into her mind, invading it. Over half of the chakra "colors" in the spot seemed to fade away. Baki-sama's blocking them out for me, she realized. Those are the residues he already knows. Now the picture was much clearer, each thread more distinct. "Focus on the Enshogan," the Suna jounin continued. "Remember what the Enshogan chakra felt like."

Sakura tried to remember. As a medic-nin her chakra awareness was far deeper than a typical
shinobi’s, but it paled in comparison to that of a true sensor. The Bakudan attack had left a haze of golden steam, but she didn't think that was the true "color" of the chakra. Black, she thought. Black and smooth and hollow and cold like a vacuum. Cold like all the heat in the world had been sucked away.

Long minutes stretched by as she concentrated.

There. Suddenly she saw it.

"Yes," Baki said. "That's." He held his finger to his wireless earpiece and spoke into it. "This is Baki. We've identified the Enshogan chakra residue. Pursuit will begin immediately."

The four of them were all wearing wireless radios. Captain Yamato spoke to them on the other end. "Be careful. We have reason to believe that Akatsuki high command, including Zetsu, is directly involved in this conspiracy. Yamato out."

"Come," Baki said to Kankuro and Temari, slipping his grip out of Sakura's hand and into theirs. Sakura was surprised to find that she could still sense chakra even when the connection was broken. "I charged you with enough of my chakra to have a limited sensing ability for about a day," explained Baki. "I am doing the same with the rest of the team. If we are incapacitated, you must continue the hunt."

"I'd rather she just try not to get me, uh, incapacitated," Kankuro said.

"I understand, Baki-sama," Sakura said, ignoring the puppet boy.

"Good. We are a day behind. There is no time to waste. Follow me." The Suna jounin suddenly ran and leapt into the air, vaulting over tall sandstone cliffs. The three subordinates pursued. The sun was copper red as it sank violently beneath the jagged horizon, like molten metal dipped into black ice. Soon it would be night.

"Try to keep up," Temari said.

Sakura knew that Baki was heading for Intelligence Division headquarters. She could even sense the trail he was following—tiny puddles of cold hollow Enshogan chakra residue that had collected on various undersurfaces of the village, rooftops, cliffsides. The dead Sougon Shune, she realized. When he died his eye must have still have been activated, and the damn thing continued to leak chakra afterwards.

The headquarters of Suna intelligence was a long, narrow building built into the edge of a cliff. Wisps of smoke were still steaming out of a hole in the side. "Traitors," Baki said. "They used some sort of clay fire that burns through rock. We can't put it out."

"Delightfully nasty. Where can I get one?" Kankuro asked.

"Ask Ryokan Mukade," Temari said, laughing. "I'm sure he'd be pleased to give you some fire in exchange for our little brother's head."

"A shameful thought, sister. Why, for my brother's head I'd take nothing less than an Enshogan eye myself."

*Ryokan Mukade is one of the Suna High Councilors*, Sakura thought. If she remembered right, Mukade had ran for Kazekage after December 7th but narrowly lost the job to Gaara. *Is that who they think is behind this conspiracy?*
A number of Suna ANBU guarded the building, but they waved them through when they saw Baki. They stalked down through nondescript corridors until they arrived at a medical lab, where Suna intelligence had been doing an autopsy of the Sougon body. The lab's doors were made of thick fuinjutsu steel, but they hadn't been forced open by the thieves. They had simply been unlocked. An inside job, and a fast one.

"There's a bunch of Enshogan chakra residue on the floor here," Sakura said. "Not as dense as in the Bakudan attack, but with more volume."

Baki nodded. "That is when they removed the eye from the body. Active doujutsu are chakra furnaces. There must be a great amount of chakra still in there; without a body to drain the excess it spilled out into the environment instead."

"And made the trail easy for us to follow," Temari said. "I bet they tried to implant the eye as soon as possible."

"Let us pray not," Baki said.

But Temari was right. They chased the chakra trail away from Suna Intelligence headquarters east, deep into the border between the eastern and northern districts. "The richest part of our village, such as it is," Kankuro told Sakura unprompted. "I'm not saying you can compare it to Hashirama Square or anything like that."

Hashirama Square had been half-wrecked into rubble, thanks to Kankuro and his fellow sand-nins, but it was still more impressive than anything Sakura had yet seen in this place. Even our ruins are finer than their greatest structures, she thought. With the single exception of Sawara, the Wind Country was desperately poor, and Sunagakure had not escaped its country's fate. Here the Enshogan trail led past blocks of brick and stone buildings, banks, restaurants, schools, houses, until it came to the doorstep of a small store and suddenly disappeared.

Above the store was carved the plaque, WEAPONS OF WAR.

"The best puppet shop in Suna," Kankuro said. "I go here all the time."

"And the most expensive one," Baki said. "Come." He swept through the door. The inside of the store was actually made of wood, a testament to its wealth. Shelves of violent merchandise hung from the walls: puppet weapons, puppet parts, puppet traps, and even some complete puppets. Kankuro, who carried his two puppets on his back, looked like he was home. The boy sidled up to the two clerks at the counter for a chat.

"The trail stops here," Sakura said. "It just disappears in the middle of the floor. Do you think the conspirators implanted the eye into someone?"

"Yes," Baki said. "And better than that. They must have disguised the eye with puppet parts. A puppet plate, or even a puppet face."

Sakura suddenly noticed that the two clerks were limp on the ground and Kuroari's limbs were clutched around their heads, like the puppet was feeding on them. Kankuro moved his fingertips to control the puppet through the attached chakra strings. "Mind-wiped," he said matter-of-factly. "They were here last night but don't remember anything."

"How were they mind-wiped?" Baki asked.

"Same way I'm mind reading 'em. Puppets… you know, not that I'm accusing, but the Old Ratface is an expert puppet master."
"Old Ratface?" Sakura asked.

"Ryokan Mukade," Temari said. "And I am accusing. This whole plot smells just like him."

"Maybe Ratface put the Enshogan in himself," Kankuro suggested. "If you do it the right way puppetry could hide the eye from a chakra sensor… even from the Byakugan. He could just walk up to Gaara and BANG! we'd finally find out whether our little brother can regenerate his head the same way he can his limbs. I suspect not."

"What do we do now?" Temari asked.

Baki was in regular contact with the rest of the investigators. He had been talking into his wireless earpiece, and now he said, "I informed the Kazekage of the situation. He is not surprised. We anticipated the conspirators would try to implant the eye in someone that we trust. Mukade, if he is involved, would not be so stupid as to think he himself could get close to the Kazekage. The assassin is someone else; though we do not know who." He stroked his chin in thought. "However, we have one advantage. Time is on our side. If the assassin does not act soon, he will certainly be exposed. And no puppet disguise can stop all the Enshogan chakra leakage. The trail of residue is still here, only fainter and harder to identify."

"Still here?" Sakura concentrated. Yes… there it was, leading away from the puppet shop, going southwest. It was so faint that it took her full focus to detect it. "I see it," she said.

"I don't!" Temari said, frowning. Kankuro nodded his head.

Baki smiled. "It appears Sakura has superior chakra awareness compared to the two of you." The two Sand Siblings stared at her in wonderment. They probably had never imagined Sakura was better than them at anything.

"Try to keep up," she said as she walked from the store.

The trail was really a lot harder to follow now. Even with Baki leading the way, it was slow going. The clumps of chakra residue that made up the trail were sparser than the oases in the Hiroi desert, and their speed was no faster than walking. It was hours before they came to the place the assassin had visited next.

It was a casino, deep in the slums of Suna, surrounded by seedy nightclubs and massage parlors. The desert night was cold, but inside the casino was almost unbearably hot. Garish neon signs flickered on the walls, and hundreds of men shouted and pressed against each other in the excitement of gambling. There were all kinds of games, but by far the most popular one was some kind of throwing dice game, similar to roulette.

Amazingly, Sakura spotted Asuma in a corner of the casino. He seemed drunk and was openly fooling around with several women as well as playing roulette. Asuma didn't appear to notice her.

What the hell is Asuma-sama doing here?

Kurenai would not approve, Sakura was sure.

"Damn casinos. I still don't get why shinobi of all people like them so much," Temari said. What she said was true. It looked like most of the gamblers were sand-nins.

"Testosterone-driven thrill seekers," Baki said, his voice dripping with disdain. "They make a little money from going on a mission, then come here and spend it all between missions. That's if they're lucky. If something goes wrong one night they go into debt, even into poverty. Many become desperate. Ripe targets for Akatsuki recruitment. All of these so-called shinobi ought to have their
fingernails gouged out."

"Not just shinobi. I hear Tsunade the Princess loves gambling," Kankuro said, laughing.

"The assassin must have come here to meet someone," Sakura said, ignoring Kankuro. "Look, there's some chakra residue leading into the back hallway."

Akasun Baki charged forward. They followed him into the large casino office complex. Baki seemed to be looking for something, because he went methodically from room to room blowing holes in the walls and floor. None of the casino workers dared disturb him. At last the floor of the one of the rooms collapsed, revealing a hidden trapdoor. The trapdoor led into an underground tunnel.

"There are many natural tunnels and caves underneath Suna," he said. "Of course traitors would try to use them."

They made their way through the tunnel for about a hundred meters before it ended at another trapdoor. Baki blasted his way through, leaping into a small room. There was a sound and a man tried to run away through the front door, but Baki caught him by the throat and forced him down. It was a Suna genin. "Where's the Enshogan eye?" Baki shouted.

The captured ninja whimpered, shaking his head, and suddenly his eyes started to melt into a repulsive black liquid. "Shit!" Sakura said, leaning over the ninja to use Mystical Palm. "He's got the same kind of seal in his skull as the other one. There must be a suicide trigger. His brain is already goo."

Baki let the dead man go with a sigh of disgust and turned to study the room they were in. It looked like it was part of the ninja's apartment. They canvassed the rest of the apartment, but there was no one else there, and not much of obvious interest. The man appeared to live alone, and considering he was still a genin at his age—with the salary that implied—he couldn't afford to live better.

"A poor motherfucker," Kankuro observed. "Might've been working for Akatsuki just for some extra money. Though on the other hand, that doesn't explain why he killed himself."

"Poverty and true belief," Baki said. "A powerful combination."

"It was a woman," a voice said behind them. They turned. Sarutobi Asuma walked out of the tunnel, smoking a cigarette and grinning. "He was obsessed with one of the girls working at the casino. They were all over each other. But the girl wouldn't marry him until he could get promoted to chuunin. He had a job working in Suna intelligence… medical division. Heard something got stolen out of that division recently." Asuma shrugged. "It looks like we meet again, kiddos. And Baki… you look good. How's that scar I gave you last December doing?"

"Fine. How is the scar I gave you?"

Sakura was dumbfounded. "Asuma-sama, what're you doing here?"

"Oh, the usual. Gambling… drinking… spying on Akatsuki on the Hokage's orders. I was here last night, too. Amazing what you can find out in two nights talking to drunk men. And as it so happens I did see someone suspicious talking to the dead man on the floor over there."

"The assassin?" Sakura asked.

"Well, I don't know who the assassin is. But I did see someone else… a short little man with rich silk
robes… arms like a mosquito… face like a rat…”

"Ryokan Mukade!" Kankuro cried. "I knew it!"

Asuma laughed. "So you guys are following the Enshogan chakra trail, huh? What are the odds that the trail is gonna lead straight from here to Mukade's personal office at the High Council?" He took a drag on his cigarette. "Anyone want to gamble on it?"

"I suppose the Hokage wishes for you to come with us, Sarutobi?" Baki asked.

"Yeah," Asuma said.

"Then let us proceed. The hunt continues."

Baki sped off, once again chasing after the chakra residue of the stolen Enshogan eye. The rest of them followed. From the casino, the trail slowly headed north. But the trail did not, as Asuma predicted, lead to the High Council chambers. Instead it ended at a sprawling, ramshackle military barracks. This barracks was very familiar to Sakura.

It was familiar because last night she had been sleeping in it.

Kankuro stared. "Is that… the Konoha camp barracks?"

It was.

"Huh," said Asuma. " Didn't see that one coming."
"Okay, so let's say the assassin is a sand-nin… or a ninja from anywhere besides Konoha. How's he gonna get into the Konoha barracks?" Kankuro asked.

"He's not," Asuma said. "No other villages are allowed into the barracks and the whole security perimeter is stuffed with Hyuuga eyes. And I can't think of a reason the assassin would want to come here."

"To assassinate someone?" Kankuro said. "The Hokage?"

Temari laughed. "This was yesterday night. Is anyone dead?"

"Maybe he knows we're tracking him. Trying to throw us off," Sakura suggested.

"Or… more likely… our assassin wears a Leaf forehead protector," Temari said. "Now why would a leaf-nin go back to his own barracks at night? I'd guess… running around stealing Enshogan all night must be tiring. Even assassins deserve a little sleep."

"And hey, it's night again! The one-eyed bastard could be sleeping there right now," Kankuro said.

Meanwhile Asuma and Baki were conferring with others through the wireless radio. Asuma informed them, "It's confirmed, no person from another village entered the barracks either yesterday or today. The chief of UC Embassy intelligence is meeting us in the main entrance lobby to aid the investigation." He gestured to the sand-nins. "You three can come in, the chief's signed off on it."

The chief of intelligence on the Embassy was Yamanaka Inoichi, Ino's father. Inoichi was a hard-looking man with ever-suspicious, roving eyes. Sakura had always thought that Ino took after her mother.

"I've put the base on lockdown," Inoichi said. "No can leave until they've been thoroughly interrogated. We are all suspects. That means you"—pointing to Sakura—"you"—pointing to Asuma—"and me."

Asuma grinned. "I think we can leave Sakura out of this."

"I have intel teams starting the interrogations as we speak," Inoichi continued. "Meantime your team should continue to follow the Enshogan chakra and see where it goes. We'll proceed along both these directions at once."

Baki nodded. "I sense some chakra residue here, but it is minuscule and random. The assassin did not stay for long. It is unlikely we will be able to pinpoint his specific route."

"If he didn't stay, then he was here for something else," Temari said. "A meeting… contact with another spy…"

"Are there any?" Asuma asked Inoichi. "Akatsuki spies that intel knows about."

"No. We kept everyone suspicious out of the Embassy. But there's reason to believe that some of our battle plans were leaked to Akatsuki before the Hokage's attack on Rain Country HQ. So like I said… we're all suspects. Keep in contact, and good luck."

The Konoha special jounin shook his head and walked away. The team quickly went to work.
examining the traces of Enshogan chakra scattered around the barracks. The barracks was basically an old, rusted military apartment complex of sandstone walls and metal doors. It had been given to the Konoha Embassy delegation as their living quarters in Suna (the Ame delegation stayed close by in another complex). Since among the team only Baki and Sakura could detect the faint residue, they split up into two groups. Asuma and Kankuro tagged along with Sakura as she searched the north end of the barracks.

There wasn't much for her to find. And half the time she wasn't sure whether the tiny fragments she found were actually Enshogan chakra, or something else that sort of felt the same. It wasn't so much a trail as a random dispersion. Eventually, though, she came across a weird clump of Enshogan residue below some overhanging apartments. The residue itself was nothing special, but there was something… mixed into it. Like they had been deposited at the same time. But Sakura couldn't figure out what it was.

She called Baki over on the wireless. When Baki saw it he seemed surprised. "That is blood," he said.

"Blood?"

"What you are sensing is superheated blood fused with the chakra residue. Highly unusual. In this case it appears that the heat powers of Enshogan were the cause. As the Enshogan raised the temperature of the blood, certain elements in the blood bonded with the chakra, leaving a fused residue."

"Are you saying someone was attacked here? With Bakudan?" Temari asked.

"Bakudan, or a similar jutsu."

Sakura didn't understand. *The assassin attacked someone? Then why wasn't it reported? Was it another spy? But why would he use Bakudan on another spy? Or did the assassin somehow hit himself?* "Can you figure out whose blood it is?" she asked.

"No. All the DNA is denatured. But this kind of fused chakra could not have traveled far from where it was originally formed." Baki glanced up at the rows of apartments above where they had found the residue. "Whose rooms are those?"

"Our medical staff is staying there," Asuma said.

Baki closed his eyes, concentrating. For a long moment he was silent. Then he said, "I sense there is someone on the third-floor room who is injured."


The team went up to the third-floor. Asuma knocked at the thin metal apartment door. A young, smirking man with the classic Sarutobi-like goatee answered the knock. "Asuma-senpai! It's like two in the morning. What are you doing here?"

"I want to talk. Can we come in?"

"Uh… sure." Iniden seemed a little reluctant, but let them in.

His room had four cots, but three were empty: he lived alone. There was a desk in one corner scattered with various books and papers, and a military rucksack in another. A Konoha forehead protector hung from a bedpost. Iniden himself hung back and watched them carefully. Sakura noticed he had a thick bandage wrapped around his hand.
"What happened to your hand, Iniden?" Asuma asked.

"Oh. Training. Got hurt by accident." He grinned.

"Let me see it," Baki said.

"Uh… no disrespect, sand-nin… but who are you?"

"Let him see it," Asuma said.

Iniden's smile faded. "What's this about, Asuma-senpai?"

Asuma stared at his cousin. His expression was more serious than Sakura had ever seen it before. "We're looking for a stolen eye. Do you happen to know where it is, Iniden?"

"What? No. I don—"

Baki leaped and slammed Iniden into the ground. The Konoha medic-nin cried out in pain as Baki jammed his fingers into the medic-nin's eye sockets. Baki's other hand grabbed Iniden's injured hand and pried off the bandage. Sakura saw that the palm of Iniden's hand was badly burned. Burned black.

"He does not have the Enshogan," Baki stated calmly. "But the wound on his hand was indeed caused by an Enshogan attack—"

" Fucking bastard!" Iniden shouted. He tried to stab Baki in the stomach with a kunai.

Kankuro's puppets, Karasu and Kuroari, were there in a flash. Kuroari blocked the kunai with its open mouth, and Karasu wrapped its long spider limbs around Iniden's body. Meanwhile Temari raised her fan weapon in front of the leaf-nin—Baki deftly stepped out of the way—and she swung it at him. A violent whirlwind exploded from the fan into Iniden, blasting him back through the far sandstone wall into the next room (fortunately empty). Then Karasu dragged Iniden back into their room through the wreckage of the wall. The medic-nin moaned pitifully, his face covered in blood.

Asuma did not seem sympathetic to his cousin's plight.

"Iniden… how could you?" he asked softly. "My own cousin, an Akatsuki spy! Why?"

Iniden shook his head, the only part of his body he could still move. "No, Asuma. You would never understand, would you? The golden boy… the son of the Third… too blind to Konoha's pleasing caresses to see the reality of her bloody hands... her sick crimes!"

"Where is the Enshogan eye, traitor?" Baki demanded.

Sarutobi Iniden laughed, half-mad. He stared up at Asuma, bright robin blue eyes wide. Like Pug, Sakura thought. They were cousins.

"Ha… haha… hahaha…you'll never figure out who it is… until it's too late…"

As he finished the leaf-nin's eyes melted into black goo. Iniden had activated the hidden seal in his brain and committed suicide. Kankuro moved his fingertips, and Karasu released its hold on the body. Iniden's corpse tumbled to the floor.

Asuma pulled out a cigarette and lit it with his pocket lighter. He stared down at his dead cousin. Sakura went up to him. "It's okay," she said. The words were stupid even as she said them.
The Leaf jounin actually grinned. "I'm just wondering what I'm going to tell the little bastard's parents. How… troublesome."

Soon Konoha intelligence agents were swarming into the room, led by Inoichi. "Turn this place inside out!" he ordered. "Search everything!" (They also carted out Iniden's body.) Unfortunately there didn't seem to be anything else in the room except books, papers, uniforms, and ninja equipment. Sakura glanced over some of the books in idle interest: a history of tuberculosis epidemics, a treatise on the principles of cellular regeneration, a monograph on neuro-spore infection. Nothing out of the ordinary that a medic-nin wouldn't read. Sakura had seen Iniden before: in the Konoha hospital, on the Embassy in the Rain refugee camps. He'd never seemed like anything but a good doctor.

"Theories!" Inoichi said. "I want to hear them. What happened?"

"We were able to track Sarutobi Iniden down due to an injury his hand suffered from an Enshogan attack in an encounter with the assassin," Baki said. "The reason for the attack is unknown. It is possible they got into some kind of conflict, or that the assassin lost control of the eye—a not unlikely scenario for a non-Sougon user. Iniden, as a medic-nin, may have participated in the initial implanting of the Enshogan at the puppet shop. Perhaps the assassin went to him for practice controlling the eye."

"But in that case wouldn't there be more chakra residue around here?" Temari asked.

"Unless they shielded it with a chakra projection field, or cleaned it up afterwards," Baki said. "Iniden was surprised that we found him. He must have believed that they did not leave enough residue to be tracked. If it were not for the fused blood, he would have been right."

"Chief Inoichi-sama! We found something in the wall," a leaf-nin said. He showed Inoichi a kind of gun-like device. "It's an electromagnetic radiation generator. Looks like it's set to emit gamma waves."

"Good work, Kuren. Now what could Sarutobi Iniden want with a gamma ray generator?"

Nobody had any idea.

Sakura was mystified. The whole investigation so far hadn't made too much sense to her. The actions of the assassin were seemingly without logical motive. If he was a Konoha ninja, then it was obvious that he would visit the barracks. But what had he been doing with Iniden? And why had he gone to the casino? The casino was a known Akatsuki hideout; that was why Asuma had been sent to spy there. It would only raise suspicion for a leaf-nin to visit without authorization. Especially if Ryokan Mukade was already there, openly talking with the Akatsuki agent. There wasn't any reason for the assassin to contact the agent if Ryokan was already doing it. Unless Ryokan was the assassin. But that couldn't be, because he couldn't have gotten into the Konoha barracks. Or, the other possibility, Ryokan wasn't involved with the conspiracy at all. But even if that was so, why had the assassin gone to the casino? Logically, the assassin ought to be lying low somewhere, waiting for an opportunity to blow up the Hokage or the Kazekage or another high-ranking official. Why was he running around Suna in the middle of the night?

At that moment there was the sound of a distant explosion. Not in the barracks—further away. Sakura looked out the window as smoke and fire rose from a large round building high in the east.

"The Kazekage Palace!" Kankuro shouted.

"Damn!" Baki said. "Report!" He was speaking into his wireless.
Now Captain Yamato's voice came into Sakura's ear. "There was an attack on the Palace. The Kazekage is unharmed. We're not sure what caused the explosion, but it wasn't Bakudan. Some sort of clay bomb. One of the Suna ANBU guarding the Palace planted it. Killed himself along with three others."

"Traitors everywhere," Temari hissed.

"I told you, sister. I told you I didn't trust them." Gaara's cold, numbing voice lingered over the radio.
"Baki-sensei… what news of the assassin with the stolen Enshogan?"

"We believe it is a high ranking leaf-nin, Kazekage-sama. We have not yet found him. Another day —"

"There's no more time. I know who is behind this… Ryokan Mukade. He's been trying to kill me since the day I was born. I'm tired of all these games… of hide and seek… I want to end this. Put the word out! Convene an emergency meeting of the High Council for dawn today… at Red Rock Cliff!"

Kankuro was shaking his head. "Gaara, calm down. Think about this. A High Council meeting will put you and Old Ratface in the same place. And in fuckin' Red Rock Cliff… you wouldn't walk out of there alive! Give us more time. We'll track down the assassins."

"I agree," Baki said.

"You underestimate me, brother. And so does Mukade." Gaara paused. "The decision is made. I want your team to go to the Lighthouse. Try to figure out what Mukade's planning. If you can find the assassins that's even better. Then return to Red Rock Cliff for the Council meeting… those are your orders."

"Yes, Kazekage-sama," Baki said.

"Where is Tsunade?" Gaara asked, apparently to another person listening on the wireless.

"She's, uh, a little busy right now," answered a male voice Sakura didn't recognize.

"Tell her to be there at dawn or her Embassy is finished."

"Inoichi, suspend the investigation and mobilize all squads," the unidentified voice said. "Chouza, liaison with the rain-nins. The full force of the United Countries Embassy will support the Kazekage at Red Rock Cliff. I'll inform the Hokage."

"Yes, Inishu-sama!" Inoichi said. It's Sarutobi Inishu, Sakura realized. Inishu was the UC Embassy Field Commander, head of the Sarutobi clan… and Iniden's father. Does he know about his son?

She looked at Asuma, and Asuma caught her questioning glance. Asuma shook his head silently. Not yet, he mouthed. Not now.

Over the wireless, it was Gaara that had the last word. "May God be with us on this Day of Kindness," he whispered. There was a dramatic silence.

Back in the room, Inoichi and his intelligence agents strode out, busier with more important tasks. Team Baki, Sakura, and Asuma also headed off. Gaara had ordered the five of them to go to the Lighthouse to continue their hunt.

The Lighthouse. You could see it from any vantage point in Suna. It was at the center of the village,
a sheer tower of smooth gray stone, carved from the canyon peak itself. Certainly it was the most famous landmark in Suna. But in truth the Lighthouse had been built after. What had come before was in the mountain below it, in the underground caves where the people who had first come to this place had lived. The Lighthouse was hundreds of years old; but the caves were thousands. And it was the caves that were the real heart of the village. There men made their most sacred worship. There they gathered together to wield power.

Under the Lighthouse were the chambers of the Suna High Council.
The Lighthouse

The Lighthouse blazed in the dark night.

A column of brilliant white light shone from the top of the Lighthouse in a vertical line, up toward heaven. The pillar of light made the Lighthouse seem as tall as the sky itself. Sakura had never seen anything like it. "What's the light for?" she asked.

"Today is the Day of Kindness… one of the Wind Country's most important holidays," Temari said. "Five hundred years ago today the Sage of Six Paths came to our shores from across the sea. We shine this light to remember that day."

Sakura remembered Gaara's prayer. *Oh God, we yearn for Kindness—Kindness at all cost.* The words unexpectedly overwhelmed her. Did she believe that? That Gaara had really changed? Kindness at all cost… but it wasn't kindness that had caused Suna to invade Konoha. It wasn't kindness that had led Gaara and Kankuro and Temari and Baki to try to kill her and everyone she loved. What was the cause, then? Poverty, the Hokage said. Structural flaws in the political and economic system, flaws which could be fixed, defeated through the United Countries organization. But Sakura wasn't so sure. Human action was governed by things far more elemental. *Fear.* Fear and its mute progeny, hatred. They had hated her, and no matter what had happened afterwards, could she deny that they still did?

*I see the way they look at me. I am an enemy to them.* Suddenly Sakura wondered if Temari and Kankuro, too, could see the way that she looked at them. *Do I hate them? They tried to kill me.* But she didn't, she realized. No, she couldn't hate someone for being a sinner.

She had too much to answer for herself.

"It is not long to daybreak," said Baki. "Worshippers will already be gathering at the Lighthouse, and in Red Rock Cliff. We must move quickly." The five of them sprinted along the rooftops toward the center of the village. There, under the Lighthouse, a crevasse in the cliff face opened up into a large cave. Rows of long, red, flickering candles along the walls of the cave lit the way forward. As they moved deeper into the cave, Sakura saw that it opened up again into a series of tunnels and caverns. Some tunnels led down, deep underground to the hidden oasis that still remained there, a remnant of an ancient river. *Water,* Sakura understood. In a land where water was more precious than life itself, this place was Suna's most sacred refuge. Even now they could hear the sounds of prayer drift up from below.

But Baki didn't lead them down. Instead they took the tunnels that went upwards. To the mountain peak. The candle flames threw twisting shadows on sandstone walls carved into various religious sculptures. Some of the sculptures were made not of rock but glass. Sakura wasn't sure how glass had come to be embedded in the walls, but the effect of the candlelight on it, the dance of fire and shadow, was extraordinary.

She was so entranced she almost didn't notice that she couldn't sense chakra anymore until Temari pointed it out.

Baki nodded. "There is another chakra sensor close by. He is interfering with your ability to sense chakra. Even I can only sense at limited range now."

"In case anyone is wondering, our radios aren't working, either," Kankuro announced. "The whole network is probably down."
"Two possibilities," Asuma said. "Either they're afraid of what we're gonna find. Or they're leading us into a trap. Or both."

"Just before the interference began, I sensed a clear Enshogan chakra residue," Baki said. "But it was not from yesterday. It is at least three days old." Meaning it was from when the original Sougon assassin was still alive! The scenarios sped through Sakura's mind. Had the Sougon met Mukade in the High Council chambers to demonstrate his Bakudan jutsu? What about the other two Sougon that had been with him? Were they still here?

At the end of the tunnels, the investigative team came to the Suna High Council chambers.

They were at the top of the mountain, at the base of the Lighthouse. The base had been hollowed out into several connecting chambers: the main High Council conference room, plus the personal offices and apartments of the High Councilors. Along the walls there were candles, but also long slit windows cut into the rock. During the day the sun would shine through the slits. Eerily, the entire chamber seemed to be deserted. There weren't even any guards. Had the High Councilors already left for Gaara's meeting at Red Rock Cliff? They would have heard of the summons the instant Gaara had made it.

Baki pushed open a heavy wooden double-door. A large, dim cavern greeted them, featureless except for a long conference table in the middle of the cavern. Sakura saw that the table was completely made of glass. It was impossibly thick yet translucent, as if it had been carved from rock and then turned to glass by a touch. The chairs around the table were also made of glass. Carved into the far wall opposite the door was the symbol of Sunagakure, an upside-down hourglass.

For an instant the huge hourglass caught Sakura's breath. It fits this place well, she thought. Not like Konoha. Not like the leaf-nins' almost religious hope in the future, the sense that no matter what happened, there always remained the pulse of things coming, there was always more time. No, for the people of Suna, time was like everything else: an immutable quantity, limited and therefore profoundly precious. The wind was already blowing through the hollow of their bones.

And the sand in the hourglass was running out.

"So now what?" Kankuro asked. "Are we just gonna stand around with our dicks in our hands? Or, uh, the kunoichi equivalent, whatever the hell that is."

"Wouldn't you like to know, Kankuro," Temari said sweetly.

"Kankuro, a perimeter," said Baki. "The other sensor is very close. I will now attempt to destroy him." The Suna jounin sat down cross-legged on the floor of the conference room, closed his eyes, and made a sequence of extremely fast hand seals. Even with the interference to her senses, Sakura felt an immense aura of chakra start to radiate from Baki's body. It felt swift and furious as the desert wind. Like it was searching for something to destroy.

Long minute after long minute passed.

Suddenly Baki opened his eyes. "Oversurge!" he cried. Sakura couldn't tell that anything had happened beyond his shout, but a moment later she felt her chakra sensing ability return. Did Baki take out the other sensor-nin somehow?

"The ceiling," Baki said.

Asuma seemed to understand. "Allow me the honors." He leaped up, chakra blades flying from his trench knives, and slashed at the sandstone ceiling above the conference table. The chakra blades cut
clean through the stone, leaving a hole that Asuma blasted open with a roundhouse kick. The others followed through the hole; above it there was another hidden cavern, dark and unlit.

"We're in the Lighthouse tower now," Temari said, looking around.

"Yeah, except this should all be solid stone," said Kankuro.

"A secret chamber. Above the High Council itself!" Baki seemed amazed at the scope of the conspiracy. He walked over to the unconscious body of another sand-nin that lay crumpled up on the floor in the center of the cavern. This must be the sensor that was fighting with Baki. Looks like he lost.

"Who is he?" Asuma asked.

"Basho," Baki said, turning over the sand-nin on his back. "We were comrades in the war."

"At least he's not your cousin," Asuma said. He pulled out another cigarette to smoke.

"Look," Temari said, gesturing to three beds in a corner of the chamber. "I can feel the Enshogan chakra residue everywhere. I think the Sougon assassins were actually living here… they were planning to assassinate the High Council."

"Until they decided to pick a bigger target and got killed," Kankuro added. "Then they switched plans."

Baki was rifling through Basho's unconscious body and now he pulled out a piece of paper from the Akatsuki spy's closed hand. On the paper was written only three scrawled words: "SLEEPER LOCATION UNKNOWN."

Sleeper. Was that the code-name of a person? The assassin? Or was it the name of a place? The name of a plan? It could be anything; there wasn't enough information to tell.

"If anyone knows what that means I'll buy you the Lighthouse," Kankuro declared.

"It means something's wrong," Asuma said. "They're pa—Baki! DON—"

Sakura whirled around just in time to see it happen. Baki opened Basho's mouth to search for more clues. But a package of dark red clay lined the inside of the mouth. And as the clay met the light it burned.

A clay bomb!

Basho's body exploded.

There was a blinding flash of white light. Baki screamed something, but Sakura did not catch it, and then the world flew apart, exploding in an inferno of fire like stitches being ripped off a furnace mouth. She was knocked back in the air, seemed to float in sheer light. Then all of sudden the flash was gone and Sakura hit something hard, something which gave beneath her weight and shattered into a thousand fragments.

Sakura's vision swam with purple spots. She groaned, tried to get to her hands and knees. The clay bomb. Wildly Sakura looked around her. Above her was a yawning chasm, which she dimly recognized as the remains of the secret chamber. The explosion had destroyed the floor of the chamber, and she had fallen down into the conference room below. Blood slithered down one side of her face. Under her hands, in pieces, was the table of glass.
"Fuck!" a voice shouted to the right of her. Temari. The sand genin clutched her leg. It was broken; a grotesque splinter of white bone stuck out of her thigh.

Sakura started to make over to help her, but then she saw that beyond Temari there was a man lying facedown in the rubble. Baki. One of his arms was gone.

"Goddamn," Asuma said from behind her. "Today is going to suck."

Sakura half-ran, half-crawled over to Baki. Kankuro was already there. "Sakura, heal Baki-sensei!" he ordered, helpless to do it himself. Sakura tried her best. She turned Baki's body over, ran her bloody hands over him with Mystical Palm. It was hard to see in the dark. The explosion had knocked out all the candles. Only dim gray fires from the clay bomb continued to burn, slowly consuming the strewn rock.

But it was not as bad as she feared. Baki was seriously injured, but breathing and stable. His missing arm ended in a metal shoulder socket instead of a human joint—*a puppet arm*, Sakura realized. The smoking remains of the puppet arm lay next to the Suna jounin. Sakura guessed that Baki had somehow used the arm to shield himself—and therefore the rest of them—from the explosion. Considering how powerful the clay bomb was, he had probably saved all their lives.

Baki's remaining hand suddenly reached up and grabbed Sakura's forearm. The grip was so strong he almost broke it.

"A trap," Akasun Baki whispered through gritted teeth. "Someone is coming."

The jounin pulled himself to his feet by pure will, leaning against Kankuro's shoulder. The white turban cloth that covered the left side of his face had been ripped away. Under it there was a metal puppet plate, mechanical and pulsing with wire.

Baki's puppet eye stared toward the wooden double-doors of the conference chamber.

"Bravo! Bravo!" a voice called from the darkness beyond the doors. "I knew you would survive the trap, Baki! Well, minus an arm or two."

The owner of the voice stepped forward. It was a short little man, in the yellow-dust robes of a Suna High Councilor, and when he smiled his face was like a leathery old rat. Asuma's description had been most apt.

"How did you do it?" Ryokan Mukade wondered. "I surmise you used your puppet arm to create a chakra projection field? Like a shield… the chakra absorbing most of the explosion. Well done, Baki, well done!"

Behind Mukade came more shinobi. Most of them wore Suna forehead protectors, but the two ninjas at the front were masked in black. A cold chill ran down Sakura's spine; she recognized them from the mission a month and a half ago.

*The Sougon assassins*. Sougon Charasu and Sougon Naishu. They were here.

"Ryokan Mukade," Baki spat. "Does your base treason reach even here, to this sacred chamber? Tell me! How many traitors are on the High Council itself?"

Mukade seemed surprised by the question. "Why, all of them, of course."

Baki looked puzzled. "I am a member of the High Council."
"Indeed you are! And like I said, all of us would like nothing better than to off the demon boy. Admit it, Baki. I'm just the one with the guts to do it."

"Gaara is fifty times the man you are!" Temari shouted.

"You treacherous little rat, you disgust me," said Baki.

"Baki… dear Baki. I'm sorry you feel that way. I have only the utmost respect for you."

The big Sougon laughed. "He's pretty strong. But I can kill him." His voice was like that of a killer beast of prey, predatory, vastly self-assured. With his Enshogan deactivated, the man's eyes were dark and slanted, like narrow slits. Sakura knew him.

He's the one who killed Pug.

Sougon Charasu, the brother of Sougon Sawar, the Fourth Tsuchikage of Iwa.

"No," Mukade said. He seemed to be staring at Asuma. "We have more important things to do. I don't even know why the damn apes are here."

Asuma had been unharmed in the clay bomb explosion. Now he held his trench knives in front of him in battle stance; and his voice was as cold as a dead man's. "To fulfill a promise." He pointed a knife at Sougon Charasu. "To kill you and to squash your eyes with my bare hands!"

The masked Sougon laughed. They all did.

Mukade chortled. "Not today, dear Sarutobi." He actually put a hand over his mouth to control himself. "Well… love to chat more, but I got a meeting to run to in Red Rock Cliff. And on the Day of Kindness even! How can we miss the festivities? Of course you're invited, too, Baki. But I fear you may not be able to make it. Don't worry. I will be sure to send your regards."

The High Councilor turned away, and the two Sougon shinobi followed. Asuma looked like he was going to leap after them. But the sand-nins behind Mukade rushed forward, closing ranks to block Asuma's path. The heavy wooden doors slammed shut behind Mukade.

They were trapped inside the conference chamber with no way out. Temari lay on the floor with a broken leg. Baki had one arm and could barely stand. Sakura and Kankuro didn't look too good either. Opposing them, six strong looking (and strong feeling, judging by their chakra) sand-nins unfurled summoning scrolls. Dozens of enemy puppets appeared out of the scrolls in a flash of smoke.

"This looks bad," Asuma said.

"Yeah," Kankuro said. "The bad guys are locked in with us. I feel sorry for them."

Suddenly the rows of long slit windows cut into the walls on either side blazed with silver light. The light flooded into the red sandstone chamber, chasing shadows from every crevasse and every secret place to oblivion. To Sakura it seemed almost as if she were waking in a cage of silver bars.

Over the Lighthouse the dawn sun was rising.

"Fight to Red Rock Cliff!" Baki shouted with all the strength he had left. "In the name of the Kazekage!"
"Fight to Red Rock Cliff!" Baki shouted with all the strength he had left. "In the name of the Kazekage!"

The sand-nin puppeteers attacked. Puppets leapt into the air, segmenting out into dozens of incomprehensible contraptions. A hail of shuriken and kunai and spears and senbon and hooks and scythes and who knows what else rained down on the trapped team.

"Wind Release: Blade of Wind!" Baki cried. Daggers of wind shot out of his hand at the puppets, slicing half of them to pieces. But the hail of enemy weapons continued nonstop. Baki fell to his knees, near collapse.

Then Asuma jumped in front of them. In his outstretched hand he held Baki's lost puppet arm. A spinning wall of solid chakra radiated outwards from the arm. A chakra projection field! The weapons clattered against the chakra field and were stopped.

In the same moment Asuma knelt down to press his hand against the floor. "Summoning Technique!" he shouted. The very large red-assed gorilla Ranma burst forth out of the ground, roaring. The gorilla charged forward into the midst of the enemy sand-nins.

"Sakura!" Asuma said. "Use the puppet arm!" He threw the arm to her. Meanwhile his trench knives were already whirling into the enemy puppets.

As she reached to grab the arm Sakura's hand by chance brushed against Asuma's face. Cold, she thought. But there was no more time to think. A wooden puppet carved like a scorpion attacked her from behind. Sakura spun to block its striking tail with her chakra-cast kunai. The puppet's tail replied by releasing a hiss of poison gas in her face. Shit! Immediately she blasted out chakra through the tenketsu in her head. The weak chakra field was enough to keep the gas from entering her lungs. Somehow still conscious, Baki cut the puppet in half with his blade of wind.

More shuriken sliced through the air at them. Sakura tried to use Baki's puppet arm to make a chakra projection field like Asuma had. The arm was a chakra conduit and amplifier—a pipe of artificial tenketsu. Even severely damaged, it multiplied the amount of chakra she could pump out from her body. She concentrated—there. The shuriken stuck in the chakra shield like it was wet mud.

But the shield wasn't strong enough to stop the spinning scythe that came at her next. The scythe cut through the chakra field effortlessly. She dodged it, but somehow the scythe turned in midair to attack her again. It's attached to a chakra string! she realized. Dimly, Sakura found she could actually sense the chakra string. As the scythe came head on she crouched under it and used the puppet arm to cut the trailing thread. The scythe smashed to the ground, inert metal.

The limited sensor ability she had from Baki's "charge" was giving her a totally new combat awareness. Like a poor man's Byakugan, Sakura could feel the other ninja in the chamber all around her, as well as whatever chakra fields they were generating. The ninja were too fast for her to pinpoint, but she could feel their general area of movement. And she could sense the chakra strings everywhere.

Behind her, Kankuro had attached chakra strings to Temari. Kankuro was using his sister as a puppet. He pulled on the chakra strings and Temari suddenly rocketed through the air above Sakura.

"Cover me!" Temari shouted at Sakura. A dragonfly-like puppet with ten wings swooped down on
Temari from the cavern roof, daggers glittering in its gaping mouth.

Sakura leaped. With one hand she flung her chakra-cast kunai, while in the other hand she funneled chakra through Baki’s arm to create a shield of chakra. The chakra-cast kunai missed the dragonfly puppet, but Sakura wasn’t aiming for it. Pulling on her own chakra string which she’d attached to the handle of the kunai, she changed the kunai’s path to slice through the chakra strings behind the puppet. The same instant the puppet slammed into Sakura’s chakra shield. Its momentum was enough to break through the shield, crushing what remained of Baki’s arm, and nearly taking off Sakura’s head. But the impact changed its direction away from Temari.

Temari now had a perfect opening. She raised her giant War Fan weapon above her head, all three of the stars open. The fan burned with swirling white chakra.

"Wind Release: Great Wind Scythe!" Temari yelled.

A hurricane wind erupted from the fan. The whirlwind shattered not only the heavy wooden double-doors, but the entire far wall of the chamber. Puppeteers and puppets alike were blown into pieces. And then suddenly Sakura sensed that all the enemy ninja were dead.

Asuma was kneeling down next to Baki's unmoving body. "Akasun's not breathing," he said.

Sakura rushed over. "Baki-sama used up too much chakra. We got to get him to the hospital now!"

"No. No time," Temari said, clutching her leg. "The Council meeting in Red Rock Cliff…"

Asuma's gorilla summon was holding the decapitated bodies of two puppeteers, one in each hand. "Go!" the gorilla growled. "I'll take care of your friends."

Asuma nodded. "Thanks, Ranma." He gestured to Sakura and Kankuro. "Let's go!"

The three of them ran due north from the Lighthouse, toward Red Rock Cliff. Mukade was at least ten minutes ahead of them. The sun beat against the red-stained stone, and the wind was rising. Sakura was bruised and exhausted from the Lighthouse battle; blood still trickled down her face from the cut on her scalp. Asuma was right. Today is really going to suck.

Red Rock Cliff was Sunagakure's most sacred canyon—it was the place where they buried their dead. The hanging tombs of Red Rock Cliff were as famous as the Lighthouse. But as they neared the canyon she was surprised to see something else rise up out of it. They were paper kites. The kites were of all size and shapes, triangles and rectangles, bananas and watermelons, vultures and spiders and dragons. Thousands of them flew high in the wind above Red Rock Cliff, tethered to the ground by gossamer strings that seemed to flash in the dawn light, as if dusted with diamonds. The kites swooped and dived and danced against each other.

Suddenly the highest flying kite, a red dragon, quivered in mid-swoop and then cratered downwards, disappearing beneath the cliff edge. Like a puppet, the kite's strings had been cut. A dull roar of applause and laughter came from the spectators inside Red Rock Cliff. Sakura realized what had happened. This is a kite-cutting competition. The kite strings were coated in broken glass and the winner was the one who kept his kite in the air the longest. The competition would probably last the whole morning.

"How many people are in Red Rock Cliff right now?" she asked Kankuro.

"On the Day of Kindness?" Kankuro shrugged. "Everyone."

"Children?" Asuma asked sharply.
"Everyone. Why'd you think Gaara wanted to hold the Council meeting here?"

The logic was chilling. Gaara wanted as many witnesses as possible to whatever happened. But if what happened was a battle…

They reached the cliff edge and started to rappel down with their hands. Below them stretched Red Rock Cliff. Square holes dotted the copper rust-colored walls of the canyon: the famous hanging tombs, the tunnels that led deep inside the stone to the mummified bodies of the Suna dead. Outside, the wind swept up flurries of white sand amongst the gathered worshippers. Children holding kites were everywhere.

In the center of the canyon, in a large circle marked by a glowing black line drawn in the sand, stood Gaara and the various members of the Suna High Council, including Mukade. A barrier circle, Sakura realized. A kind of seal that could be used to block certain things from entering or exiting, such as light or sound.

"Yamato's ANBU team must have set up the barrier circle to block heat," Asuma said. "Everyone can see through with normal vision. But the barrier blocks the Sougon from seeing inside with their Enshogan. And if they can't see, they can't use Bakudan."

Kankuro laughed. "So the assassins are useless. The Old Ratface's worst nightmare!"

"No," Asuma mused thoughtfully. "I don't think Ryokan is worried at all. He's too confident. That's why he didn't just kill us back at the Lighthouse."

Asuma's words reminded Sakura of… of what? Suddenly she felt there was something terribly wrong. Something important she was missing.

They had been trapped in the Lighthouse. Baki couldn't fight. Mukade had come personally to finish them off… why didn't he? Asuma thought it was because of arrogance. But that wasn't right, Sakura thought. Mukade had been surprised. Something had been wrong with the plan.

The plan. The note in Basho's hand. SLEEPER LOCATION UNKNOWN. Sleeper. The Sleeper had to be a person… the assassin with the stolen Enshogan. Who else would it be? So Mukade didn't know where the assassin was. But why?

Iniden. They had found Iniden's blood mixed with the Enshogan chakra. Had something gone wrong between the two of them? The assassin attacked Iniden's hand. Why his hand? Because Iniden was a medic-nin. His hands were close to the Enshogan, were doing something to it… had he been testing the eye? Then it was an accident, maybe. But why was Iniden even involved in the first place? There something I'm missing.

As Sakura's mind raced, the three of them were already running through the heart of Red Rock Cliff. They came to the black barrier circle. Suna, Konoha, and Ame ANBU guards were posted all around the barrier to stop any trespassers. But Gaara saw them and gave the order to let them through.

As soon as Kankuro crossed over the barrier he yelled out to Gaara, "Ryokan Mukade is a traitor! He's hiding the Akatsuki assassins! They just tried to kill us!" This information caused quite a stir. The Councilors muttered among themselves like an excited flock of geese. But Mukade stood there perfectly calm.

Sakura stared at Mukade. Why is he so calm?

The Old Ratface, the master puppeteer. He had taken the assassin to a puppet shop. Used puppetry to
hide the Enshogan so as to fool a chakra sensor, to fool even the Byakugan. Why? To make the
disguise perfect, even at close range. To let the assassin get to the Kazekage face to face. Someone…
someone he could trust…

Iniden had laughed. Why had he laughed? *You'll never figure it out who it is until it's too late…*

Sakura had seen the books on Iniden's desk. A history of tuberculosis epidemics, a treatise on the
principles of cellular regeneration, a monograph on neuro-spore infection. Nothing out of the
ordinary. No, but *why those* specific books?

*We're all suspects,* Inoichi said.

In the corner of her eye, she saw Gaara speaking with his brother. ANBU Squad 1 stood guard
around him. Some of the Councilors were approaching Gaara with a piece of paper. Asuma was also
walking toward Gaara purposefully.

Asuma. Asuma had started this whole train of thought in Sakura's mind. He had reminded her of
something. *What?*

The casino. The Enshogan trail had led to the casino, to a known Akatsuki establishment. Why?
Why would the assassin go there? It didn't make sense.

Unless… unless they had been at it all wrong. They had assumed the assassin was a traitor. All their
logic had been premised on that assumption. But what if the assassin went to the casino… because
he was trying to help? Because he himself was part of the investigation. His actions were illogical…
seemingly random… because he was trying to find himself. Because he himself *didn't even know he
was* the assassin—a sleeper agent—

At last she remembered. She had touched Asuma's face during the battle.

His face was cold.

*My god, it's Asuma! Asuma has the Enshogan eye!* She whirled around, to warn the others, before it
was too late—

Sarutobi Asuma's right eye burned with golden flames.

"Gaara!" Sakura shouted. "Asuma—"

BOOM!

The explosion was blinding.
BOOM!

The explosion was blinding, a burning orange wave of steam like a furnace. Sakura was thrown back hard into the ground. A lance of numbing pain shot through her head. For a horrible moment she didn't know where she was.

Her eardrums were ringing madly. Her vision was blind, black. She thought maybe she was asleep, or dreaming. She tried to open her eyes. Nothing happened. Then suddenly the blackness before her gave way to blue, something blue as the surface of the sea. *What's that?* she wondered. The blue sea compassed her entire vision. Mysteriously, in the sea there seemed to be floating thousands of odd little boats. Wires dangled from each of the little boats, hanging, twisting in the blue. For some reason the fantasy came to her that the boats were made of paper and that all of them were drowning in the sea and that only she, she of all the ninjas in the world, could save them.

"Gaara!" Kankuro screamed, as if from somewhere very far away.

Kankuro's voice broke through Sakura's trance-like daze. *Not boats,* she realized. *Kites.* She was lying on her back in the sand and staring at the sky, filled with flying kites, of Red Rock Cliff.

*Red Rock Cliff. The explosion!*

Sakura raised her head to find that Gaara was gone, and in his place was a steaming crater.

Asuma was turning to her now, his right eye still glowing gold. Suddenly he was tackled from the side by two ANBU, Ink and Rhino. The Bakudan explosion missed Sakura by half a meter. There was a brief struggle, and then Asuma didn't move anymore.

"What the fuck happened?" Rhino shouted, his voice uncomprehending. Sakura tried to respond but her mouth didn't work. Unconsciously she raised her hand from her chest and the hand came away slick with blood.

The ANBU Captain, Yamato, was there next to her. "It's all right, Sakura," he said. "Some of your ribs are broken, but it's not a lethal wound. You're just stunned."

"Where's Gaara?" Kankuro screamed again.

"I believe he is blown into bits, dear Kankuro!" a smooth oily voice piped up. Ryokan Mukade, the traitor. Behind him the old men of the Suna High Council were watching warily, making no move to intervene. Mukade cackled in malicious delight. "Our Fifth Kazekage is no more!" he cried.

"Not yet I'm not," a boy's voice said, strained from pain. All turned to look at it.

Mukade's mouth flopped open.

A small form was rising up from the sand, a few meters away from the Bakudan crater. Gaara. Alive. Except he clutched his side, and something red gushed down his left arm and leg. Kankuro rushed over to him. "The ANBU Saint saved my life," he said flatly. "He pushed me out of the way before the Bakudan hit."

"Saint was the only one who saw," Ink said. "He was a Hyuuga… the only one who could've reacted fast enough to Sakura's warning." The ANBU paused. "He's dead."
"What happened to Asuma?" Captain Yamato asked Sakura, helping her to her feet.

"Sleeper… sleeper agent," Sakura managed. "It was Iniden… controlling him… the neuro-spores…
must have infected Asuma somehow… Ryokan Mukade implanted the eye…"

"Such a sssmart girl," a man hissed with a serpent's tongue.

Sakura felt her gut churn. She knew that hiss. At the edge of the barrier circle, a half-white half-black
man-thing with jaws like a Venus flytrap was rising out of the sand. The thing was grinning.

"Akatsuki devil!" one of the Councilors spat.

Zetsu laughed. "Fools… never ssuspected, did you? My ssspires! Nasty little things, once they get
into your blood… I infected Sarutobi with them during our last encounter. Hes been under my
control for months! The irony… is delicious…"

"Too bad it didn't work," Yamato observed.

Zetsu laughed again. "Yes, too bad. The girl figured out the ssecret just in time. I supposse… well
just have to do it the hard way… wont we, Mukade?"

"Yes, we will," said Ryokan Mukade. With confident strides he and his bodyguards walked over to
Zetsu, along with over half of the ANBU in the barrier circle. The rest of the High Councilors
looked at this display of naked power mutely. Meanwhile the remaining ninjas loyal to Gaara closed
around him tightly in a protective ring. Outside the barrier, people were scurrying around with great
commotion and confused shouts. They must be wondering what's happening, Sakura thought. I bet it
doesn't look good.

Gaara and Mukade now stood at opposite ends of the circle, facing off against each other.

"Mukade," Gaara said, leaning against Kankuro's arm, badly injured. "At last it comes to this. An
open coup."

"I regret it came to this, demon," said Mukade.

"No, you would rather assassinate him from the shadows like a coward!" yelled Kankuro. "You
haven't the guts, you little rat!"

"By rights the demon ought to have been hanged in his mother's womb fifteen years ago. Instead he
lived to bring Sunagakure to the brink of destruction. No more. The fealty to the leaf apes ends here!
The shinobi of the Sand bow to no man and especially to no bitch of a woman!"

Gaara stared with hollow black circles under his eyes at the men around him. "High Councilors…
Ryokan Mukade is a traitor and an Akatsuki spy. I am your rightful Kazekage. It is time for you to
choose between us. If you move against me now… there shall be no mercy."

The old men on the High Council murmured among themselves. Sakura knew what was happening.
They were trying to figure out who would be on the winning side. The wrong choice of ally would
be fatal.

One of the High Council members, who looked older than the rest, stiffened his shoulders, adjusted
his robes, and then, ever so deliberately, walked toward Mukade's camp. Many followed—more than
half. The others Councilors didn't move. Did they think to remain neutral? Impossible. Baki would
have been with Gaara from the start, Sakura thought. He was the only one.

"The Council is on my side, demon," Mukade said. "By majority vote, in accordance with the laws of the village, we depose you as Kazekage. You have no right to dispute this vote."

Unexpectedly Gaara laughed. "You… bunch of clowns… you just tried to assassinate me! You dare speak of law!"

"Exile!" one of the Council members who hadn't moved suddenly said. "Mukade… you win. You will be Kazekage. Don't allow this to lead to unnecessary bloodshed. Allow the boy to leave the village peacefully, on his word never to return."

"You soft old fool," the elder Councilor said. "If the demon is not destroyed now he will destroy us!"

"I've heard enough!" another of the Councilors spat. "You've gone too far this time, Ryokan. Making dark pacts with terrorists! We are with you, Kazekage-sama! To the end!"

Mukade chuckled. "At least you have a few old men on your side. And some leaf ANBU, and some genin children. Not nearly enough."

"No," said Gaara. "You forgot one thing. I am the leader of Suna… I am Sabaku Gaara of the Desert… and this is my home. And I… have… the sand!"

The sand beneath their feet exploded upwards.

Everything happened simultaneously, too fast for Sakura, her head still dazed, to follow. A tidal wave of sand as tall as Red Rock Cliff surged forward over Mukade and his followers, breaking on the opposite cliff face with a screeching roar. At the same moment, a web of black venom-dripping spikes stabbed through the wave of sand back at Gaara. "Wood Release: White Creation Rebirth!" Yamato's voice called next to her. A ten-story high white banyan tree erupted from the sand under Sakura's feet. The hard, white branches of the tree intercepted the web of black thorns, wrapping around them, new branches sprouting out as fast as they could be cut. Just as the tree and the thorns started to attack each other, three giant puppet spiders climbed over the tidal wave of sand. Each of the spiders was as large as an entire building. Their long clawed legs were made of iron; mandibles of diamond glittered in their gaping mouths. The puppet spiders leaped with astonishing speed, landing on the banyan tree and on top of Gaara's sand shield.

Meanwhile Red Rock Cliff was swarming, everywhere, with the sounds of screams. The screams echoed and reechoed against the canyon walls until they shook. Crowds of civilians stampeded out of the canyon in a mob. Abandoned kites zigzagged crazily in the wind. The wind was so strong that many of the kites flew higher, taking with them the glass-coated strings like a leash. The strings whipped uncontrollably in the air, their broken glass edges sharp enough to cut a man's throat. And in the midst of all this chaos ninjas fought against each other and killed each other and died, their desperate struggling cries all churned together, one long scream of agony and triumph and rage, staining the hot white sand with blood.

Sakura was with Yamato, Rhino, and Ink inside the canopy of the banyan tree. Another battle, Sakura thought. Her head throbbed; she had a bad concussion from the Bakudan explosion, and it was hard to concentrate. What for? What are they all fighting about? On the Day of Kindness… why are so many people going to die?

A sharp pain rippled through her ribs, and she staggered, falling on one hand. Before her, Sarutobi Asuma lay unconscious on his back, his face shadowed into black-and-silver bars by the branches overhead. His real eye was closed, but the Enshogan, its glowing golden surface inflamed with webs
of dark blood vessels, stared blankly upwards. The Enshogan was decaying...slowly dissolving into black liquid. The seal. The seal on the eye had finally activated.

"Sakura! Can you fight?" Yamato asked, grunting with the effort of sustaining his Wood Release jutsu. A puppet spider was cutting away at the top of the tree with its diamond mandibles.

She nodded. "Yeah," she said.

"Then this is your mission. We're surrounded on all sides by the enemy. Keep Asuma alive. And kill as many enemies as you can." Yamato stood up, unsheathing the sword on his back. "Everyone prepare to move out on my signal."

"What are you waiting for, Captain?" Ink asked.

Rhino laughed. "Right, you weren't here the last time. We're waiting for—"

The trunk of the white banyan tree glowed red for a split second, like it was being superheated from the inside. Then it violently exploded.

"—for that," Rhino finished.

"Now!" Yamato yelled.

Yamato took a running leap off the tree. Sakura grabbed Asuma and followed. Yamato threw some sort of seed ahead of her. The seed burst in midair into a large wooden slide. Sakura landed on top of it and slid down speeding to the canyon floor. Behind her, the trunkless crown of the tree exploded in another Bakudan blast. Sakura tumbled from the slide, rolling into a crouch onto the white sand dunes. In her hand she gripped her chakra-cast kunai tightly, hot and glittering to the touch. Asuma lay motionless in the sand next to her; she breathed hard, painfully, her ribs were broken, her limbs shook from exhaustion. The red sun beat down on her throbbing head. Paper kites fluttered overhead, glass-coated kite wires that whipped in the wind.

All around her there was fighting, sand-nin against sand-nin, sand-nin against leaf-nin and rain-nin. Captain Yamato and the other ANBU ran toward Gaara, who was fighting with Mukade's puppet spiders nearby. Zetsu's black thorn spikes were erupting out of the sand in all directions, spiraling in a twisting web. Sakura wasn't sure what to do.

"Should I just stay here, or try to run for it?"

"Actually, we were flying kites," Chouji observed glumly. "Then the other people flying kites started trying to kill us." The short fat genin paused, staring at Asuma's body. "Why, uh, does Asuma-sensei have one eye?"

"Long story," Sakura said. "We got to get out of here!"

Chouji nodded vigorously in agreement. But Ino cried out, "No way! Finally a real battle! I wanna kick ass! Watch me, Sakura!" She charged forward at the nearest enemy sand-nin, a chuunin who was dueling with a Konoha chuunin.
"Aw, damnit!" Chouji said, following Ino.

Anake rolled his eyes. "Well, Sakura? Now that the bimbo and the fatass are gone, I think we can make a run for it."

"I heard that!" Ino shouted. "Why don't you go help out instead of running your mouth like a bitch?!"

Anake smirked. "Forget it, my dear. We might as well already be dead. Surrender, I say! Fly the white flag and maybe they won't torture us horribly before they cut our heads off." As he was saying this, though, he made a hand seal and spit a wind elemental attack out of his mouth at a Suna ANBU who was attacking Chouji. "Sakura, behind you."

Another Suna ANBU was thrusting his sword at Sakura's chest. Sakura managed to parry it with her chakra-cast kunai, but the ANBU was very strong, and the sword probably would have hit her anyway if she hadn't used her other hand to jerk up the sand beneath the ANBU's feet with a chakra field. The ANBU fell down like a carpet had been pulled from out under him. Huh. I didn't think that would actually work. Before Sakura had time to think about what she would do next, a rain-nin attacked the Suna ANBU and the two moved away, exchanging furious blows.

The battle was growing more and more chaotic by the second. Like a hurricane blowing across the ocean, the center of the fight had shifted, and they were now in the middle of it. Blurs of running and leaping ninjas swirled around Sakura. She stood guard over Asuma and didn't try to join the battle. I'm no good for fighting right now. Unless I open the chakra gates. But I won't do that unless I have to.

"Rolling fatass!" Anake shouted at Chouji, who had gone into his Human Bullet Tank secret clan jutsu. "Give it up already!"

"Shut up!" Chouji said. "You're like the fucking enemy! I hate you!"

"Wonderfully stated. I hate you too!"

Anake wasn't wrong. Ino and Chouji weren't really doing anything; they were way too slow to hit any of the enemy ninjas with their attacks and were basically just getting in the way. The best that could be said of them was that they hadn't died yet.

"You guys—" Sakura started.

"Got you!" Ino said, crying in triumph. "Mind Body Switch!"

Against all expectations Ino's mind transfer jutsu connected with a nearby Suna ANBU. She took over the sand-nin's body. "Haha! Look at me, cactus!" the ANBU cried out in a strange male voice, waving to Sakura. At the same instant a Konoha ANBU leaped above the Suna ninja. With one flashing cut he sliced off the sand-nin's head.

"Ino!" Sakura shouted.

Fortunately, the decapitation of the host didn't kill Ino. It just knocked her back into her real body, unconscious. Given the trauma of experiencing her own death, she would probably be out for a long time.

Chouji seemed speechless. "I miss Shikamaru," he finally managed.

Sakura was holding her head in pain. It was so hard to concentrate, but she could feel something
disturbing. *What am I feeling?* With her inability to focus, she could only vaguely sense the chakra of the most powerful ninjas in the canyon: Gaara, Mukade, Hyuuga Hiashi, Zetsu, Yamato, Tosuken, and some others she didn't know. It was one of the ninjas she didn't know that disturbed her now. An immense amount of chakra was building up in him.

Sakura realized what the chakra was with a chill. *Enshogan*—

"BLAST WAVE!"

The roar of a killer beast echoed along the length of Red Rock Cliff.
"BLAST WAVE!"

The roar of a killer beast echoed along the length of Red Rock Cliff.

From the center of the canyon, by the tall white stump of the banyan tree, an enormous wave of rippling heat billowed outwards. It was as hot as a Bakudan blast, but unlike the Bakudan the wall of heat expanded in a sphere in all directions. It was impossible to avoid. Before Sakura's eyes, dozens of fighting ninjas, friend and enemy alike, were caught by the Blast Wave. They didn't even have time to scream before their bodies were roasted into charred bones.

Sakura stared as the Blast Wave came rushing straight at her.

*Today is really, really going to suck,* she thought again.

She opened the first two Chakra Gates.

Chakra flooded her body, overflowing, as before. But at the same moment a jagged stab of pain tore through her head, so painful that she almost blacked out. *Agh!* Her concussion, her head injury. It couldn't handle all the chakra. She cried out, falling to her hands and knees. In front of her, so close she could feel the heat on her face, was the Blast Wave.

With desperate instinct Sakura poured her chakra into the sand beneath her hands. Screaming, she jumped up, throwing her hands over her head, pulling on the chakra field, taking the sand up with her. A thick wall of white sand was pulled up over her body and then back down behind her. The dome of sand covered herself, Asuma, Chouji, Ino, and Anake completely. For a split second everything was in darkness.

The Blast Wave hit.

There was an odd crunching sound, like a can being crumpled up, and then all of a sudden everywhere there was light.

The dome of sand had turned into glass. The heat of the Blast Wave had fused the sand into a new silicate configuration. Sakura gaped in wonder through the thick, semi-transparent glass at the scenes of carnage outside, as through a distorted mirror. Behind them the Blast Wave slowly dissipated.

The glass of the dome, smoking, superheated, began to fracture. Cracks ran up the length of the dome, branching out, growing larger. Finally the glass gave way—shattering all at once. Sakura screamed again, blasting chakra from her tenketsu in a whirlwind. A million shards of hot glass exploded outward from her, scattering on the steaming white sand.

Two masked Sougon assassins stood before her with burning golden eyes.

"So you survived my Blast Wave," laughed the man called Sougon Charasu. "You got stronger… Sakura."

"She is the Betrayer's little pet, after all," said Naishu.

Sakura's head was pounding harder than ever before. It was hard to think or focus on anything. "Fuck you!" she managed to get out. "You killed Pug!"
Sougon Charasu cackled. "Was that his name?" he asked. "The one who saved your life? Thanks for telling me. I do so love to know the names of the people I blow up."

Sakura tried to stumble backward, but Charasu moved so fast she didn't even see it, catching Sakura in the throat with his hand. His body was truly massive, like a hulking beast, every muscle coiled with liquid power. She gagged in pain beneath the force of his grip.

"Wind Release: Vacuum Wave!" Anake called from behind her.

The two stone-nins dodged the attack, splitting up in opposite directions. Sougon Charasu still held onto Sakura's neck.

"Wood Release: Smothering Binding!" Thick tendrils made of wood burst out of the sand all around Charasu. One of the tendrils latched onto his wrist, forcing Charasu to throw Sakura away. She tumbled hard in the sand.

Captain Yamato ran at Charasu from the side, a sword in his left hand, his right already making the seal for another jutsu. "We're losing!" Yamato shouted at Sakura. "Get the other kids out of here—"

Sougon Charasu met Yamato's strike with his own katana and turned it. Then he went on the offensive. Charasu was just as fast as Yamato, and much stronger physically. And his style of taijutsu was like nothing she had ever seen before. As he moved curtains of alternating heat and cold moved with him, acting both as a shield around him and as weapons to attack Yamato, a blur of fire and ice. *This the true power of the Enshogan*, Sakura realized. *True mastery of heat!* Yamato, strong as he was, couldn't fight hand-to-hand with the Sougon leader. Instead he leaped back, fleeing from Charasu's attacks, throwing up blockades of trees and branches that were instantly cut apart.

Sakura had managed to climb to her feet. *This is bad.* Yamato was right; they were losing. Mukade's puppet spiders were everywhere, as if multiplying. Gaara's chakra signature was weakening. And in front of her Captain Yamato was going it alone against an S-rank ninja.

She made to help him, though she wasn't sure how. Her head throbbed. Just then Yamato grunted out in pain, stumbling to the ground. Charasu's white-hot katana stabbed through Yamato's chest. The big man laughed victoriously. He pulled out the blade to drive in another finishing blow, but suddenly stopped.

"Shit!" Charasu hissed.

Sakura felt it too.

There was a new chakra signature somewhere above her. The chakra was like the sun against a backdrop of candles, overshadowing all the others by its power. Even Gaara's chakra paled in comparison to this blinding white light. But somehow, too, the light was shadowed, as if something dark came with it unseen. And if you followed the light all the way back to the center, to the origin point, it was not a sun but a black hole. Sakura turned to gaze in wonder at the source.

Atop the highest peak of Red Rock Cliff stood a woman in white robes.

Senju Tsunade raised her hands. "Earth Release: Swamp of the Underworld!"

The sand in the center of the canyon turned into a brown muddy swamp. Everything started to sink down. But it was easy for most ninjas to jump out of it and use chakra to keep on top. Only the heavier things were stuck, sinking deeper and deeper into the mud. Mukade's puppet spiders were dragged down helplessly into the depths of the swamp. Zetsu's web of thorns was also sunk.
"Damn that bitch!" Sougon Charasu spat.

He had barely finished saying this before there was a flash of light and the Fifth Hokage appeared out of the ground in front of Charasu. She stared into the stone-nin's masked face.

"Torment," the Hokage said.

Sougon Charasu froze and fell backwards, his face twisted into a grotesque expression of insanity. His mouth gaped wide open, as if he was screaming, but no sound came out.

Having defeated Charasu in one second with her ultimate genjutsu Tsunade disappeared in another flash of light. In the distance there were shouts and cheers. Something blew up loudly.

Sakura and Captain Yamato were on the periphery of the battle now, far away from the swamp where the main action was taking place. Sakura ran toward Yamato, who was trying to get up. Blood oozed out from between his seared right ribs.

"Sakura! Dodge!" Yamato yelled suddenly.

She dodged to the side. The ground where she had been standing exploded.

The Bakudan attack just narrowly missed. She staggered back, looked around her frantically. She saw him just in time. The masked Sougon was crouched on a black thorn vine above her. Not Charasu. Sougon Nachi, she remembered.

"Damn you and your Queen Bitch!" Nachi shouted, raging. "Die!"

His eyes shimmered gold—

Sakura dodged again as Sougon Nachi attacked with Bakudan. It was like in the forest again, a month and a half ago, when Sakura and the three Sougon shinobi had fought each other. But in the flat canyon of Red Rock Cliff there was no place to run or hide. Attack, I've got to attack! Sakura thought, her mind throbbing. It hurt to think.

She ran at Nachi. The man fell back, dodging, using the web of thorns as a barrier between them. A long-distance fighter... he's weak up close. Sougon Nachi was spamming Bakudan all over. But Sakura, with the speed of two Chakra Gates open, was able to dodge and weave between his attacks, getting closer each time. Now she was close enough to look into his uncovered eyes.

"Blast Wave!" the Sougon screamed.

A large Blast Wave erupted from his body. Sakura raised up a wall of sand to block it, but the Blast Wave was more powerful at close range. The sand melted into molten glass and shattered, not fully absorbing the shockwave. She was blown back. She cried out in pain. Sougon Nachi cackled, gloating.

"Binding!" Sakura said, still lying on the ground.

The full-strength genjutsu, further enhanced by her open chakra gates, hit the Sougon stone-nin. His muscles froze. Now the man couldn't move—an opening. She threw her chakra-cast kunai directly at the man's face. Then she threw some more kunai, just for good measure.

Nachi's eyes widened as the kunai came for him. Sakura thought she had won. But then the clutch of kunai fell clattering in midair to the ground, as if they had hit some sort of invisible wall. He used his Enshogan to absorb the kinetic energy of the kunai! Sakura realized.
There was no choice but a direct frontal attack. An attack with her own hands. She charged forward. The stone-nin assassin also seemed to recognize the decisive moment. Finally breaking the genjutsu, he moved to close the remaining distance.

They ran right at each other.

Sougon Nachi's eyes burned with golden flames. Sakura's hands, overflowing with chakra, raised up a huge wave of sand.

"Tree-fucking ape bitch!" Nachi yelled.

"For Pug!" she shouted.

So close to each other they could almost touch, his Blast Wave and her charging wall of sand connected. There was a sickening crunch as the wave of heat hit the sand wall. The sand fused into molten glass. The glass shattered, exploded with shrieking violence. Into the vacant space, the breach of exploding glass and superheated golden haze, the girl and the man leaped.

Sakura didn't really have any idea what she doing. She couldn't see anything in the haze. She blindly stabbed into the space in front of her with a kunai. There was a scream of pain on the other end. "Stupid bitch!" she heard Nachi shout.

At the same moment, the air above her head exploded. The Bakudan overshot slightly, but it was close enough. She was blasted down hard into the ground. She rolled on the sand stunned.

Am I falling? There was a burning pain in her head. Before her there was something blue, blue as the surface of the sea. The sky. **So blue**, Sakura thought. **So blue and large and quiet.** In the back of her rational mind she knew she had suffered another concussion which had knocked her into a coma-like trance. But somehow that seemed insignificant to her now. Everything is insignificant compared to this sky. It was the most beautiful and the most wondrous thing she had ever seen in her life.

The man named Sougon Nachi appeared at the edge of her field of vision, stretching his hand toward her. The man mouthed some words. She heard the words as she heard the buzzing of a fly. She knew that Nachi was about to kill her, that she was about to die. She knew that, but suddenly death was insignificant to her, even more insignificant than life.

What is it? she thought. **What is it?** Was it God? She remembered Gaara's prayer, for God to be with them on this Day of Kindness. God was in this sky, yes, but what was God? Was it kindness? No, she thought. Kindness and hatred, the possibility of kindness and hatred, was something that only existed on earth. In the sky there was something else. The word came to her in a flash. **Innocence.** The innocence of a world without man, without good or evil. With all her heart she desperately yearned for that innocence, to join her soul to that lofty infinite eternal sky. To death.

And at that same moment, something within her pulled back.

Something whispered that innocence was not for her.

It happened suddenly, more on sheer instinct and adrenaline than anything else. In the sky above her, fluttered a white paper kite. She could see the glittering kite wire close by her, close enough she could almost reach out and touch it. The kite wire was behind the man with the eyes of gold flames. With the palm of her right hand she threw out a chakra string into the air. The chakra string hit the kite wire. Sakura pulled back hard on the chakra string. The glass-coated kite wire whipped around in the air and wrapped itself around the man's neck.

Die! was all she had time to think.
She pulled her arm in the other direction. The wire followed, and with a clean coiling movement sliced opened Sougon Nachi's throat. Blood gushed out. Nachi stumbled back, his arms scrambling, and then fell down backwards in the sand.

Sakura didn't move for what seemed like a very long time. Then, as normal consciousness gradually returned to her, she rolled on her stomach and got to her knees before the dead man. Sougon Nachi's shimmering Enshogan eyes stared up the sky blankly. For some reason Sakura remembered Asuma-sama's words.

She reached down, pried her fingers into the Sougon's eye sockets, and pulled out his eyes. They were cold in her open hands, cold enough to burn her skin. And already decaying through the self-protective seal. Sakura opened her fists and then closed them shut, squashing the Enshogan eyes. Cold black liquid leaked through her fingers down into the hot sand.

Someone put a hand on her shoulder. The ANBU Captain, Yamato.

"Sakura," Yamato said. "You did very well. I know... I know this was your first time. The first killing is always hard."

Sakura stared. She shook her head slowly. "No," she said. "No. This is the second man I killed."

The first was your little brother, Asuma-sama.

She felt nothing.

In the distance around her, there were muttering voices, whispers. As if a light had gone out, the battle was over, and the survivors groped confusedly for what to do next. Gaara and the United Countries had won. Ryokan Mukade was flattened on the ground like a pancake, every bone in his body crushed into powder. Gaara and Kankuro stood on top of Mukade's corpse. "Traitor!" "Akatsuki traitor!" the ninjas that gathered around them whispered. Rhino and Ink sat on the sand nearby. Chouji cradled an unconscious Ino behind what remained of their glass-fused shelter. Anake too, and Asuma. And Sarutobi Inishu, and Tosuken, and thousands of others who were alive.

The bodies of those who hadn't made it lay scattered all throughout Red Rock Cliff. Most were ninjas. But many—too many—weren't. Medic-nins walked through the canyon, healing the wounded, rounding up prisoners, cataloging the dead. The swamp of the underworld had long since reverted back into sand; half-sunk hulks of spider puppets and decomposing webs of thorns littered the dunes as bygone wrecks. Above all, above the whispers, there was silence. The only sound was the wind, the rushing, whistling wind, and the flutter of the kites that somehow remained in the sky.

The Hokage stood in front of Sakura, her back turned to her. Sakura heard her sensei's voice. "It is over. The village is yours, Kazekage-sama... What will be your decision?"

Gaara raised his head to stare at the sun. On his right temple Sakura could see the tattooed character of "Kindness." At that moment, by sheer chance, a fallen kite blew by him on a flurry of sand. The boy reached out his hand and caught the kite string. The kite was red; it jerked madly in Gaara's grip, twisting, before soaring up into the sky, higher and higher, until it was a mere shadow against the sun.

The Fifth Kazekage spoke. He spoke to all the gathered ninjas, to the gathered villagers, to his people. The voice carried on the wind through Red Rock Cliff.

"Suna will join the United Countries," he said. "We will go to Iwa."
Asuma scratched his head. "Yeah, so can you explain what happened to me again?"

They were in the main Sunagakure hospital. Sakura was standing by the recovering Asuma's bedside, along with Dr. Micho, Inoichi, and Asuma's students. Tonton the pig was curled up on Asuma's lap, looking around at the humans with wide glassy eyes.

"It's quite straightforward, Asuma-san," Dr. Honjo Micho said, adjusting his glasses. "Ahem. What I mean is it's just like Sakura guessed. You were infected with some of Zetsu's spores when you fought him in the Forest of Death. Once the spores got into your bloodstream, they leached onto your spinal cord and brain. They're a kind of neurological parasite I've never seen before... microscopic, devoid of chakra, undetectable by ordinary means. Brilliant, really. Now, in general the spores had no effect on your normal behavior. However, the spores can be triggered by the right sensory stimuli, in your case a certain kind of gamma radiation, rendering you hypnotically suggestible to any command... in effect, as Sakura said, you were a sleeper agent. Sarutobi Iniden was your handler. He implanted the Enshogan in you and hypnotized you using a gamma ray generator to assassinate the Hokage or the Kazekage if you ever saw their real bodies. Is all that clear?"

Micho shrugged his shoulders and grinned, as if to say this explanation was as simple as it was going to get.

"Sounds like a plan Shikamaru would come up with," Asuma said. He had bandages over the right side of his face. The remains of the Enshogan eye and the puppet plate disguising it had been removed, and his old eye had been put back its place. Conveniently, it turned out Mukade had kept the eye in a glass jar in his private apartments. "Too much for me. Well... I'm cured now, right? No more spores?"

Micho smiled. "No more spores. You're a free man."

"At least for now," Sakura thought. "Sougon Charasu is still out there. So many had died in Red Rock Cliff, so many good people. Like Saint. But somehow Zetsu and Sougon Charasu were still alive. Charasu's dead corpse had proved upon inspection to be a mud clone. He had used his clone to absorb the Hokage's Torment genjutsu and then escaped in the chaos. Zetsu had run away as well. No one knew where they were now... except that they would be back. Pug's killer is still alive."

"Zetsu's spores were everywhere in Red Rock Cliff," Sakura pointed out. "A lot more people could have been infected."

"Yes, we're trying to figure that out now. I've ordered everyone to get tested. Meantime the Hokage is personally leading the effort to create an inoculation serum. The serum will be a permanent solution to any future spore attacks."

Inoichi scowled. "The breach of our security is far deeper than anything a 'serum' could cure. Don't think that Sarutobi Iniden is the only traitor in our midst."

As if she had somehow understood Inoichi's words, Tonton jumped up from Asuma's lap with a squeal and started running around the bed in a circle, excited. Sakura picked Tonton off the bed to calm her down.

Asuma sighed. "And how is Uncle Inishu taking the news about Iniden?"

"As one might expect he would take it. Rest assured... I am watching him very closely."
"Dad!" Ino said. "You can't seriously be accusing Commander Inishu of being a spy."

"Are you a spy?" Inoichi asked his daughter with no trace of irony. He turned to Micho. "Are you a spy? Am I a spy? Do you think Iniden went to Akatsuki by himself? He had high-level help. The leadership of Konoha has been compromised. We are all suspects."

Ino rolled her eyes. "Okay, dad, we get it. Don't you have somewhere to be? You know, secret agent stuff or whatever."

Inoichi turned his ever-suspicious, hawk-like stare on them as he left the room. "Remember what I said. All of you."

"Jeez, your dad is so intense," Chouji said to Ino after the door had closed.

"I know! You should see how he acts at home."

"Why would Akatsuki want you two guys as spies?" Anake wondered aloud, as if talking to himself. "Surely they can't be that desperate."

Asuma laughed. "Oh, I don't know about that, Anake. My students may be lazy bastards but their skills in subterfuge, otherwise known as bullshit, are unrivaled."

"Asuma-sensei!" Chouji said.

"All right, enough," Micho said. "The patient needs to rest. Doctor's orders. Out with all of you. Especially the pig!" He shooed them out of the room. Through the door he could be heard saying, "And no, Asuma-san, you absolutely are not allowed to smoke in the hospital!"

"Asuma-sama seems to be doing okay," Sakura said as they started talking down the corridor, carrying Tonton in her arms. She doubted whether she could cope so well after what had happened to him. Or is that just a front? I don't know. Maybe both. A day earlier, the first time Asuma had woken up, Sakura briefly told him what had happened during the battle in Red Rock Cliff. Asuma stared at her and then said, "Thanks." After that short conversation they hadn't talked about either Pug or the Sougon assassin again. What was there to talk about?

Unexpectedly Ino pulled Sakura aside. "I have something to say to you, cactus!"

The two girls stood by an open window in one of the hospital corridors, overlooking the courtyard below where children were flying kites. Sakura looked at her best friend.

"So you killed one of the bad guys," Ino said. "That's good."

Sakura stared.

"And… you saved my life. That's good, too." Ino paused. If Sakura didn't know better, she would think Yamanaka Ino was choking up. "Yes, the official UC Embassy pigwasher… saved my life. Because I was an idiot and I got myself knocked out."

"Ino… it could have happened to anyone."

"But it didn't happen to you. No, you're the hero now. The girl who unraveled the conspiracy and saved the Kazekage. And you did it all without a ninja headband, just with that big ugly forehead of yours. Pah!" Ino tossed her long ponytail angrily. "I don't how you did it." She turned away to look out the window, leaning her arms on the sill.
"I worked hard, Ino. It wasn't easy. You know."

"Yeah… I know." Suddenly she smiled, her face breaking into a genuine grin. "Do you remember, Sakura? Back at the Academy, when you asked me what kind of flower you were? I said you weren't even a flower, just a bud. It would be a waste if you just ended up as a bud. A flower is meaningless unless it blooms. And that bud could grow into… a flower that was the most beautiful in the world."

Ino turned to look at her best friend. "Well, Sakura… you're not a bud anymore! You still have a big ugly forehead, but you're strong. Stronger than me. Congratulations."

Sakura didn't know what to say. "Ino… we're rivals, right? I always wanted to be as strong as you. Surpassing you was my goal. Just because maybe I'm a little stronger now doesn't mean you're not a great kunoichi. And I know that you'll surpass me again. We're best friends forever."

Ino laughed. "Right! Just wait till the chuunin exam! I'm going to kick your ass!" Then she leaped over to give Sakura a big, tight hug. Tonton squealed as she was crushed between the two girls' embrace. Ino's blue eyes were sparkling and playful. "So tell me, you cactus. What does it feel like to kill a man?"

The UC Embassy stayed in Sunagakure for only a few more days. The Iwa chuunin exam would begin on June 29th, two weeks from now, and time was short. They still had to travel through the rest of the Wind Country, tramp across the Swamp Country, and then make a stopover in Hiroshiki, the capital of the Earth Country, before reaching Iwa. So the Hokage ordered the Embassy to move out of the village even before everyone's injuries from the battle had fully healed.

Fortunately, Sakura's wounds weren't very serious. In terms of physical damage she had only suffered some bruises, broken bones, and a concussion, easily fixed by medical ninjutsu. The internal damage to her muscles caused from opening the Chakra Gates was more serious, but to her surprise not nearly as bad as the last time. Due to her inability to concentrate she hadn't been able to open the Gates all the way or even generate a lot of the chakra she should have ordinarily. Her body had also gotten stronger and was more able to withstand the stress of opening two Gates. She still walked with a dull pain in her limbs, but that would dissipate with time.

So instead of lying in the hospital, she wandered through the village aimlessly, hanging around with Ino and Chouji and Lee, playing around with Tonton, even flying kites with the Suna children. During the last few days Sakura also spent a lot of time with Temari and Kankuro. Baki had confirmed to her the rumor that was spreading all around the Embassy: the Hokage was planning to put her together with the Sand Siblings for the chuunin exam. Such an inter-village team had never been attempted before. Its symbolism, especially given the recent history between Suna and Konoha, was potent.

Kankuro had laughed when Baki told them about the decision. "Don't you need to be a ninja to take the chuunin exam?" the puppet boy asked.

"Assume that Sakura will be restored to active duty when we arrive at Iwa," Baki said. He had on a new puppet arm and face plate, but hadn't bothered to costume them yet, and therefore looked particularly imposing as he glowered at them. "She is your teammate. You must respect her and work together if you wish to pass this exam."

Temari turned to stare at Sakura. A faint smile played on her lips. "If I wanted a damn leaf-nin on my team, which I don't… I'd take your ex-boyfriend. But… you'll do."

"That's my big sis's way of making a compliment," Kankuro added. "You actually did pretty well
during the mission. So you probably won't slow us down too much."

On the appointed day, at dawn, when the Embassy was to leave the village, the Kazekage came to see them off.

Gaara made his way slowly through the ranks of the assembled sand-ninja and other personnel who were to travel on the Embassy. Several of the old High Councilors who had survived the battle of Red Rock Cliff trailed after him, silently and respectfully. Gaara didn't say much; but sometimes he would reach out to touch a ninja's shoulder or to shake his hand. When he came to where Team Baki was, he stopped for a long time. It was especially personal for him because Temari, Kankuro, and Baki were the closest bonds that he had. Sakura guessed that he had never been separated from his siblings for such a long time in his whole life. Now they would all be leaving on the Embassy. As he bid goodbye to them, the Kazekage seemed even more alone than before. But Sakura also saw in him now great strength.

The strength to endure.

The last person Gaara spoke to before the Embassy left the village, improbably, was her. They walked a little away from the others in order to have a private conversation.

Sakura bowed low to him. "Kazekage-sama."

"Please, call me Gaara. That is my name." The boy seemed to smile, though the expression was unpracticed and he didn't quite do it right. "I want to thank you for saving my life."

She shook her head. "It wasn't me. My warning was too late to matter. Saint was the one who saw Asuma-sama as he was already charging Bakudan. He's the hero."

"That may be. The ANBU Saint is not here to tell us… even so, I thank you for trying. On that day there were not many who tried to keep me alive."

"There were enough," Sakura said.

"Yes. Enough."

Sakura paused. She hesitated, cleared her throat, then finally said, "Can I ask you something? Why did you change? What made you try to be… kind?"

Gaara stared at her, eyes black and impenetrable. "Before, I fought only to fight, to fight to the death. You wonder if you're really strong enough—stronger than the one you are dying to kill. I thought that defeating a man strong enough to hurt me and utterly destroying him proved the meaning of my existence. I fought for my sake only, and I loved no one but myself. But each time, with each killing, I found myself only unhappier and lonelier than before. Uzumaki Naruto showed me that there was a different way to live. He taught me that it was not hatred, but kindness that can defeat loneliness. Only Kindness at all cost."

"But sometimes… even if you want to change, it's so hard. And even if you do… you can't ever change what you did before. All the mistakes that you made. Even if you had another chance… a chance to make up for what you did…"

"You mean redemption?"

She nodded.

"There's no such as redemption," Gaara said. "Only regret."
Only regret. The fatalism, the predestination, but somehow also the hope, of Gaara's words seized her. "And is that... is that enough?"

"There is a saying in the Wind Country. The sandstorm passes, but the stars remain. What we did... what others did to us and before us... all of that is gone now. And we can never go back there, even if we wanted to. Like a passing sandstorm, all human life is but a breath in the wind. But yet there is something that remains behind, something that shines through with eternal beauty. Duty. Bonds. Love. Kindness. Those who died in Red Rock Cliff... those who have died in all times...we owe them that. That must be our promise to them, to each other, even to those who are yet to come. That is our inheritance and our legacy. That is our birthright."

Gaara hesitated, stumbling over the words. He looked down at the sand beneath his feet as if not knowing how to continue. For a moment he seemed not at all like the psychopath demon Sakura had feared before, not all like the great leader of the village she hoped he would become, but only as what he was. Only a boy. "But you asked if that was enough? Enough? I don't know. I can only give an answer that is true for me, now, at this time. It is not my place to tell you how to live your life... or what it means to be a shinobi... or the answer to the mystery of this world. I only want to tell you that you are not alone."

"Thank you, Gaara," Sakura said.

"I hope we will meet again, Haruno Sakura."

The Embassy, the combined Leaf, Rain, and Sand forces, left Sunagakure the same way they came in, through a slit in the high, red-stained stone walls. They pushed hard and fast north, trudging across the dunes of the Hiroi Desert. Within days they reached the edge of the Swamp Country that bordered Wind to the north. The Swamp Country was appropriately named: endless impenetrable glades and fens of hot, black, muddy, reptile-infested, insect-infested, shitty swamp. The swamps came from all the sediment being sloughed off the Dreamstone River, the world's largest river system by volume, which flowed through the middle of the country from east to west. In the west, where the river was slowest, lay the famous Wraithglades, the mysterious forests of bone-like ash trees that was said to be haunted with ghosts.

But the Embassy avoided the Wraithglades in order to save time. They didn't even bother to stop in Numagakure, Swamp's hidden ninja village. Instead they continued to push north and west, staying close to the river, following the Dreamstone up back through the steeply rising terrain. Rugged, knife-edge mountains began to grow up out of the swamp, higher and higher. Then one day the swamps were gone and, squeezing through a narrow valley pass, the Embassy came to the place they had dreamed of for many months.

The Earth Country, at last.
Into the Mountain's Maws

They had walked across half the world.

Starting from the Fire Country, over a period of two months, the United Countries Embassy had slowly wounded its way west. Along the way they had passed through a whirlwind of countries, cities, villages, places—forests and rivers, grasslands and mountains, deserts and swamps and maelstroms—all of them strange, all somehow indefinite. Like a misshapen shape glimpsed from a rushing train, they left behind only an obscure impression, gone as soon as they had been seen. What lingered were not the shapes. It was the changes the shapes had wrought in those who had glimpsed something they had never seen before.

The place they came to now was the one most unlike the place they had left. The chief geographical feature of the Fire Country was flatness, openness; it bled into four other countries along its western border, into the Sea of the Sage toward the south, into Lightning and Water toward the east. In a certain sense Fire, the political entity, existed more as lines on a map than as a real state, reflecting its origin as an amalgamation of bits and pieces cobbled together by the first Fire daimyos.

But the borders of the Earth Country were stamped in the land itself. Many thousands of years ago, violent volcanic eruptions had formed a long chain of mountains which surrounded Earth on all sides. The Dreamstone Mountains, closing off Earth from the rest of the continent. Ever since then it had existed as if it were an island on land, isolated and mysterious. Only the coming of the Sage of Six Paths had brought Earth into the world again.

The people of Earth bowed before the Sage's godlike power, adopted his religion and absorbed his teachings. But the old ways and customs were slow to change. Their dress, their distorted language, their ethnic and clan ties, their values, all persisted even in the face of extraordinary economic and technological transformation. And five hundred years later they still lived much as before. Whereas Fire had already become an industrialized society, Earth was very much still agricultural and rural.

As the Embassy squeezed through the narrow pass into Earth, the first thing they saw was mountain upon mountain of terraced rice paddies. Farmers with bent backs and straw hats on their head waded through the flooded paddies, whipping water buffaloes harnessed to their plows, circling slowly around the terraces. When the farmers saw the Embassy they shouted. At the shout flocks of wild geese burst from behind the mountains, quacking nosily. Far below, loose rocks kicked over the edges of the pass tumbled down into the Dreamstone River, green and calm like a sheet of jade.

"The Earth Country!" Rock Lee cried. "The Iwa chuunin exam!"

"Walkin' straight into the mountain's maws," Kankuro observed. "We must really want to die."

Sakura thought it was the most extraordinary place she had ever seen.

Even though the Earth Country was so different from Fire, Sakura felt far more at home here than at any other time on the Embassy. She didn't know why. Maybe because it was the beginning of summer, hot and bright. Maybe because she was near the end of her journey. Maybe because she had stopped training so hard and relaxed enough to see her surroundings. Whatever the reason, impressions came to her with the clarity and permanence of a photograph.

Crossing the bridge across a valley stream. The wagons jamming up in piles on the narrow wooden bridge, but men splashing into the glittering rushing water, wading across the stream with artless laughter. Red leaves floating in the water cling to their clothes as they climb out.
A frog jumping into a pond with a splash, and Tonton following it.

Wandering through a hidden meadow, scarcely larger than the trees around it are tall. The air stifling sweet and smeared with the nectar of ripe oranges. Shaking slim tree trunks to make oranges fall to the ground by the armful, throwing them one by one into each other's mouths.

A hollering shepherd running down a hill with long strides, swinging a stick, driving in front of him a thousand bleating sheep.

Climbing a moss-cracked ridge and suddenly seeing before the sheer jagged peaks of the Dreamstone Mountains, so high they were covered in white glacial ice.

Shirtless boys playing in ruins from a thousand years ago by the side of the road. Running a hand over overgrown temple walls made of huge stone faces, feeling the worn broken idols beneath her fingertips. A tree made of twining trunks squatting on top of a doorway, the roots hanging down like strands of thrown over hair.

Marching at night through valleys thick with forest shadows. Passing a cottage with a single candlelight still on. Catching a glimpse of a young girl singing in an unknown tongue, and wondering who she was.

Sakura found herself mesmerized. Day by day, her consciousness was drawn further into the rhythms of Earth, into the lives of those who lived there. She tried to comprehend how all this immense beauty could exist in one place. What did it all mean? Peace, she imagined to herself. Peace and innocence.

But she didn't forget what she had come here for.

"What do you want, girl?" the Hokage had asked her two months ago. And she had thought she had known. "When the Embassy arrives at Iwa, I will test you. It will be a test of strength. If you pass my test, then you shall be reinstated as a ninja, and you shall participate in the Iwa chuunin exams. If you fail... then it's over. Do you understand?"

A test of strength. Another chance. That was why she had come to the Earth Country. She had come here to be a ninja again.

She was ready.

Meanwhile, the mesmerizing beauty of the Earth Country had turned into chaos.

It started in Hiroshiki, the capital of Earth, three days after the Embassy had entered the country. That morning the towers of the city had first appeared over the tree line. Sakura could just make several gleaming white stone spires; a ruby was embedded in the crest of the central spire. This was the legendary Cathedral of the Faith, the vast white stone temple first built by ancient pagan kings, then refashioned by the Sage of Six Paths. In the distance, behind Hiroshiki, the Dreamstone Mountains sloped up higher and higher until the peaks were covered in white ice. But the paved valley road into the city was smooth and lined on all sides by trees.

The Embassy rolled down the road in high spirits. Ahead of them a large crowd of earth-kin, Hiroshiki civilians, had gathered. A welcoming party, Sakura thought. Until she saw the banner they had unfurled along the length of the road. The banner read:

"LEAVE NOW, BETRAYER! YOU ARE NOT WELCOME HERE!"

Behind the banner thousands of earth-kin protesters waved signs to the same effect. The most
popular sign was a version of, "GO BACK WHERE YOU CAME FROM APES!" followed by "DEATH TO THE FIRE COUNTRY!" and "DEATH TO KONOHA!"

At the head of the Embassy, the Hokage reined in her horse in front of the protesters that blocked the road. When they saw her the crowd of earth-kin started screaming as if they had been drenched in boiling water. "Betrayer!" they shouted. "Get out of here, Betrayer! Get out of Earth!"

The Hokage struggled to make her voice heard over the roar. "The Embassy is here on the invitation of the daimyo! Make way or you will be dispersed!" But her words only seemed to enrage the protesters more. The Hokage turned to her entourage. "Inishu! Clear a path!"

The ninja in the vanguard of the Embassy moved forward, pushing aside the protesters. And then all hell broke loose.

Suddenly a mob of wild screaming people was attacking the Embassy on all sides. They were civilians. A single ANBU could probably kill them all; or at least the Hokage could use a genjutsu to knock them out. But the Embassy couldn't use that kind of force against civilians. Instead they had to absorb the attacks of the mob as they pushed forward through into the city. "Death to the Betrayer! Death to Konoha! Death to Konoha!" the protesters shouted. They threw rocks and broken glass bottles, kicked and punched and spat. Sakura was almost hit by a rock a few times and had to wipe the spit off her face and clothes. "Don't fight! Just get into the city!" the Hokage ordered, riding back and forth along the Embassy. The Hiroshiki police were waiting inside the city gates. They did nothing against the mob outside, but held back the protesters from entering.

At last the Embassy was through. The Hokage led them quickly down the thoroughfares to an isolated barracks on the outskirts of the city. In the rush Sakura caught only a brief glance at the actual streets of Hiroshiki, a combination of the ancient white stone architecture that still survived along with newer wooden houses and buildings. She didn't have a chance to see it again. After a hasty audience with the Earth daimyo, which came to nothing, the Embassy slunk out of the city that night.

"What's going on?" Sakura asked Asuma.

"It's those goddamn Sougon bastards again. They're fucking with us."

Sakura understood his implication. "You mean the Tsuchikage."

The Fourth Tsuchikage of Iwagakure was Sougon Sawar, known by the epithet Sun Breaker. He was also the head of the Sougon clan, and the person who had ordered the attack on Honjo Laboratory in the Forest of Death.

The person behind everything that had happened.

"You got it. The Earth daimyo is interested in the UC, but Sawar hates it. So what does he do? The bastard stages a fucking protest right in front of the daimyo's palace. Makes it seem like the masses hate us just as much as he does. The daimyo gets scared, calls off the negotiations. Now we're runnin' off with our tail between our legs." Asuma shook his head. "I don't why Sawar spent so much effort trying to assassinate us when he could have just thrown a few rocks instead."

"What were they chanting about? Why did they call Tsunade-sensei the 'Betrayer'?"

Asuma shrugged. "Tsunade and Sawar go way back, you know. There's a lot of bad blood between them."

Sakura considered this. "But it can't all just be the Tsuchikage's personal grudge against Tsunade-
"Well... yeah, some earth-kin haven't gotten over the war yet. Most of Earth isn't like that. You saw them before, right? Nicest people in the world. Still... Sawar has definitely got the riff-raff stirred up now. It's probably going to get worse every day. And Iwa is gonna be a real riot."

Thereafter, in every village and town they passed, and even just by the side of the road, a crowd of angry protesters came out to welcome them with chants of "Death to the Betrayer! Death to Konoha!" The harassment was constant and furious. A few of the civilians and regular soldiers on the Embassy were injured, and one of them was almost killed by a stone that hit him in the head. It was like walking through a never-ending ambush.

One day an old earth-kin woman started screaming, "Murderers! Murderers!" and raised up the body of a little boy in her arms. The boy had been stabbed in the throat by a kunai. The old woman pointed a quivering finger at one of the Konoha ANBU. "Fucking Sougon plant!" Asuma said. The mob went wild. "Murderers! Murderers!" they shouted, rushing at the ANBU to tear him limb from limb. It took hours to beat them all back.

The woman was detained and an investigation was made. It turned out the boy had died from a stomach virus and wasn't even related to the woman, an Iwa operative. But it didn't matter. The story of the Konoha ninja murdering a little child in cold blood spread like wildfire. The protests grew larger by the hour.

At last the Hokage was forced to order the Embassy along another route to Iwa, away from the main roads and the mobs of protesters. They pushed deep into the mountains, navigating steep, winding passes so narrow that sometimes they had to walk single-file. Most of their remaining wagons and other heavy equipment were abandoned in this last leg of the expedition. There were little signs of human habitation; only the endless, sweeping indifference of the Dreamstone Mountains. The stunning isolation from everything was almost inconceivable against the fury of the past few days. Sakura thought the land was even more beautiful than before.

On the last night of their journey the United Countries Embassy camped at the base of a large, heavily forested mountain. Tomorrow they would reach Iwa.

Sakura's mind was full of confused, half-formed thoughts. Tension ran through her whole body like an electric current. This is it, she thought. Tsunade-sensei's going to test me tonight. She walked away from the others to the edge of the camp. The moon was absent and the sky filled with stars. For some reason, though it was not cold, she decided to start a fire. The girl stared into the crackling flames as if looking for something in it. But there was nothing. She wondered what her mother and sister were doing in Konoha, and if they were well.

The fire was oddly soothing, and eventually the girl nodded off into sleep.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" she said. "I never noticed it before."

"No. You're a spring girl," he said.

She laughed. "And what season are you, Uchiha Sasuke?"
He didn't say anything, but drew her close. His breath was hot on her face and his tongue tasted like fire. But the kiss ended; then he shrunk back away from her, as if frightened of something. "What's wrong?" she asked.

He paused. "I can't take you with me."

"Take me where?"

"Girl," Sasuke said, as if from a place far away.

"What?"

"Girl," Sasuke repeated. His voice echoed, changed, seemed to turn to a higher pitch. It was softer and colder all at once, like a silver reed in the frozen snow—

"GIRL."

Suddenly the snow vanished, replaced by the embers of a dying campfire. The dream faded. She was back again in the Embassy, in the camp in the Earth Country. All that had happened returned with the clarity of waking from an unwanted sleep. Before her loomed a tall shadow, dark and inscrutable.

"Tsunade-sensei…"

The Hokage's eyes flashed in the dim firelight. "It's time, Sakura. Come with me."
Sakura followed her sensei in silence. The Hokage walked out of the camp, pushing her way up the nearby mountain. A chill wind blew down from on high, a shiver through sloping forests of thick black trees. Branches stirred and scratched at one another with wooden fingers. Everywhere all around her summer locusts cried out, but the mountain seemed to swallow what they had said.

They climbed. The trails were steep and winding. At first they were low enough to the ground that if Sakura looked back she could catch glimpses of the Embassy camp through the trees, like swarms of fireflies. But soon enough the camp faded, each point of light coalescing until it was just a single bright dot. And then at last on the heights they were alone. It was indescribably calm. The sky was clear and bursting with stars. In the brilliant white starlight the whole world seemed like shadows bathed in milk, luminous, formless.

Suddenly the Hokage spoke. "I grew up during the first years of Konoha's existence. My grandfather, Senju Hashirama, sought to end the constant wars between the shinobi clans that were tearing apart the world. The hidden villages were founded to stabilize the situation. For a time it worked, but it didn't last. The rough balance of power between the greater countries broke down. And the wars came again, more monstrous than ever, for so much power had been gathered on either side.

"That was a time when men spoke not of peace, but of mere survival. The First Ninja War had just begun, but the Fire Country was losing, and we, the most talented of our generation, were soon on the front lines of that war. I remember the first time I was sent off to battle. I was so excited. We all were, Orochimaru, Jiraiya, ready to go to war, to kill, to be true ninja at last. But Hiruzen-sensei seemed sad. And my grandfather was the saddest of all. He pulled me up, lifted me up as he had so many times before, held my head tight against his wrinkling cheek. 'Tsunade-kun,' he said. 'I'm so sorry.' I was nine years old.

"Those who grew up in peace couldn't understand. Over eighty percent of the children in our generation went to battle and never returned. But we who survived learned the ultimate truth of this world. **Strength is the only thing that matters, don't you ever believe anything different.** A single battle would last for days or weeks, until all your friends were dead, until you were too tired to think or move or feel, to go on. But you had to anyway. And if you lived you were strong. That was all strength was to us. The dead were weak, we abandoned and forgot them, but the living we worshiped as gods, for it was victory that gave us the right to rule the world. We grew hard, cruel, detached. We crushed our emotions and buried what remained deep inside, we deceived ourselves, we exposed nothing, trusted nothing and loved no one but in secret. We were all insane, but we didn't even know it.

"That was the most terrible thing. The wars had become normal, gone on so long we couldn't conceive any other way to live. For three decades they continued, interrupted by only short bursts of ceasefire, the longest of them only six years. I lost everyone I loved—my grandfather, my father, my little brother Nawaki. I fought as if by rote, I had no idea what I was fighting for, why I was a ninja. Then I met a man named Katou Dan. Dan was different from everyone else. Dan had lived a life as hard as mine. But somehow he still dreamed. He fought not for war, but for an end to war. For the day when we could live in peace. We fell in love. Eventually he asked me to marry him, and I said yes.

"But before we could get married, there was a war to finish. The wars had caught us again, both of us, and in the end they took us to this place, this mountain you stand on now. We called it Deathtrap
Mountain... the stone-nins had hidden a secret base here, a fortress buried below a lake on the mountain peak. The leader of the stone-nins, Seurin Shadowstar, planned to harness the mountain's underground energies to construct a superweapon called the Annihilation Device, a bomb of immense power that would have reversed the war in their favor. We had to stop them. It was a mission from hell. Every step we took up the Deathtrap was purchased in blood, against endless traps, ambushes. At last we pushed our way into their base, where Seurin Shadowstar met us in full desperate force. Dan and I led the attack. For three nights we fought on the lake, under it, in the caves of earth. The corpses piled in thousands on either side. Finally the victory was ours. But Seurin was dead, and Dan as well. He had sacrificed all for his dream. That was the end of the Third Ninja War, seventeen years ago. Iwa made peace with us the next day."

The Hokage fell silent. They climbed a last ridge; and then they were on the top of Deathtrap Mountain. The peak was flat and in the center was the lake. Sakura realized she had seen it before. In the Torment genjutsu... it's the same place. The lake had been different then. Thick fog drenched everything in murk. Dirty waves churned, as if the earth beneath was breaking apart. There had been a horrible smell, a sick stench that made her gag and reel, and the water had been red with the cold blood of countless corpses.

But that had been seventeen years ago. Now the lake was still and deep, its surface smooth as a black mirror. A million stars glittered in the water, white and brilliant, staring out like eyes of glass, lifeless, without the gift of sight. There was absolutely no sign anywhere that any human being had ever been here before.

The Hokage stepped lightly onto the lake, walking toward the center. The girl followed. As they got close she saw that there was a small stone rising out of the water. It was a rectangular slab of white marble, high as a man and twice as wide. Thousands of names had been carved in little block characters on either side of the slab, the names of the shinobi who had died in the Battle of Deathtrap Mountain, leaf-nin on the right side, stone-nin on the left. And in the center of the memorial stone were carved these words:

FOR THE LAST BATTLE OF THE LAST WAR
August 29, 509

For a long time the girl and the woman stared at the stone. Sakura didn't know what to say. Finally she looked at her teacher. Senju Tsunade's face was pale and ashen in the starlight, her flowing hair washed out of all color. But her dark eyes were strangely vivid; something in them seemed to crack, like a glass, in which the contents had turned to ice.

The Hokage spoke in a voice that fell and trickled like drops of water. "Do you understand, Sakura?"

The girl nodded. "That's what this is all about, isn't it? Stopping the next Ninja War. That's why you created the UC Embassy. Bringing all our strongest ninjas, recruiting allies from Rain and Wind. Something is happening... something that can't wait. And Iwa is the source. Why? What's there, in Iwa?"

"The Fourth Tsuchikage, Sougon Sawar, is obsessed with Iwa's defeat in the Third Ninja War. He has forged a vast conspiracy to launch a new war and avenge his loss by destroying Konoha. The key is the superweapon abandoned seventeen years ago. During the Battle of Deathtrap, Konoha recovered the core of the prototype bomb, the so-called Annihilation Heart, and was supposed to have destroyed it. However, unknown even to me, we did not. Sawar learned of the bomb's existence and approached Akatsuki with an offer of alliance. He sent a secret three-man team to steal the Heart with Akatsuki's help. Our spies indicate that the new prototype Annihilation Device is now
somewhere in Iwa itself. It is being powered with chakra from the bijuu Akatsuki has already captured. Once complete, it will be powerful enough to destroy an entire country in a single instant."

Sakura was staggered. An entire country in a single instant... and she had seen it. During the attack on Honjo Laboratory, in the case, a very bright, glowing thing which shimmered and throbbed and pulsed. And in the genjutsu, in the womb of that terrible frozen machine. A seething heart, a steaming crystal blazing white with incomprehensible heat. Annihilation...

She struggled to absorb the Hokage's words, understand the scale of what was at stake. "And what are you going to do?" she asked. "If... if you want to go straight into Iwa and fight the stone-nins..."

"Our mission is simple. We must topple Sawar, expose his conspiracy, destroy the Annihilation Device, and bring the Earth Country into the United Countries. It may not come to open battle. The Tsuchikage isn't the only power in Iwa. There are many in Iwa who support peace. There are many who are horrified by the possibility of the Annihilation Device. If I can use diplomacy... convince the peace faction to back the United Countries, force Sawar to resign... a negotiated resolution is possible. But Sawar won't make it easy. He will use every possible means to weaken us, divide us, turn us against each other. There may be no open battle, but there will be shadow war."

Shadow war. "Like in Hiroshiki, the staged riots against the UC. Like the attacks on you and Gaara in Suna. The Tsuchikage was behind all of it." Sakura remembered a canyon of hot white sand, and a large blue sky like the sea, and a man's eyes, cold in her hands, cold enough to burn. "And that was just a warm up."

"Yes. The coming Shadow War will involve every shinobi in Iwa: spying, deception, theft, conspiracies, blackmail, murder. And there shall be one central nexus around which the shadow war will turn. The chuunin exam... this is no ordinary exam. The strongest genin from every country, and with them their powerful jounin sensei, even from as far east as Lightning and Water, are all coming to Iwa. Never before has such talent gathered in one place. They are coming because the whole system of world power is in the balance... because what happens in Iwa over the next two months will decide the fate of the world.

"As long as open battle does not directly break out, the controlled violence of the chuunin exam will be used as a proxy to measure the strength of each country. Of each alliance. Everyone will be watching. It will be the United Countries against the Earth Country and their allies, a bloc that is being called the Confederacy—Earth, Water, Waterfall, Swamp—united by their defeat in the Third Ninja War. If genin teams from the United Countries perform well in the chuunin exam, we will be able to attract more unaffiliated countries to our side, sway undecided Iwa factions; and likewise for the Confederacy. If it does come to an actual battle, the relationships forged through this chuunin exam will likely be the decisive factor."

The Hokage paused. "And you, Sakura, are at the center of it all. I chose you as my apprentice... you are my personal representative in the chuunin exam. Everything that you do will directly reflect on my personal strength. In effect, you will be the leader of the United Countries in each trial of the chuunin exam. Your allies will look to you. And your enemies will target you. Your actions may very well cause the success or failure of our mission. Do you understand?"

The enormity of the crisis before her was overwhelming. It was as if the whole world was sitting on a pile of kerosene, ready to blow at any moment. One spark, and utter annihilation. Or somehow it would be saved. What happens in Iwa over the next two months will decide the fate of the world. Sakura had the sense that history was being made now and that she would be a part of it, they all would. All of them had a duty to perform, a burden to carry. They had to come together or all would be lost.
Sakura turned away. In the distance, far off the lake, mountain peaks a million years old stood against the stars. "No," she said finally. "No, I understand... but why? You took away my forehead protector." Her throat was tight. "And now... you want me to lead the chuunin exam?"

"Konoha is like a great tree. We produce a thousand buds, but only some of those branches grow strong. It is the task of the elders to cultivate the tree as best we can. In each generation, the High Council creates a flagship team composed of the most talented young shinobi, taught by the strongest sensei. These are the children who grow up to become the future leaders of the village. So the First Hokage was the older brother of the Second Hokage. The Second Hokage taught the Third Hokage. The Third Hokage taught the legendary sannin. One of the legendary sannin taught the Fourth Hokage. The Fourth Hokage taught Kakashi the Perfect Ninja, my designated successor. And for your generation..."

The last of the Uchiha, the greatest bloodline of all. The host of the nine-tailed demon fox. And her.

"I disobeyed orders."

"And for that you could have been court-martialed... technically. In truth, your actions in the Forest of Death were quite justifiable. You tried to support your commanding officer in a chaotic situation, risking your own life in the process. It was a heroic act. The only mistake you made was to drag Ino and Chouji along with you." Tsunade shook her head. "I told you all along, Sakura. I didn't suspend you from active duty because of the mission."

"Then why?"

"I was trying to protect you."

"Because you thought I was too weak to be a ninja." Sakura could not keep the bitterness from her voice.

"No. Because I was afraid of what you might become."

"What the hell does that mean?"

The Hokage did not answer directly. "Your strength has already been tested, Sakura. Many times. As a genjutsu type and as a female ninja, it was expected that your strength would mature more slowly than those of your male peers. You were overshadowed on Team 7, but never forgotten. After Team 7's breakup, I began to train you as a medic-nin and a genjutsu specialist. You exceeded all my expectations, mastering jutsu in weeks that it took others years to learn. On the UC Embassy, again, your performance was extraordinary. In Rain, you mastered the Chakra Gates and defended the Asylum against a surprise attack. In Suna, you exposed the Enshohan eye conspiracy and single-handedly saved Gaara's life. Each challenge I placed in front of you, you met. Each test, no matter how difficult, you passed with flying colors. In the upcoming chuunin exam I have decided to place you together on a team with the Sand Siblings. The three of you will be the new flagship team of the United Countries. And you shall be the leader, Sakura. There is no one who is more prepared for this role than you."

"And...that's it?"

"Not quite. The final test is a question. The same question I asked you twice before. Twice I asked you, and twice you lied. I shall ask it once again. Are you ready, Sakura?"

What do you want, girl? Why do you want to be a ninja?

"I am."
"So be it." The Hokage's voice was very soft. "The test begins now."

NOW.
NOW.

The word echoed and echoed in her mind. *The Torment genjutsu*. Sakura tried to prepare herself, but her vision cracked apart like glass, shattered into a million pieces. She was falling into an endless black void—

The girl found herself standing on a lake in a cold, gray dawn sky. Through the thick haze of fog she could barely see distant mountain peaks. Where was she? What was she doing here? She had been doing something… couldn't remember. Was this a dream? There was a horrible smell, a sick stench that made her gag and reel. Corpses. Layers and layers of corpses, floating in the water of the lake. Everything was totally silent. In the thick fog she could hear or see nothing.

The lake shook, churned, as if the earth beneath it was breaking apart. A faint red beam of light shone up out of the lake. By some strange compulsion she dived into the cold frozen water, swimming down toward the light. She emerged into a chamber carved out of the rock at the bottom of the lake. A secret base. Now the girl saw what the red glow was—flickering emergency lights, wailing siren shrieks. There were corpses of ninjas here, too. From the trail of corpses, it was clear which way the battle had gone. She followed the trail into the tunnels.

The mountain shook again, trembled. The walls splintered. Rubble and dust fell from the ceiling. What was that? What was happening? But somehow Sakura did not feel afraid and pressed on. Suddenly she came to it: an immense natural cave, hundreds of meters tall and even wider, buried a kilometer beneath the earth. The cave was filled with ice, glittering limestone icicles that dripped from the ceiling in long daggers. And in the middle of this cavern there was a terrible thing. It was immense, frozen, a gigantic metal and flesh construct covered in ice, fed by huge, black cables that burst from the floor and which thrust deep into its chest—like a giant frozen incubator, a metal and flesh womb. The thing shrieked, as if damaged, and then Sakura saw it—glittering there, gleaming—the crystal, the fetus, at the core of that womb.

*The Annihilation Heart.*

"The complex is collapsing!" a woman yelled about the roar of battle. A familiar voice, like a winter reed. It seemed younger. "We have to get out!"

"Not yet!" a man with flowing white hair shouted back. "Get the crystal! The Annihilation Heart!"

The man's words touched something in Sakura's memory. No, something was wrong. *This has happened before.*

All around this terrible machine, in this frozen ice cavern, ninjas were fighting and killing and dying. The cavern walls were cracking apart. Reams of icicles broke and stabbed down into the struggling ninjas. Everything shook wildly. The man with flowing white hair and the woman led a group of Konoha shinobi, slashing their way through the ranks of stone-nins to the front of the heaving machine. "The crystal!" the man shouted.

*Dan,* Sakura remembered. The man's name was Dan.

And there was the third woman.
A stone-nin who blocked their way to the Annihilation Heart. A woman with braided black hair, a woman with burning eyes. It was the most beautiful woman that Sakura had ever seen in her life. Her skin was dark as the night, but her eyes were bright as the stars, and the katana sword in her hand was glittering white, the edge so sharp it seemed to cut the very frozen air. Her face was sad and gentle, wise and proud. And Sakura knew this woman was one of the greatest shinobi that had ever lived. Seurin Shadowstar.

"I see you," Seurin said, and the whisper was a haunting echo. "So it comes to this at last. Do all our dreams have to end this way? My friends, it is not too late."

"It was always too late," said Senju Tsunade.

They came together in a clash of roaring fire—

But Sakura only had eyes for the crystal. It was right next to her, so close that it filled her entire vision. The crystal's light was so beautiful. So pure. All she had do was reach out and grab it—

_Torrent!_

Suddenly she remembered.

"No!" Sakura cried out. With a great effort she pulled her hands back from the crystal before she touched it. A machine shrieked unseen in a blinding white light. But the crystal was like some sort of sucking force, a magnet, and she was drawn back. She could feel the genjutsu, sense the alien chakra of the Hokage in her own body. She tried to break it. Nothing happened. Her hands were like leaden weights. "No!" Sakura screamed. "I won't—"

From behind her, against the searing white light, came an all-encompassing blackness.

The girl turned.

Behind there was the shadow of a woman. It was gigantic, colossal, flaring up over the whole cavern, looming over it like a haunted god. And then the shadow laughed.

_FOOL_, the shadow said. _ISN'T THAT WHAT YOU WANT?_

The girl knew the shadow. It was the shadow of her master—plunging down over her, swallowing her—and the master's shadow was _Torment—_

_IS THIS WHAT YOU WANT—TO SEE—AS I SEE—_

SEE—

"Dan!" Tsunade screams.

Dan explodes, bursting apart as if from inside. A gold haze occupies the space his upper body had been. Dan falls to the ground, limp. Seurin Shadowstar stands over him with burning eyes. Anguish screams in Tsunade's heart, something breaks deep inside her. She cannot be stopped. In one stroke Tsunade stabs a chakra scalpel into Seurin's heart and twists. It is over in a moment. Then she is by Dan's side, by the man who is everything to her. His chest is utterly ravaged.

_No!_ Blood pours out everywhere from the hole in his chest, washing over her like a hot bath. She runs her hands across the wound. There's so much damage. _I have to save him!_ Desperate she pours waves of chakra into Dan's body, draining what's left of her own. All around her the battle rages but she doesn't notice. Dan's body is warm in her arms. She knows if he's warm then he's not dead. But
at last the flow of blood slows, stops with a shuddering gasp. And then he is so stiff and cold, cold as the stained ice beneath.

The battle is long over. Leaf-nins surround her, silent, awkward. Tsunade's whole body shakes with wracking sobs. "No," she whispers as she cradles her lover's corpse. She can only think of how he would always kiss her forehead, before a battle, the strands of his long silver hair falling against her own. Please be careful, she would say. And he would laugh, so soft, so strong. Not me, he would say. I'm nobody. But promise me you'll live. And she said yes. "No, Dan… don't you see... the war's over... your dream…"

He will never live to see it.

Nor will Seurin Shadowstar. Her body is right next to Dan's, her eyes black and cold. Even in death she is beautiful, even in death she is magnetic. Blood trickles out of Seurin's chest where Tsunade has stabbed her. Like me, Tsunade thinks. "There is a hole inside me where my heart had been.

And now she is all alone.

DEATH, the shadow said. WAR AND DEATH. IS THIS WHAT YOU WANT? Another vision came—

Tsunade sits behind a desk. The sun dazzles on the packed snow outside. Everything is so quiet, so peaceful. Into the office walks a young girl. Tsunade knows her at once, though they've never met. She used to have the same face. The girl's eyes are wide and green and bright with life, her cheeks smooth and soft. But there is something about her, something damaged. This is a girl that has seen death, Tsunade thinks.

"What do you want, girl?" Tsunade asks.

"Please," Haruno Sakura says. "Make me your apprentice!"

"And why, girl, why do something like that?"

The girl's eyes are wide as full moons. "Because I don't want to rely on other people's strength anymore. Because I want to protect the people I love. Please, Hokage-sama… just give me the chance. I won't let you down. I promise."

Tsunade has been waiting for this moment, but when it comes she can't speak. The High Council's orders are clear: Sakura must be trained to her full refusal. I can't refuse. Tsunade thinks of Dan again, and Seurin, and Nawaki, and even—all the people she has ever loved. But they were all dead. No one... I have no one...

She stares at the girl who stands before her with such trembling hopes and fears. And you're just the same as me. Sakura's teammates were gone, her sensei distant. She was alone. Just like her. But could Tsunade dare? Dare to love again... to love and to accept the possibility of it all getting blown away...

"Fool," Tsunade says. "Don't make promises you can't keep. Let that be your first lesson... as my student..."

REGRET, the shadow said. DESPAIR AND LONELINESS. IS THIS WHAT YOU WANT? The crystal exploded—

By the gates Tsunade waits. Heavy rain pounds the ground, muffling the world. But at last the survivors return. There are not many. They avoid her gaze, look away. She rushes through the
crowd. A man catches her, holds her close. Orochimaru.

"Sweet princess," he says. His face breaks into a leer. "Smile for me. I have not seen it for such a long time..."

"Orochimaru!" she shouts. "Where is he?"

The rain slithers down Orochimaru's face. His long black hair hangs down in matted clumps. "Nawaki is dead, Tsunade."

Tsunade stumbles back. Nawaki... my little brother. Dead. But she had known he would die, had felt it in her bones. He had just been a little boy, running off with bright eyes to his first battle of the Second Ninja War. Just a weak little boy. Suddenly she cannot contain it, the pain and the agony. She screams, shrieking, lurching in the rain, until her lungs are burning and empty, and she collapses in Orochimaru's arms.

"Tsunade... your face..." Orochimaru grins. He reaches up a delicate white hand to touch her cheek. "Where is your smile now? Sweet princess... no... you are that no longer." He laughs, a rattling shaking hiss like a snake. "Now you are a queen... the Queen of Torment..."

PAIN, the shadow whispered. GRIEF AND SHAME. IS THIS WHAT YOU WANT? The torture of her sensei's memories burned through Sakura's soul like fire. "Tsunade-sensei!" she shrieked. "Stop—"

Tsunade has her hand on Asuma's chest.

Her head throbs. Confused, half-formed thoughts overflow her mind. The conspiracy exposed this night is staggering. The Sougon clan... Akatsuki... the Annihilation Heart. The world has changed, the fate of Konoha hangs by a single thread. But she doesn't care about any of that now.

Sakura, she thinks.

The girl walks into the operating room. She is covered in dried blood. She moves in a daze, blank and numb, and when she looks up her wide green eyes are dull with guilt, with self-loathing. Her face... her face... Tsunade's heart stops, she almost shrieks with pain. She knows that face. Knows it because it is just like her own.

"Sakura," she whispers. "What have you done?"

The words catch in her throat. What have I done? Tsunade feels as if her soul is being ripped out of her. She never expected anything like this. Tsunade is no stranger to all the horror of the shinobi world. But seeing Sakura like this... it's too much. Tsunade rushes to embrace the girl in her arms, to protect her, though it was already too late. If only she had known this could happen.

"I'm sorry," Sakura says, head held low. "Tsunade-sensei...I failed you. It was all my fault."

"No. It was not your fault, Sakura. It was mine."

The girl is numb in her arms, obviously in traumatic shock. It's too painful for Tsunade to look at her. She stares at Sakura's forehead protector instead. It's soaked through with blood. Suddenly Tsunade is seized by the impulsive, rash thought that this forehead protector is the cause of everything bad that has ever happened. And in that instant she hates that thing, she hates that symbol and all it represents, she hates herself. For the symbol is Torment.

A sudden hope bursts in her heart.
"Give it to me," Tsunade whispers.

FEAR, the shadow says. FEAR AND HORROR. IS THIS WHAT YOU WANT? "Stop!" Sakura screamed. "Tsunade-sensei! I know! Enough—"

Tsunade is just a little girl. With bright eyes she goes off her to her first war, with Orochimaru and Jiraiya and Hiruzen-sensei. In the forests not far from home they wait. The waiting is horrible. As it drags on Tsunade's throat tightens, closes up until she can't breathe. "Do you know the mission?" Hiruzen-sensei asks them. And she can barely gasp, "I am a shinobi of the Leaf! The bad men are coming. Kill them all!"

It is far into the night before they come. But when they do the night bursts with redness, fire. The forest is burning. The cries of the bad men are everywhere, all around them. There is confusion, chaos, smoke and lightning and flashing, thundering weapons. Suddenly Tsunade is scared like she's never been before. Behind them there is another explosion of fire. Tsunade cowers behind a tree.

"I want to go home!" she wails, sobbing.

"This is your home now!" Hiruzen-sensei shouts.

Tsunade is in a blind terror. She runs to her sensei, the kindly, laughing man who is like a father to her. But the man's face is twisted into some wild demon she doesn't know. "Coward!" he shouts. "You stupid worthless girl, you're supposed to be a shinobi! You have a mission!"

"Please, Hiruzen-sensei! Let me go home!" Tsunade pleads.

The man seizes and twists Tsunade's hair. "Didn't you hear me? This is your home now! Kill those who have invaded it! Go! GO!" He throws Tsunade forward, straight into the frontlines. Around her there are dark shapes, silhouetted black by burning trees. A sword flashes down at her. The attack finally causes her training to kick in. Tsunade spins, dodging, pulls out a kunai to strike at the attacker. The edge slices down on the attacker's forearm. A huge hose of dark blood shoots out of the arm, splattering Tsunade's face. "Bitch!" she hears a young voice cry out. But the movement is not complete. Her other hand drives out and the kunai hits the bad man in the stomach. The bad man crumbles, falling to the ground. She attacks him again with the kunai, blades flashing. Again. Again. She is screaming. The dark shape does not move. But there are so many more dark shapes, so many more.

At last, in the morning, when the battle is over, Orochimaru and Jiraiya and Hiruzen-sensei find her. She stands in the middle of a pile of men as tall as her own little nine-year-old body, and her forehead protector is soaked with blood.

"Kill them all," Tsunade whispers. "Kill them all."

TORRENT, the shadow whispered. MADNESS. INSANITY. IS THIS WHAT YOU WANT? IS THIS WHAT YOU WANT? Sakura felt her soul breaking apart—dissolving—an endless scream—Tsunade looms over the fallen girl.

Sakura shudders violently. Hot tears leak down her cheeks, her breath is choked with vomit. The screams of the Torment genjutsu still overflow her mind, Tsunade knows. The girl looks up with wide, blurred eyes.

"Fool," Tsunade says. "That is what war is. That is what this life means. You do not want it."
The sight of Sakura in so much pain wrenches her heart. How could she use the Torment genjutsu on such a child? On the apprentice she loves? Tsunade turns away before the girl sees her start to cry. A yawning guilt like she's never felt before burns down her chest. *But I had to*, she thinks. *She wouldn't go away! I had to make her understand, I had to save her!*

The girl's voice trembles behind Tsunade's back. "Tsunade-sensei."

Tsunade turns in shock.

Somehow Sakura has gotten to her feet. Her wide green eyes are not filled with fear, as Tsunade expects, but with something else.

Tsunade is stunned. She can't believe anyone could still have the strength to stand up after being hit with the Torment jutsu. What kind of child is this? Sweet Sakura, stubborn, dutiful Sakura. Tsunade can only think of the time they've spent together, as teacher and student. They are some of her most precious memories. Sakura's laughter, her warmth and innocence, her shyness. The way she furrows her brow when she was thinking. The way she clings to Tsunade's every word, the way she smiles when Tonton does something foolish. So brilliant, so fast and quick and sharp. How Sakura would always surprise her. How after a long day's training they would sit together beneath a tree and Sakura would read her favorite poetry aloud, and Tsunade would close her eyes and, for a time, forget her scars.

But was it all a lie?

"Tsunade-sensei," the girl continues. "Is that the best you can do?"

All lies.

Tsunade can't breathe. She's being strangled by her own throat. She doesn't understand why the girl won't give up. *After all I did to push her away... even after the Torment genjutsu... no normal person could possibly withstand such a psychological attack...* ...

... could it be?

Senju Tsunade has lived for over five decades. She has lived through three world wars, dozens of battles, funerals and operating tables beyond count. But she has never felt so sickened as now... this moment when she finally realizes the truth about Haruno Sakura.

A chill goes through her.

**TORMENT**, cried the shadow. **MADNESS. INSANITY. FEAR. HORROR. PAIN. GRIEF. SHAME. REGRET. DESPAIR. LONELINESS. WAR. DEATH. MADNESS. INSANITY. IS THIS WHAT YOU WANT? IS THIS WHAT YOU WANT? WHY? WHY?**

The exploding crystal and the shadow seemed to fuse, to suck her into a blinding white light that was darker than a black hole. And in Sakura's hands the fetus crystal had a face. It was the face of a girl, young as her, with smiling eyes and flowing strands of long black hair. The girl opened her mouth—and somehow Sakura knew that this was *the last secret*—and that if she saw it she would go completely insane—

"Enough!" Sakura screamed, half-mad. "Enough! Yes! I want it! I want it more than anything! I—"

WHY? cried the shadow.

"—because this is my life!" Sakura felt her own mind explode, burn away into nothingness.
Hallucinations and memories fused together and both were real, both unreal. Somehow Sasuke was there, whispering in her ear. *Twice you lied and twice more. Don't you get it? Don't you get it?*

"No!" she screamed. "I didn't lie! Never! I need to be a ninja!" She struggled to articulate the words, to say something, anything. "All of us! We're all missing something, we're all alone! Just like you said before... we need a home, a place to belong to. A purpose. And Konoha is the only home I have! There's no place else for me to go. Tsunade-sensei, enough! ENOUGH—"

The white light shattered into a million pieces. The genjutsu cracked, vanished. Then the girl was flat on her back, floating on the quiet dark lake, staring at the distant, motionless stars.

Senju Tsunade the Queen of Torment stood right over her. She did not speak, but grasped Sakura by the arm to help her up.

Sakura got to her feet slowly, unsteadily. She stumbled and sank beneath the water several times. She looked up at her sensei with wide, blurred eyes.

"I wanted you to go away," said the Hokage. "I wanted you to run as far away from this life as you could. But you're still here. That was your choice, your plan, not mine. Sakura... you are the most important person in the world to me. You are the daughter I never had. I love you... all I ever wanted was the best for you, for you to be happy. Please forgive me. I only meant to protect you. I was so afraid, you see. So afraid you would walk down the same path I had. So afraid that one day you would become like me."

The woman's face was blank, unreadable. But it was just a mask, Sakura knew. For the first time she knew. The mask was the god, the cold machine, the shinobi. But the heart was human. Sakura saw through it now—she saw Senju Tsunade as she really was. Sakura wanted to laugh. A torrent of emotions raced through her one after the other, blazing anger, then disgust, then a giddy freedom, then pity, and then, finally, nothing at all.

Nothing but the truth.

"Tsunade-sensei," she whispered. "I won't ever be like you. I promise."

The woman looked away. For a long time she didn't speak. Between them, the white stone, the memorial to the Battle of Deathtrap, loomed strangely large. "Fool," she said.

Another long silence passed. Sakura knew the next words were hers.

"You... you said you would give me a second chance. You said when the Embassy got to Iwa, you would test me. Test my strength. Did I pass?"

The Hokage turned. Her dark eyes were gleaming, wet with tears. "Once there was a woman who told me the secret. 'When there is a true desire in the heart and that desire is strong... that is when you find real strength that even you did not know you had.' Tomorrow, we come to Iwagakure. It is a place unlike anywhere you have ever been before. It is a place so old that the stones speak of the scars of a thousand ages... so untamed the wild beasts cry in the night before rushing rivers in the black caves... so vast the four seasons are alive together in the span of a single mountain... and the men who live in that place have eyes so cold and hard, so brilliant and terrible, so strong to their utmost extremity, that it is a wonder they are not the undisputed masters of the world. And only if you know your own heart will you have the strength to endure. Beware! That is the true test. It started the day you were born. And it never ends."

The Hokage reached inside her robes. She drew out a familiar forehead protector. The metal plate flashed against the stars—the symbol of Konoha, the swirling leaf that represented the unity of the
village, the ideals and dreams of its founders.

Sakura took the forehead protector in her hands. It felt heavier than before, somehow; maybe that was just because of her flayed palms. She tied it around her head. The metal plate was cold against her forehead, the cloth of the band tight and scratchy. But again she was a genin of Konoha. A kunoichi.

A ninja.

"I know," the girl said.

The Hokage bowed her head. A sudden wind blew across the lake, rippling the water, shaking the reflected stars. The Hokage's white robes fluttered, her long golden hair flapped against her face. It was as if the whole world was moving, trembling. The only thing that stayed still was the marble tombstone. It had not moved for seventeen years. "Dismissed," she whispered.

Sakura nodded. She knelt and then started to walk away, quickly as she could, stumbling across the lake, down the mountain.

Senju Tsunade lingered on, watching that place where her dreams had gone to rest.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter concludes what I call the "prologue" of WILL OF STONE. I want to explain now why I wrote this part of the story the way I did, and where the story is going to go from here.

WILL OF STONE is about Sakura going to Iwa to take the chuunin exam. But before she got there, I wanted to spend a little bit of time setting up the pieces on the board first. I wanted to explore Sakura's backstory. I wanted to develop her relationship with Tsunade. I wanted to show off her cool new jutsu. Most of all I tried to set up the main theme of this fic, which is where strength comes from and what gives Sakura the strength to be a ninja. In the canon story Sakura is a cipher; we don't really understand what her motivations are. Not here. Sakura is forced to confront the question of what she wants from the very first chapter—what am I doing here? What's my place in the world? Do I really want to be a ninja? And by the end of the "prologue" that question has been answered.

All in all, I'm pretty happy with the way it played out.

I think the biggest knock you could make against the "prologue" is that it's too damn long. At ~80,000 words, the "prologue" clocks in at about the size of your average novel. Was that a mistake? Perhaps. On the other hand, I believe the length of the "prologue" makes Sakura's journey that much more meaningful. Taken by itself, the "prologue" is a stand-alone story, fully developed, with a complete character and plot arc. I think the payoff was worth it.

The reader could very well stop reading at this point. Indeed, if you're satisfied with the end of Chapter 27, I urge you to consider that choice. Because from here on out the story is going to move in a very different direction. Think of it almost like a reboot, a new novel. The plots, the ideas that dominated the "prologue" are finished. And all the
stuff that was implied and set up in the "prologue" is now going to come to the front.

I'll highlight three major elements:

1) Realism. This story is supposed to be a more "realistic" take on a world of killer assassins. But in fact the "prologue" is no different from anything in Kishimoto's canon. The good guys always win. Nobody important dies. Asuma gets his eye back. Sakura gets her rank back. And so on. The reason for all these happy endings is that I wanted to keep the "prologue" consistent with the canon. I wanted to fill in some of the blanks left by Kishimoto, but I didn't want to change those blanks in a way that contradicted the larger reality of his universe. Sakura's journey in the "prologue" is not a changed story, only a story that has not yet been told.

That ends now. Starting next chapter the canon is going out the window. Iwa is going to be a full-blown Alternate Universe, a place where no one is safe, where weakness is counted in corpses and strength is earned in blood. Child assassins from different countries fighting each other in a violent trial with huge political repercussions? You better believe people are going to die. Major, important characters will not make it to the end. The status quo is going to be totally trashed.

2) Epicness. WILL OF STONE was advertised as an "epic novel." And now it will be. Sakura's redemption arc is done. Her story is now going to expand into what is supposed to be the overarching conflict of this book, the United Countries' fight against the Confederacy to preserve world peace. Sakura's isn't trying to save herself, she's trying to save the world. While her growth as a ninja is still very important, that personal story is subsumed into this larger, epic story. As a result, Sakura's character arc in Iwa is going to feel quite different from what it was in the "prologue."

3) Romance. Sakura is about to get a boyfriend. The relationship between the two of them will take up a huge chunk of what happens in Iwa. It will be a microcosm of the larger epic conflict and at the same time the major driver of Sakura's growth as a ninja. It is, in many ways, the heart of WILL OF STONE and what this story is all about. The romance will change Sakura, it will reveal what makes her truly strong. The answer is surprising. This is going to be a Sakura as you're never seen her before.

If you don't like that, stop reading here.

But if do... if any of this sounds exciting, sexy, or dangerous... then don't stop. Turn the page. Turn to the next chapter. Turn to Iwa, to the trials that will decide the fate of the world. Everything is going to change. There's no going back.

The real story of WILL OF STONE starts now.
I. IWAGAKURE:

Iwagakure, the Village Hidden in the Stones, is a hidden ninja village located in the center of the Earth Country. With a ninja population of 4,500 and a total village population of 45,000, Iwa is currently the largest hidden village in the world. It is also the oldest: its history as a human settlement far predates the hidden village era, stretching back over a millennium to the time of the ancient Birthright Empire.

Originally founded during the Age of Glory by settlers from the powerful mountain clans in the Scar, Iwa prospered as a trading post and agricultural community. Later on, when the mountain clans began to war aggressively with each other, it became a key strategic military fort. Iwa began to be known as "The Castle on the River," after its defensive position on a mountain island in the middle of the Dreamstone River. This position, like a elevated castle with a moat, is so strong that Iwa has never been conquered by force in a thousand years.

The coming of the Sage of Six Paths over five hundred years ago transformed Iwa as it transformed the rest of the North. The mountain clan empires of the Scar fought the Sage of Six Paths and were destroyed, leaving behind only the ruins of their cities and the temples of their Shiva religion.

Iwa, then called Overlook Island, became a safe haven for various clans fleeing from the upheaval in the Scar. Among them was the Sougon clan, wielders of the terrible bloodline power called the Enshogan eye. The Azuraki, Chuzuru, Bakura, Haghira, and Noatari clans also settled in or around Iwa during this period; most of the present-day villagers can trace their heritage back to these original ancestors, known popularly as the "Six Sacred Clans."

Iwa was fractious but relatively peaceful during the hundred year Age of Revelation. However, during the Age of Chaos that shortly followed the death of the Sage of Six Paths, all-out war erupted between the ninja living around Iwa. Working as mercenaries for hire, the clans became first battlefield and then blood enemies. The Sougon clan, always the most powerful, gradually began to dominate the others, and by the end of the Age of Chaos had become a de facto ninja aristocracy in
firm control of Iwa’s central Overlook region.

The founding of Konoha in 461 AS and the Sixty Clan Conference that established the hidden village system led to the formalization of Sougon power in Iwa. The legendary general Sougon Uzaemo consolidated all the remaining mountain clans under his rule, becoming the First Tsuchikage of the hidden village of Iwagakure. Last of the five greater villages to be founded, Iwa is by far the most internally cohesive. The unquestioned leadership of the Sougon clan in every area of village life is as potent a military strength as any jutsu. On their honor as shinobi, stone-nins vow undying loyalty to the Tsuchikage and his will.

Iwa was a central actor in all three of the Ninja Wars that have dominated the present-day Age of Enmity. Countless stone-nin heroes rose and fell in the desperate chaos of war. Yet, in a deeper sense, the village has changed little from the past. Deeply insular and isolated, Iwa remains defined by the land around it. Nestled far in the heart of the Dreamstone Mountains, Iwa's most distinguishing feature is the Overlook, a huge outcropping of white dreamstone at its western tip. The Overlook divides the eastern flow of the Dreamstone River in two smaller rivers, the Yellow River and the White River, which surround Iwa to the north and south. From above, Iwa looks like a eye opening in the middle of the water.

An island city in the mountains, Iwa is well protected from direct assault. To reach Iwa, one must cross over one of six bridges and then pass through a guarded gate. Several ancient fortifications further protect the village: Sougon Castle at the Overlook, Noatari Tower near Onden Barrier, and Haghira Tower at the Bat Gate in Aoyama. For visitors who are not enemies, however, navigation within the village is straightforward. Iwa is divided into five main districts, arranged in a asymmetrical fan outward from east to west: Kuramae, Sakaicho, Shitamachi, Aoyama, and Onden. The Overlook is a central point of reference, visible from any place in the village.

A list of notable locations in Iwagakure follows:

**Aoyama:**
[AOYAMA is one of the five districts of Iwa. Located in the south and center of the village, facing the Yellow River. A major residential and cultural area.]

**Bat Bridge:** a bridge from the Bat Gate in Aoyama south across the Yellow River to Sakaicho.

**Bat Gate:** a guarded gate at Aoyama. The southern entrance into Iwa via the Bat Bridge.

**Chuunin Exam Stadium:** the major sports stadium in Iwa, most famously used as an arena for the Iwa Chuunin Exam.

**Haghira Tower:** an ancient stone tower previously occupied by the Haghira clan. Said to be haunted with vengeful ghosts.

**Ninja Academy:** a school for children studying to be Iwa ninja.

**Zoo, The:** the building complex used to house all foreign genin during the Iwa Chuunin Exam. Originally a zoo for exotic animals before the Third Ninja War, subsequently abandoned due to lack of funding.

**Kuramae:**
[KURAMAE is one of the five districts of Iwa. Located to the west, around the Overlook. The village's central military, business, and administrative area.]

**Council Chambers:** the assembly hall of the Iwa High Council, including various administrative committees and bureaucratic departments. Located around Uzaemo Square.

**Katsu-ji Temple:** an important Kiyome temple complex. Located around Uzaemo Square.

**Kindness Hospital:** the major military and civilian hospital in Iwa. Located around Uzaemo Square.

**Overlook, The:** a huge promontory of white dreamstone at the western tip of Iwa. Breaks the churning waters of the Dreamstone River into the White and Yellow Rivers. The highest point in
Iwa. "The Overlook" also generally refers to the central power center of Iwa, including Sougon Castle, the Council Chambers, and Katsu-ji Temple.

**Sougon Castle:** an ancient castle carved into the Overlook during the Age of Revelation. The ancestral home of the Sougon clan.

⇨ **Vault, The:** a vast complex of buried chambers located beneath Sougon Castle, divided into three main levels.

**Garden of Solitude:** the first level of the Vault. By far the largest level, the Garden of Solitude consists of a single massive chamber.

⇨ **Garden of Ancestors:** the second level of the Vault. Contains a Shiva shrine to venerable Sougon ancestors; the traditional burial place of the Sougon clan.

⇨ **Garden of Fate:** the third and deepest level of the Vault. Renowned as a place of deep spiritual and prophetic power.

**Eyeless Gates:** specially constructed barrier gates that control passage from one level of Sougon Castle to another. Eyeless Gates can only be opened by the Enshogan eye.

**Spider Bridge:** a bridge from the Spider Gate at Kuramae northwest across the White River to the north bank of the Dreamstone River. Meets Inume Pass into the Scar.

**Spider Gate:** a guarded gate at Kuramae. Via the Spider Bridge, one of the two western entrances into Iwa.

**Uzaemo Square:** a large plaza next to the Overlook. Many village institutions are located around Uzaemo Square, including Sougon Castle, the Council Chambers, Katsu-ji Temple, and Kindness Hospital. Named after Sougon Uzaemo the First Tsuchikage.

**Wasp Bridge:** a bridge from the Wasp Gate at Kuramae southwest across the Yellow River to the south bank of the Dreamstone River. Meets Inume Pass into the Scar.

**Wasp Gate:** a guarded gate at Kuramae. Via the Wasp Bridge, one of the two western entrances into Iwa.

**Onden:**

[**ONDEN is one of the five districts of Iwa. Located to the east, where the two rivers of the Dreamstone reunite at Onden Barrier. A major residential and military area.**]

**ANBU Headquarters:** the headquarters of the Iwa ANBU. Located around Hagoromo Square.

**Deer Bridge:** a bridge from the Deer Gate at Onden Barrier northeast across the White River to the north bank of the Dreamstone River. Meets the Minoji Road to Hiroshiki.

**Deer Gate:** a guarded gate at Onden Barrier. Via the Deer Bridge, one of the two eastern entrances into Iwa.

**Hagoromo Square:** a large square next to ANBU Headquarters. Named after Senju Hagoromo the Sage of Six Paths.

**Lion Bridge:** a bridge from the Lion Gate at Onden Barrier southeast across the Yellow River to the south bank of the Dreamstone River. Meets the Minoji Road to Hiroshiki.

**Lion Gate:** a guarded gate at Onden Barrier. Via the Lion Bridge, one of the two eastern entrances into Iwa.

**Noatari Tower:** an ancient stone tower occupied by the Noatari Clan.

**Onden Barrier:** a stone barrier wall erected at the place where the Yellow and White Rivers reunite to form the Dreamstone River. The Watermill at Onden is located here.

**Shinjuku Burial Ground:** the primary military graveyard of Iwa. Located around Hagoromo Square.

**Watermill at Onden:** an old watermill next to Onden Barrier. Subject of a famous woodcut by the artist Anayama Tokusai.

**Sakaicho:**

[S**akaicho is one of the five districts of Iwa. Literally "boundary city," it is a slum area located on**
the southern bank of the Yellow River. Reached by the Bat Bridge.

**Mannen House:** an orphanage and poorhouse operated by the Mannen clan.

**Ninja Training Grounds:** a large open-air training area for shinobi.

**Sakaicho Prison:** a maximum security prison. Dug underground into the side of the Dreamstone Mountains.

**Shitamachi:**

*SHITAMACHI is one of the five districts of Iwa. Located to the north and center, facing the White River. The village's main entertainment district and center of "Floating World" culture.*

**Floating World, The:** a notorious gambling establishment and brothel.

**House of Brotherly Love:** a high-end boy brothel.

**Inaho Teahouse:** a high-end after Inaho Village in the Scar.

**Slug Bridge:** a bridge from the Slug Gate at Shitamachi north across the White River to the Sagewood.

**Slug Gate:** a guarded gate at Shitamachi. The northern entrance to Iwa via the Slug Bridge.

**Street of Beggars:** an infamous street of high-end brothels. It is said the women and boys are so expensive they will make even a rich lord a beggar. Includes the House of Brotherly Love and the Floating World.

**Tsukai Gardens:** a large public park.

**Walking Stick Hill:** a steep hill in Tsukai Gardens surrounded by flowers at all times of the year.

**Other Locations:**

**Catacombs, The:** a series of ancient burial chambers beneath Iwa. The Catacombs are built atop and into the Weeping Caverns.

**Dreamstone Glacier:** the vast mountain glacier from which the Dreamstone River originates. Located west of Iwa in the Scar.

**Dreamstone Mountains:** the huge mountain range that surrounds Iwa on all sides. Includes the Scar, the Dreamstone Glacier, the Dreamstone River Valley, and the Dreamstone River.

**Dreamstone River:** the world's largest river system by volume, and the major river in the west. Begins in the Dreamstone Glacier in the Earth and Glacier Countries and runs south, through the Swamp, Iron, and Blood Countries, before emptying into the Sea of Solitude. The Dreamstone River is split in two at Iwa by the Overlook, reuniting at Onden Barrier.

**Dreamstone River Valley:** a large mountain valley where Iwa is located. Located in the Dreamstone Mountains.

**Minoji Road:** a major road in the Earth Country, running east to west from Iwa to Hiroshiki. Closely follows the flow of the Dreamstone River.

**Sagewood, The:** a large wooded forest outside of Iwa, north of the White River. Named after Senju Hagoromo the Sage of Six Paths.

**Cathedral of Faces:** an abandoned Shiva cathedral in the Sagewood. Dedicated to the worship of Cirsa the Life-Giver, one of the Five Gods of Zen.

**Scar, The:** see Part Two of Glossary A below.

**Weeping Caverns:** a series of underground limestone caves. Located beneath Iwa, the Catacombs, and the eastern portion of the Scar. So named for the way the walls "weep" water from the rivers above.

✦ **Cave of Frozen Tears:** a chamber of frozen white stalactites in the Weeping Caverns.

✦ **Pillar of Heaven:** a giant stalactite in the Weeping Caverns.

**White River:** the north distributary of the Dreamstone River at Iwa. So named for the white foam and the rapids of its straight, steep route.

**Yellow River:** the south distributary of the Dreamstone River at Iwa. So named for the yellow clay sediment churned up along its slow, meandering route.
II. THE SCAR:

The Scar is a series of connected canyons and gorges on the Dreamstone River, west of Iwa. According to legend, the Scar was created by a great comet of fire that fell from the sky; more scientifically, it is a wide channel cut by the slow erosion of the Dreamstone River over millions of years. Hundreds of kilometers long from the western to the eastern tip, the Scar is a wild, uninhabited place, full of dangerous beasts and unique landscapes. The six "sacred animals" of Iwa are all represented in the Scar: deer, lions, wasps, spiders, bats, and slugs. In addition, the Scar contains the ruins of many ancient buildings, crumbling monuments to the time when great Shiva empires ruled the Scar and made it the seat of their power.

The Scar has three main gorges. The first of these, the Gorge of Winds, is a narrow bamboo forest primarily populated by Iwagakure's outcast ninja and their families. The second gorge, the Gorge of Mist, is a vast river valley teeming with the majority of plant and animal life in the Scar. The third gorge, the Gorge of Stones, lies deep in the ancient ice at the foot of the Dreamstone Glacier itself. Because the Scar is so isolated from everything else, even Iwa, the few people who still make their home in the Scar generally have the freedom to determine their own affairs.

Perhaps the most famous natural wonder in the North, the Scar has many notable landmarks, ruins, and other named locations. The following places are listed in geographic order from east to west:

**Gorge of Winds:**
*The GORGE OF WINDS is the first of the three gorges of the Scar. Entered from Inume Pass to the east of Iwagakure. Steep and narrow, the Gorge of Winds is dominated by limestone pillars rising sharply from a swaying forest of bamboo. The narrow passageways give rise to fierce currents of wind, which make eerie sounds like musical piping. The Weeping Caverns cave system extends below this gorge.*

- **Inume Pass:** the eastern entrance into the Scar from Iwagakure.
- **Agestone Keep:** a ruined castle guarding the western end of Inume Pass.
- **Valley of Spears:** a valley of sharp limestone pillars. Lush bamboo forests grow at the base of the pillars.
- **Gunnai Road:** a winding road along the eastern cliff of the Valley of Spears.
- **Cathedral of Hands:** an abandoned Shiva cathedral in the Valley of Spears. Overgrown with bamboo trees. Dedicated to the worship of Dymeter the All-Seeing, one of the Five Gods of Zen.
- **Kashima Village:** also called the Untouchable Village. A small village in the Valley of Spears. Made up of so-called "untouchables," families exiled from Iwagakure for dishonor and criminal activity.
- **Singing Stick Hollow:** a famous lookout in Kashima Village.
- **Kashima Shrine:** a Kiyome shrine on the outskirts of Kashima Village.
- **Inaho Village:** a small village at the western end of the Gorge of Winds.
- **Mount Nagara:** a mountain near Facing Ice Falls.
- **Saigani Temple:** a large Kiyome temple next to Facing Ice Falls.
- **Facing Ice Falls:** a famous bowl-shaped waterfall between the Gorge of Winds and the Gorge of Mists. One of the largest waterfalls in the world. So named because the the Ice Spear is visible from its summit.

**Gorge of Mists:**
*The GORGE OF MISTS is the second of the three gorges of the Scar, between the Gorge of Winds and the Gorge of Stones. By far the largest of the gorges, the Gorge of Mists is a vast river valley teeming with exotic plant and animal life. Often covered in mists, rain, and heavy fog. Surrounded by the Dreamstone Mountains, including the legendary Mount Echigo.*
**Grebe Lake:** a small lake at the eastern end of the Gorge of Mists. Famous for the nests of grebes on its mossy surface. Connects to the Biwa and Dreamstone Rivers.

**Goyu and Akasaka:** a pair of ruined statues along the Dreamstone River. The only remaining trace of an unknown ancient city. In the folk tales of the Earth Country, Goyu and Akasaka are legendary lovers who were turned into stars so they could live forever, yet are destined to cross only once a year.

**Mount Owari:** a mountain bordering Biwa Valley.

**Biwa Valley:** a hilly valley filled with small glacial streams.

**Biwa River:** a river in the Biwa Valley, formed from glacial runoff in the summer. Drains into the Dreamstone River at Kesa Village.

**Jubei Dam:** a small dam along the Biwa River, near Kesa Village.

**Kesa Village:** a village at the intersection of the Biwa and Dreamstone Rivers. Well known in the Earth Country for producing sweet oranges.

**Musashi Plains:** a great plain of hilly grassland at the center of the Gorge of Winds. The Dreamstone River flows through the center of the Musashi Plains and meanders widely into many channels.

**Jewel Islands:** a famous chain of tiny islands in the heart of the Musashi Plains, formed by the meandering flows of the Dreamstone River, the Biwa River, and other rivers in the Dreamstone River drainage basin. The Jewel Islands are named for their small size and the limestone caves beneath many of the islands, which are said to contain many secret buried treasures.

**Plover Bend:** a bend in the Dreamstone River in the Musashi Plains. So named for the plovers that gather there in the spring.

**Lake Takenouchi:** a lake in the Musashi Plains formed from glacial runoff off the Dreamstone River.

**Taima Rock:** a rock at the head of Lake Takenouchi shaped like a pregnant woman.

☞ **Mino Shrine:** a small shrine dedicated to the Kiyome martyr Makotogao Rika.

☞ **Karasaki Lion Ranch:** a famous lion ranch near Lake Takenouchi.

**Purplepine Road:** a dirt road through the heart of the Shikkotsu Forest.

**Shikkotsu Forest:** also called the Forest of Bones. A forest of ancient sentinel trees in the north of the Gorge of Mists, bordering the Musashi Plains. Home of the legendary mountain slugs.

☞ **Forgetting Grass Cave:** a strange cave covered with pale white grass. So named for Okki of Kyouko's titular poem.

☞ **Grove of Emperors:** a famous grove in the Shikkotsu Forest that during the summer migration is home to a huge number of Emperor butterflies, the largest species of butterflies in the world.

☞ **Cathedral of Bones:** an abandoned Shiva cathedral in Shikkotsu Forest. Built from the bones of animal and human sacrifices. Dedicated to the worship of Khiton the Strength-Spinner, one of the Five Gods of Zen.

**Single Branch Village:** a small village at the base of Mount Echigo. So named for an image in Kishimo Jiraiya's *Discourses* in which a bird is content with using but one branch of a tree.

**Mount Echigo:** a dormant volcanic mountain rising alone from the grassland at the western edge of the Musashi Plains. Second in height only to the Ice Spear, it is so tall that all four seasons are represented in its bulk. Considered the holiest mountain in the Earth Country.

☞ **Walkway of Monkeys:** a path up the mountain notorious for packs of roving golden monkeys.

☞ **Narataki Noodle Stand:** a tiny restaurant built on the upper slopes of Mount Echigo.

☞ **Observatory, The:** a ruined star observatory built on the upper slopes of Mount Echigo.

☞ **Senso-ji Temple:** also called the Temple of Time. A legendary Kiyome temple at the very top of Mount Echigo, dedicated to Atropus, called the Death-Judge, the Earth God and the God of Time. Built atop smoking hot springs.

**Fuwa Valley:** also known as the Valley of the Nest of Wasps. A narrow strait between the Gorge of
Mists and the Gorge of Stones infested by huge wasps.

Gorge of Stones:
[The GORGE OF STONES is the third of the three gorges of the Scar, far to the west of Iwagakure. The origin point of the Dreamstone River itself, it is so high in elevation that permanent glaciers cover the cliffs all year round. Lack of vegetation at this altitude is compensated for by fantastical shapes of stone and ice. This gorge is also pockmarked by many small glacial lakes.]

Black Tower: a large collapsed watchtower of black obsidian, bordering Fuwa Valley. Marks the eastern boundary of the Gorge of Stones.

Oranda Valley: a steep river valley at the eastern end of the Gorge of Stones. Slopes up west toward the Dreamstone Glacier.

Kannon Chasm: a vast, deep crater that runs across the western width of Oranda Valley. Created by the Shadowstar Earthquake.

Sekigahara-machi Graveyard: also known as the Tomb of the Lost. Originally an ancient Shiva graveyard, fell to the bottom of Kannon Chasm during the Shadowstar Earthquake.

Katsuge Village: a former village of Scar-dwelling hermits and mystics. Originally built near the ruins of the Cathedral of Hearts, it fell to the bottom of Kannon Chasm during the Shadowstar Earthquake.

Cathedral of Hearts: an abandoned Shiva cathedral near Kannon Chasm. Partially destroyed by the Shadowstar Earthquake. Said to hide the secrets of immortality. Dedicated to the worship of Tethis the Tear-Wiper, one of the Five Gods of Zen.

Dreamstone Glacier: the vast mountain glacier from which the Dreamstone River originates. Its eastern boundary is located in the Gorge of Stones.


⇨ Iwata Lake: one of the Rainbow Lakes.
⇨ Hakone Lake: one of the Rainbow Lakes.
⇨ Inkyoji Lake: one of the Rainbow Lakes.

Frozen Forest: a great forest of petrified wood buried beneath the Dreamstone Glacier. Believed to date millions of years into the past.

Reverie Tree: a giant petrified withertree at the base of the Ice Spear. Marks the origin point of the Dreamstone River. The only tree of the Frozen Forest tall enough to reach above the surface of the glacial ice; so named for its hallucinatory appearance.

Ice Spear, The: a great mountain on the border of Earth and Glacier. The tallest mountain in the world and the origin point of the Dreamstone River. Represents the westernmost edge of the Scar.

III. COUNTRIES:

The world of WILL OF STONE is divided into two main continents, a northern continent ("the North") and a southern continent ("the South"). The North is the canon continent of the NARUTOverse, splintered into dozens of different countries and dominated by the hidden village system. The South is of similar size to the North, but is split into just three great, centralized empires.

Between the two continents, the vast Sea of the Sage churns with violent storms and dangerous sea monsters. Due to the impracticality of travel, contact between the North and South was historically very limited, and the culture of each continent developed independently. With the coming of the Sage of Six Paths, and the unification of the world under the proselytizing religion Kiyome, communication became much more frequent. In recent years diplomatic, military, and trading outposts have been established throughout both continents.
For more information on hidden villages and locations within each country, please refer to Part 4 and Part 5 below:

THE NORTH:

**Blood Country**: a lesser country in the west bordering Steam, Earth, Dust, and Wind. The end point of the Dreamstone River as it empties out into the Sea of Solitude to the west. Founded in the aftermath of the Third Ninja War by Makoto Muro, the self-styled Warlord of Blood, as a "buffer country" between Earth and Wind, in accordance with Article One of the Ashwarren Accords. The Blood Country is the strongest of the three new buffer countries, as well as the most aggressive. However, its expansionary ambitions were recently derailed by a violent power struggle between the ruling Makoto clan and the followers of the cult religion Jashin. Having expelled the leaders of the cult from the country, Makoto Muro is now attempting to recruit hundreds of replacement ninja to rebuild Chigakure.
  ⇒ Capital: Bloodthirst.
  ⇒ Hidden Village: Bloodthirst. Also called Chigakure.
  ⇒ Notable Areas: Dreamstone River, the Witherwood, Isle of Regrets, Jetswallow Beach.

**Bright Country**: a lesser country in the northeast bordering Iron, Lightning, and Crescent. Borders the Grasswave Sea to the north and the Sea of Splinters to the south. A nation without a hidden village since the days of the First Ninja War, the Bright Country has always relied on the more powerful Lightning Country for protection. In exchange, Bright offers Lightning highly advantageous prices for its fertile agricultural products.
  ⇒ Capital: Linan.
  ⇒ Notable Areas: Blade's Light Valley, Fukushima River.

**Coral Country**: a lesser country in the southeast bordering Water and Tea. A group of tiny islands in the Sea of Splinters, the Coral Country is primarily sustained by tourism to its famous coral reefs. Its small size and negligible strategic value means that it is rarely touched by political conflicts; occupied during the Ninja Wars by Water through mutual treaty, Coral was never directly attacked and easily won independence as part of Article One of the Ashwarren Accords.
  ⇒ Capital: Yudaru.
  ⇒ Notable Areas: Asan Reef, Asan Point.

**Crescent Country**: a lesser country in the northeast bordering Lightning and Bright, so named for its shape like a crescent moon. Borders the Sea of Splinters to the south. Historically a part of both Bright and Lightning, the Crescent Country won its independence peacefully as part of Article One of the Ashwarren Accords. It is the home of the distinctive Hoka ethnicity, a race of dwarf-like pygmy people.
  ⇒ Capital: Elea.
  ⇒ Notable Areas: Fukushima River, Westlake, Westlake Monastery.

**Dust Country**: a lesser country in the west bordering Blood, Earth, Swamp, and Wind. Founded in the aftermath of the Third Ninja War as a "buffer country" between Earth and Wind, in accordance with Article One of the Ashwarren Accords. Primarily a landlocked desert, the Dust Country is by far the weakest of the three new buffer countries. However, its control of a wide stretch of the Dreamstone River makes it an area of continuing strategic importance. The Dust daimyo court has an ambivalent relationship with Dasutogakure, which often operates as a rogue entity; nonetheless, both parties share a commitment to neutrality.
  ⇒ Capital: Tanami.
  ⇒ Hidden Village: Dasutogakure.
  ⇒ Notable Areas: Dreamstone River, Hiroi Desert, The Barrens, Chasm Lake.
Earth Country: one of the five greater countries, bordering Glacier, Steam, Blood, Dust, Swamp, Rain, Grass, and Waterfall. Borders the Bitter Sea and the Grasswave Sea to the north, and the Sea of Solitude to the west. The origin point of the Dreamstone River at the Ice Spear. Member of the Confederacy. The major power in the northwest, the Earth Country is also one of the most isolated nations in the world, with a unbroken history stretching back to the Age of Myth. Its unique geography, ecosystem, and culture have always been a source of fascination for outsiders. The governance of the Earth Country is evenly divided between the daimyo court and Iwagakure: while the daimyo is responsible for economic and domestic affairs, the Tsuchikage Sougon Sawar controls the military and all foreign policy. Utterly opposed to the aims of the United Countries, Sawar has assembled an equally powerful Confederacy to destroy it.
⇒ Capital: Hiroshiki.
⇒ Hidden Village: Iwagakure.
⇒ Major Cities: Hanyu, Canyon City, Nethara, Lussajis, Baata.
⇒ Notable Areas: Dreamstone Mountains, Dreamstone River, Dreamstone River Valley, Dreamstone Glacier, Angelfall Stone, the Sagewood, the Scar, the Ice Spear, Sagae Pass, Deathtrap Mountain, Yonoro Mountains, Lussajis Lake, Cathedral of the Faith.

Fire Country: one of the five greater countries, bordering Wind, Rain, Grass, Waterfall, River, Sound, Iron, Wave, and Tea. Borders the Sea of the Sage to the south and the Sea of Splinters to the east. Member of the United Countries. The major power in the continental center and the country with by far the largest population, economy, and military in the North. Founded at the beginning of the Age of Enmity in close alliance with Konohagakure, the Fire Country has been called "the Empire of Enmity" for its dominant influence on all aspects of life throughout the continent. It is considered the spiritual successor to the ancient Wood Country of the Age of Blood. Badly weakened by the December 7th attack, the Fire Country attempted to recover by creating the United Countries peacekeeping organization. The Hokage Senju Tsunade aggressively recruits other countries into the United Countries, promising a new, better world order.
⇒ Capital: Ashwarren.
⇒ Hidden Village: Konohagakure.
⇒ Major Cities: Hokuto, Kiushu, Shikoke, Onya, Mino.
⇒ Notable Areas: Jade River, Naka River, Mountain Enasei, Mount Shikoke, Shadowspring Forest, Ash Valleys, Ash Mountains, Valley of the End, Kiushu University, Honjo Laboratory, White Temple, Five Towers of Ashwarren.

Glacier Country: a lesser country in the northeast bordering Earth. Borders the Bitter Sea to the north. Like its much larger neighbor to the south, the Glacier Country has a millennia-old history dating back to the Age of Myth, and one which has served to isolate it from the surrounding world. Located in a harsh, frozen environment of the Dreamstone Glacier, it remains a largely undeveloped society; fishing and hunting are the primary form of sustenance. While Glacier has a nominal daimyo, it is in fact self-governed by a complex web of interrelated tribal clans. Hyogakure, its tiny hidden village, is one example of such.
⇒ Capital: Uruwashai.
⇒ Hidden Village: Hyogakure.
⇒ Major Cities: Whitewarren.
⇒ Notable Areas: Wailing Caverns, Dreamstone Glacier, Dreamstone Mountains.

Grass Country: a lesser country in the continental center bordering Rain, Earth, Waterfall, and Fire. A small but prosperous agricultural nation, the Grass Country has largely escaped the ravages of the Ninja Wars despite its key strategic location, avoiding the fate of the Rain Country to the immediate south. From the start of the Sixty Clan Conference a succession of crafty daimyos forged careful alliances, allowing Grass to come out on the winning side in all three Ninja Wars. The daimyo court maintains a close relationship with Kusagakure, which has always played a key role in any
diplomatic negotiations.
Capital: Rinan.
⇒ Hidden Village: Kusagakure.
⇒ Major Cities: Greensun, Ratai.
⇒ Notable Areas: Dreamstone River, Manoatari Plains, Kannabi Bridge.

Iron Country: a lesser country in the east bordering Fire, Sound, Bright, and Wave. Borders the Sea of Splinters to the east. The only country still controlled by samurai, Iron has existed as an independent sovereign entity since the Age of Blood, partly as a consequence of its snowy, mountainous terrain and lack of strategic value. The Iron Country also maintains a strict policy of armed neutrality. It has not been involved in any international conflict in five hundred years, with the single exception of the campaign against the Silla Brotherhood during the Postwar Period.
Capital: Silla.
⇒ Major Cities: Sekensei.
⇒ Notable Areas: The Three Wolves, Samurai Bridge, Tree of Sekensei.
⇒ Flag: a red slashing X on a white field, symbolizing the unity of the samurai.

Lightning Country: one of the five great countries, bordering Bright and Crescent. Borders the Grasswave Sea to the west and the Sea of Splinters to the east and south. The major power in the northeast. While the Lightning Country has a very powerful military and the second largest economy in the North, its influence has historically been limited to the region which immediately surrounds it. Even during the Ninja Wars, Lightning rarely engaged in battle further away than the Waterfall Country. In part this is due to geographic insularity, and in part due to a mindset, emanating from Kumogakure, that it is not advantageous to be involved too deeply in distant lands. Lightning has remained carefully neutral in the political conflict between the United Countries and the Confederacy.
⇒ Capital: Taitan.
⇒ Hidden Village: Kumogakure.
⇒ Major Cities: Sakya, Yasakani, Battery Watch.
⇒ Notable Areas: Yasakani River, Cojira Mountains, Cojira Desert, Howling Scream Canyon, the Bulwark, Sea of Clouds.

Rain Country: a lesser country in the continental center bordering Swamp, Earth, Grass, Fire, and Wind. Member of the United Countries. Formerly known as the Valley Country, it was founded at the beginning of the Age of Enmity as a prosperous republic. However, Valley's fertile land and key strategic location made it an irresistible target for belligerent powers. Repeatedly invaded during all three of the Ninja Wars. The devastation wrought by warring shinobi armies eventually extended to the environment itself, ravaging the soil and causing constant rain to flood the Weeping Lands. Recognizing a need for change, Mukai Hanzou the Reaper consolidated the remnants of the military and constructed Amegakure atop the metal husks of Bliss. Hanzou's methods were effective but also brutal; resistance to his dictatorship led to the creation of the terrorist organization Akatsuki. In the Postwar Period, the Rain Country has become riven by a ongoing civil war. Hanzou's internationally recognized government controls the southeast from Bliss, while Akatsuki controls the northwest from its headquarters at Caiaden. Perhaps seeking more resources to defeat Akatsuki, Hanzou has chosen to align Rain with the United Countries.
⇒ Capital: Bliss.
⇒ Hidden Village: Bliss. Also called Amegakure.
⇒ Major Cities: Caiaden.
⇒ Notable Areas: Haven River, the Weeping Lands, Tempest Eye, the Asylum.

River Country: a lesser country in the north bordering Waterfall, Sound, and Fire. Borders the Grasswave Sea to the north. The origin point of the Haven River as the hundreds of small rivers and
streams of the Haven River Basin run together toward the southwest. Founded shortly after the Sixty Clan Conference, the River Country is small in population but the wealthiest country in the word in terms of per capita income. An incredibly fertile agricultural region, River is also a major trading and shipping center, its commercial ports second only to the Water Country. Due to this importance as an economic artery for the entire North, River is often called "the Ricebowl Country." River has a medium-sized hidden village, Kawagakure, but in practice will always hire mercenary armies to defend itself as needed.

⇒ Capital: Saitoi.
⇒ Hidden Village: Kawagakure.
⇒ Major Cities: Mistra, Canaltown.
⇒ Notable Areas: Haven River, Haven River Basin, Ishii Island.

**Sound Country:** a lesser country in the north bordering River, Iron, and Fire. Founded during the Ceasefire out of the union of three smaller countries, the Sound Country was invaded and almost entirely destroyed by the Fire Country during the Third Ninja War. Recently rose to prominence with the rebuilding of its hidden village; however, during the December 7th attack, Otogakure was exposed as a front for the Akatsuki terrorists of Nomo Orochimaru. Subsequent investigation revealed that the entire Sound Country government had been co-opted by Akatsuki. A Konoha task force led by Maito Gai obliterated Otogakure and the country has fallen into chaos, its survival uncertain.

⇒ Capital: Otogakure.
⇒ Hidden Village: Otogakure.
⇒ Notable Areas: Pine Wastes, Valley of the End.

**Steam Country:** a lesser country in the far west, bordering Earth and Blood. Borders the Sea of Solitude to the west. Founded in the aftermath of the Third Ninja War as a "buffer country" between Earth and Wind, in accordance with Article One of the Ashwarren Accords. The least strategically relevant of the three new buffer countries, Steam has usually been ignored by the major powers; and vice versa. Recently, however, the technological transformation of Joukigakure has sparked a surge of interest in the potential for steam-based warfare. A small but industrialized nation, the Steam Country is now poised to export the energy of its vast Steam Fields to the many buyers clamoring for steam technology.

⇒ Capital: Steam City.
⇒ Hidden Village: Joukigakure.
⇒ Major Cities: Far Harbor.
⇒ Notable Areas: Golden River, Steam Fields.

**Swamp Country:** a lesser country in the west bordering Dust, Earth, Rain, and Wind. Member of the Confederacy. Founded by mountain clans from Earth at the beginning of the Age of Enmity, the Swamp Country has always been Earth's closest ally. In many ways it is an extension of Earth-kin culture, a isolated, honor-based community centered around the banks of the Dreamstone River. Yet without the Dreamstone Mountains to protect it, Swamp is far more vulnerable to outside influences. Always on the opposite side of the Rain Country in any conflict, Swamp's hidden village Numagakure is largely defined by a visceral hatred of its nearest neighbor. At the same time, Swamp's economic centers, the major cosmopolitan cities Kurenkara and Izu, have swelled with immigrants fleeing from the chaos and poverty in Rain, Wind, and Dust, altering Swamp's society as a result. In the Postwar Period, Swamp is a nation torn between its traditional and modern identities.

⇒ Capital: Kurenkara.
⇒ Hidden Village: Numagakure.
⇒ Major Cities: Izu.
⇒ Notable Areas: Wraithglades, Dreamstone River, Dreamstone Mountains.
**Tea Country:** a lesser country in the southeast bordering Fire, Wave, Water, and Coral. Borders the Sea of Splinters to the east. Founded after the First Ninja War by mutual agreement with Fire, the Tea Country is a peaceful farming society. Poor and largely undeveloped, Tea has maintained its independence from the greater powers which surround it by pursuing a policy of neutrality; this policy did not, however, prevent a brutal invasion by Water during the Third Ninja War. The Tea Country is the source of most of the tea in the North, a valuable agricultural export which it provides on highly favorable terms to both Fire and Water.

⇒ Capital: Koizumi.
⇒ Major Cities: Yashio.
⇒ Notable Areas: Marchpool River.

**Water Country:** one of the five greater countries, bordering Coral, Tea, Fire, and Wave. Centered around Seija Island and its surrounding archipelagos in the Sea of Splinters. Member of the Confederacy. The major power in the southeast. Smallest of the greater countries by population, the Water Country's naval empire is by far the most extensive. Dozens of deepwater ports and a vast shipping fleet make it the beating heart of Northern commerce, and the dominant trading partner with the three empires of the South. Water's power at sea is unrivaled; during the Ninja Wars, Kirigakure ships raided up and down the coast of the Sea of Splinters with total impunity. However, Water found much less success when it attacked deeper inland. Perhaps fittingly, the Water Country is a traditional ally of the Earth Country and its strong land-based army.

⇒ Capital: Kyouko.
⇒ Hidden Village: Kirigakure.
⇒ Major Cities: Seija City, Tidewatch Keep, Jinzu, Kasai.
⇒ Notable Areas: Sanzu River, Sakon Dam, Asan Reef, Seija Island, Kasai Stone, the Maelstrom, theWitching Water, Turtle Islands.

**Waterfall Country:** a lesser country in the north, bordering Grass, Earth, River, and Fire. Member of the Confederacy. Founded during the First Ninja War out of the ruins of two smaller countries, Waterfall has been controlled for over forty years by Misain Seve, the leader of Takigakure. An utterly ruthless and opportunistic despot, Seve has snatched Waterfall time and time again from the jaws of destruction. Occupied by Earth in the Second Ninja War, Waterfall successfully allied with Fire to retake its territory in the Third Ninja War, becoming more powerful than ever. A stable and growing industrial nation, Waterfall is one of the key strategic actors in the PostKwar Period. Now, by choosing the Confederacy over the United Countries, the seemingly immortal Seve plans one more roll of the dice.

⇒ Capital: Miyawe.
⇒ Hidden Village: Takigakure.
⇒ Major Cities: Reel.
⇒ Notable Areas: Haven River, Lake of Eternity, Torrentrage Falls.

**Wave Country:** a lesser country bordering Fire and Water. Historically a disputed region between Fire and Water, the Wave Country won its independence as part of Article One of the Ashwarren Accords. Now a sovereign entity in its own right, the small island nation relies on a declining fishing and whaling industry to support its meager standard of living. In recent years the Wave Country has aligned itself more closely with Water, which shares similar commercial interests. Kirigakure funded the construction of the Tazuna Bridge and helped establish Namigakure, Wave's first hidden village.

⇒ Capital: Kishimon.
⇒ Hidden Village: Namigakure.
⇒ Notable Areas: Otter Straits, Tazuna Bridge, the Maelstrom.

**Whirlpool Country:** a defunct lesser country in the southeast bordering Fire. Founded during the Sixty Clan Conference, the Whirlpool Country and its hidden village Uzushiogakure was a close ally
of Fire. Destroyed by the Water Country during the Second Ninja War and subsequently absorbed by Fire.

**Wind Country:** one of the five greater countries, bordering Fire, Dust, Swamp, and Steam. Borders the Sea of Solitude to the west and the Sea of the Sage to the south. The end point of the Haven River as it empties out into the Sea of the Sage at Sawara. Member of the United Countries. The major power in the southwest, the Wind Country has the most illustrious history of any nation in the world. Through the ages it has been the capital of the Birthright Empire, the seat of the ancient Blood Country, and the principal residence of the Sage of Six Paths. However, Wind was crippled by climate changes during the Age of Chaos; its fertile northern grasslands eroded away, and the Hiroi Desert grew to encompass almost the entire country. While Sawara and the regions surrounding the Haven River Delta remains prosperous, the rest of the Wind Country is desperately poor and undeveloped. Wind's hidden village, Sunagakure, was recently duped into the failed December 7th attack on Konoha; the resulting fallout saw Wind ally with Fire and join the United Countries in order to prevent its own destruction.

- Capital: Sawara.
- Hidden Village: Sunagakure.
- Major Cities: Sagehall, Yayoi, Soruto.
- Notable Areas: Hiroi Desert, Hiroi Mountains, Haven River, Haven River Delta, Candlelit Monastery.

**THE SOUTH:**

**Ilithian Empire:** also called Ilithia. One of the three great empires in the South. An aggressive and expansionist military empire, Ilithia has been the bitter rival of Genoa for nearly an entire millennium. Ilithia's extensive coastal and island territories make it the dominant naval power in the South and thus an ideal foil for Genoa's land-based armies. In recent years, however, the two empires have opted to settle their differences without resorting to direct warfare, perhaps in recognition of the devastation such a war would cause. Many Ilithians are dissatisfied with this uneasy truce and openly petition the Ilithian Empress to attack Genoa with all the might at her disposal.

- Capital: Piraeus.
- Notable Areas: Piraean River, the Summerlands.
- Flag: a Sage's wheel surrounded by six spokes of purple light. Symbolizes the blazing strength of the Ilithian Empire and the Kiyome faith at its core.

**Ru Daunu:** also called Great Daunu. One of the three great empires in the South. Despite having the largest landmass and population, Ru Daunu is considered weaker than both Genoa and Ilithia and has rarely been able to challenge either directly. Rather, it usually attempts to opportunistically ally with one country against the other, maintaining the balance of power between the three empires. A vast tropical nation with difficult jungle terrain and monsoon climates, Ru Daunu remains more of an agricultural economy than an industrial one; the extremely modern Bayon province is a notable exception. Ru Daunu has a hereditary monarchy, though much of the true power resides with the landed nobility in each of its eleven major provinces.

- Capital: Bayon.
- Notable Areas: the Spice Isles.
- Flag: a Sage's wheel surrounded by a circle of eleven green stars. Represents the hope given by Kiyome to each of the ten provinces of Ru Daunu.

**United Republic of Genoa:** also called Genoa. Of the three great empires in the South, Genoa is considered the most powerful both economically and militarily, though not decisively so. A large mountainous land of forests, rivers, and lakes, Genoa was the first country to convert to Kiyome and then subsequently the first country to take full advantage of the industrial revolution. Though Genoa
is now a representative democracy, it remains a distinct point of pride among Genoans that Otsutsuki Hagoromo, the Sage of Six Paths, is directly descended from the Genoan royal family. Genoa is usually opposed by its rival Ilithia in various political and military conflicts.
⇒ Capital: Hoath.
⇒ Notable Areas: Noroisen Forest, Mammoth Caves.
⇒ Flag: a golden Sage's wheel growing out from the bend of a red crescent moon. Symbolizes the union of Kiyome and traditional Genoan society.

IV. HIDDEN NINJA VILLAGES:

A hidden village is a military city founded, controlled, and populated by ninja, with the purpose of defending the country in which it is based. While countries retain large conventional armies, their overwhelming military strength lies in the hidden villages. This gives hidden villages great political power, in many cases more than the official government. The five Kages, in particular, operate as de facto Shogun warlords.

The hidden village system is the dominant military and political framework in the North; the Iron Country is the only significant military power without a hidden village. This system was conceived by Senju Hashirama as a way to bring stability to an anarchic world. Instead of warring mercenary clans, shinobi power would instead be centralized and used to enforce order. With Uchiha Madara, he founded Konoha, the first hidden village. Others quickly followed their example. The system was formalized at the Sixty Clan Conference in Ashwarren and followed by an unprecedented era of peace and prosperity, leading some to characterize the new era as the "Age of Concord."

However, the peace did not last. Suppression of internal conflicts within countries gave way to externals conflicts between them; the subsequent Ninja Wars caused many to question the value of hidden villages. Yet the system endures to this day, the defining feature of the Age of Enmity:

Ame: also known as Bliss. The hidden village of Rain and the capital of the Rain Country. Member of the United Countries. Originally founded at the beginning of the hidden village era as a peaceful republic, the city of Bliss was ravaged by the Ninja Wars and environmental collapse. Lord Mukai Hanzou emerged to assume dictatorial control and found the village of Amegakure. Now a rusted city of metal skyscrapers from a bygone age, the village has returned to a position of influence. The northern end of the Sohkaido Road along the Haven River, though much of the road is no longer accessible. See Bliss.
⇒ Leader: Mukai Hanzou the Reaper.
⇒ Shinobi: ~1000.
⇒ Notable Clans: Mukai, Kyoroku, Nichiren.
⇒ Fighting Style: stealth and ambush. Similar to the fighting style of Numa. Rain-nins are infamous for their many assassination jutsu and ability to conceal themselves in any area. Poison is a standard component of all rain-nin attacks.
⇒ Uniform: purple wetsuits with a thin layer of metal scale armor. Genin wear purple and black wetsuits. Some rain-nin wear straw hats and reed cloaks.
⇒ Village Symbol: four vertical lines in parallel, like falling rain.

Chi: also known as Bloodthirst. The hidden village of Blood and the capital of the Blood Country. Founded and led in the aftermath of the Third Ninja War by Makoto Muro the Warlord of Blood. Like its namesake during the Age of Chaos, Chigakure is an attempt to realize the same expansionary empire, though these ambitions are yet to be fulfilled. A city of black marble arches and red brick streets on the banks of the Dreamstone River, Chigakure has recently been destabilized by a conflict between Muro and followers of the cult religion of Jashin. See Bloodthirst.
⇒ Leader: Makoto Muro the Warlord of Blood.
Shinobi: ~200.
Notable Clans: Gifuu, Makoto.
Fighting Style: aggressive close-range combat. Blood-nins are known for their extreme violence and mass destruction jutsu.
Uniform: red nylon suits with black plate chest armor, armored arm and leg guards, and headband. Genin wear red nylon suits with gray armor plating.
Village Symbol: a twisted black cross. Based on the flag of the original Blood Country.

Dasuto: the hidden village of Dust. Based in the Dust Country. Founded during the Second Ninja War by the Ashuju clan as a way to escape persecution in Numa. Built within the dark caves of a howling desert canyon in the Barrens, Dasutogakure nonetheless remains a place of refuge for various ninja outcasts, many of whom are adopted into the Ashuju clan if they prove worthy. It maintains its existence by pursuing a policy of strict neutrality with its more powerful neighbors.
Leader: Ashuju Nyoko the Sandsnake.
Shinobi: ~100.
Notable Clans: Ashuju.
Uniform: beige nylon suits with brown flak jacket and beige bandanna. Genin wear beige and brown spandex suits.
Fighting Style: unpredictable and swarming. Dust-nins based their style on the movement of dust storms: motionless at first, then suddenly pressing in from all directions, crushing the enemy with whirling force. Ashuju clan members are also known to utilize deadly smell-based attacks.
Village Symbol: six scattered dots arranged in an equilateral triangle pointing to the left. Represents an approaching storm of dust.

Hyoga: the hidden village of Glacier. Based in the Glacier Country. Founded after the Second Ninja War by the Konoe, Kozumi, and Uraouji mountain clans of the Scar. The village is governed by an unique triumvirate ruling system led by the heads of each of three clans. The Executor is responsible for general administration; the Arbiter is responsible for internal security; and the Legislator is responsible for taxes and diplomacy. Glacial-nins live in extreme isolation in scattered cubical igloos carved out of the Dreamstone Glacier. Proud of their self-sufficiency and lack of contact with the outside world, they rarely participate in international chunin exams.
Leaders: Konoe Denzae the Iceborn (Executor); Kozumi Youko (Arbiter); Uraouji Mana (Legislator).
Shinobi: ~200.
Notable Clans: Konoe, Kozumi, Uraouji.
Fighting Style: generally extremely defensive and conservative, though occasionally wild. Water jutsu are standard for all glacier-nins.
Uniform: thick white fur-lined suits with animal skin cloaks and white bandanna. Genin wear white and gray fur-lined suits.
Village Symbol: three irregular sloping triangles that bisect in the middle. Symbolizes the jagged surface of a moving glacier.

Iwa: the hidden village of Stone. One of the five greater villages. Based in the Earth Country. Member of the Confederacy. See detailed entry in Part 1 above for more information.
Leader: Sougon Sawar the Sun Breaker.
Shinobi: ~4500.
Notable Clans: Azuraki, Chuzuru, Bakura, Haghira, Noatari, Sougon.
Fighting Style: steady but relentless pressure. Stone-nins are famous for waves of continuous attacks against the enemy, until either the enemy is dead or they are. They are also known for kamikaze tactics. Earth jutsu are standard for all stone-nins.
Uniform: brown nylon suits with yellow flak jacket and brown bandanna. Genin wear brown and yellow nylon suits.
**Village Symbol:** a rock carved against a rock, symbolizing the unyielding strength of Iwa.

**Jouki:** the hidden village of Steam. Based in the Steam Country. Recently transformed by Ishikawa Goemon after visiting the United Republic of Genoa in the South. Joukigakure's new purpose is to apply the advanced steam technology of the South to ninja warfare; it is notable for being the only military force in the North which has adopted this kind of technology. Built in rows of iron houses on a vast iron platform. Rising steam from the nearby Steam Fields provides the geothermal energy to power the village's considerable collection of steam machinery.

- **Shinobi:** ~100.
- **Notable Clans:** Ishikawa, Naemura.
- **Fighting Style:** mass destruction range attacks using steam technology.
- **Uniform:** mechanical steam-powered suits. Brass full body armor plate with brass headband and golden silk cloaks. Genin wear the suit but not the cloak.
- **Village Symbol:** three lines curling up into the air, like rising steam.

**Kawa:** the hidden village of River. Based in the River Country. Founded shortly after the Sixty Clan Conference, Kawagakure is one of the most stable hidden villages despite its consistent defeats in major conflicts, including the Third Ninja War. This is primarily due to Kawagakure's location at the rocky mouth of the Haven River Delta, which has enabled it to become a major commercial port. Revenue from the shipping business allows Kawa to easily replenish any losses through foreign recruitment. Its famous floating buildings are attached to each other via long wooden walkways that crisscross the different streams of the Delta.

- **Leader:** Nekoto Kawabata of Jade.
- **Shinobi:** ~450.
- **Notable Clans:** Higeru, Nekoto, Rouga.
- **Fighting Style:** entrapment and denial of enemy movement. River-nins will attempt to control the terms of engagement before any direct battle. The Higeru clan is known for its use of fishing nets to pin down enemies.
- **Uniform:** light orange nylon suits with pink flak jacket and headband. Genin wear light orange and pink spandex suits. Some river-nin wear hairnets with jade rings.
- **Village Symbol:** an upside-down triangle crossed horizontally with a thick black bar. Symbolizes the position of the village within the Haven River Delta.

**Kiri:** the hidden village of Mist. One of the five greater villages. Based in the Water Country. Member of the Confederacy. Founded second of all hidden villages, Kirigakure is known as the "Village of Bloody Mist" for the violent internal purges by which each set of leaders has come to power. Under the Fourth Mizukage, Ningeni Yagura, the village reached unprecedented heights of brutality, massacring all bloodline clans and instituting a system of deathmatches in order to advance in rank. After the mysterious disappearance of Yagura four years ago, Terumi Mei seized control of Kirigakure with the support of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist, the village's most powerful shinobi. Mei has forged new partnerships with a number of old allies, including Iwa. Kirigakure is located at the mist-filled eastern edge of Seija Island; sunken towers of encrusted pink coral show the constant influence of the sea upon the village.

- **Leader:** Terumi Mei the Lady of Dew.
- **Shinobi:** ~3500.
- **Notable Clans:** Hoshigaki, Houzuki, Momochi, Touin.
- **Fighting Style:** defensive and calculated. Deceptively passive, mist-nins prefer to lull enemies into making mistakes that leave them open to an devastating counterattack. However, the Hoshigaki clan, an exception to this rule, is known for its extreme aggression. Water-based attacks are standard for all mist-nins.
- **Uniform:** light blue nylon suits with mesh armor, dark blue flak jacket, and dark blue headband. Genin wear light blue spandex suits with mesh armor.
Village Symbol: four curved diagonal lines in parallel, like the motion of mist.

**Konoha:** the hidden village of Leaves. One of the five greater villages. Based in the Fire Country. Member of the United Countries. Founded by an unprecedented alliance between the Senju and Uchiha clans, Konohagakure has generally been considered the most powerful of all villages. A central actor in all major events of the Age of Enmity. The ascendant victor in the Third Ninja War, Konoha was weakened by the surprise attack of the Kyuubi Kitsune two years later, resulting in the death of the Fourth Hokage Namikaze Minato as well as the Undeclared War. The massacre of the entire Uchiha clan by Uchiha Itachi further compromised Konoha’s military position, leaving it vulnerable to the devastating December 7th terrorist attack. The Fifth Hokage, Senju Tsunade, has established the “United Countries” peacekeeping organization in order to prevent future terrorism. Konoha is built around a series of hot springs along the Naka River in the heart of the Shadowspring Forest; tiled wooden structures in the style of the ancient Wood Country dominate its idyllic landscape.

- **Leader:** Senju Tsunade the Queen of Torment.
- **Shinobi:** ~4000.
- **Notable Clans:** Aburame, Hyuuga, Sarutobi, Senju, Uchiha, Yamanaka.
- **Fighting Style:** overwhelming offense. The attack of a leaf-nin army has been likened to that of wildfire; leaf-nins are known for their unparalleled offensive arsenal. Leaf-nin are also famous for using genjutsu. Fire jutsu are a common element of the leaf-nin fighting style.
- **Uniform:** black nylon suits with dark green flak jacket and headband. Genin wear black and green spandex suits with leather chest armor.
- **Village Symbol:** a swirling leaf, representing the unity of Konoha.

**Kumo:** the hidden village of Cloud. One of the five greater villages. Based in the Lightning Country. Kumogakure is by far the strongest power in the northeast, utterly dominant from its perch above the Sea of Clouds high in the Cojira Mountains. Its spires and bridges of electric steel are so intimidating that the village has never been directly attacked, even during the Ninja Wars. Yet the geography of their home has also been a disadvantage in the lands beyond; cloud-nins fight far better inside the Lightning Country than outside of it. Perhaps as a consequence, the Fourth Raikage, Juukan Aae, is known for his extremely cautious international policy.

- **Leader:** Juukan Aae the Stormfist.
- **Shinobi:** ~4000.
- **Notable Clans:** Fukunaga, Kasuga, Kirazu, Juukan.
- **Fighting Style:** opportunistic and sudden. Cloud-nins prefer to stay above the fray of battle, only engaging at the last second when it is advantageous. However, these late sudden attacks are very powerful. Lightning-based attacks are common among cloud-nins.
- **Uniform:** silver spandex bodysuits with white flak jackets and headband. Genin wear silver spandex bodysuits.
- **Village Symbol:** three rounded ellipses, symbolizing floating clouds.

**Kusa:** the hidden village of Grass. Based in the Grass Country. A small village in the prairie valleys of the Manoatari Plains, its low-slung buildings are noteworthy for being made entirely of shaped grass and vines. Kusagakure was historically allied with Konoha and against Ame, but in recent years the Kusa High Council has pursued a policy of diplomatic openness with all parties. Unlike most lesser villages, Kusa is not dominated by a single clan or alliance of clans; its internal stability thus depends heavily on the continued unity of the High Council.

- **Leader:** Ikenobo Zeami the Princess of Dragonflies.
- **Shinobi:** ~550.
- **Notable Clans:** N/A.
- **Fighting Style:** close-range combat from a defensive position. Grass-nin have honed the art of swordsmanship to perfection; in their hands, even grass can be a fatal slicing blade. They are also
known for their camouflage abilities. Grass-based attacks are a standard component of the grass-nin arsenal.

Uniform: dark gray nylon suits with turquoise flak jacket and headband. Genin wear dark gray and turquoise spandex suits.

Village Symbol: three curved upward points in a zigzag line, like blades of grass.

**Nami:** the hidden village of Waves. Based in the Wave Country. Founded one year ago by the ex-Mist ninja Uchiku Sarashina as a satellite village of Kiri and a new home for the Unchiku clan. A close ally of Kiri, Namigakure has nonetheless chosen to remain neutral in the political struggle between the Confederacy and the United Countries. Currently located in temporary housing on the outskirts of Kishimon; the hidden village proper is still being built at the base of Tazuna Bridge.

Leader: Unchiku Sarashina; called Sarashina Seashell.

Shinobi: ~150.

Notable Clans: Unchiku.

Fighting Style: defensive and calculated. Similar to the fighting style of Kiri. The Unchiku clan specializes in wave-based water jutsu.

Uniform: dark blue nylon suits with mesh armor, orange flak jacket, and gray headband. Genin wear dark blue and orange spandex suits with mesh armor.

Village Symbol: a sharp tipped point that curves from right to left, like a crashing wave.

**Numa:** the hidden village of Swamp. Based in the Swamp Country. Member of the Confederacy. One of the original participants in the Sixty Clan Conference, Numagakure has always been a close ally to Iwa, its more powerful northern neighbor. It is equally the hated enemy of Ame, the closest village by proximity, and with which it is in constant conflict. Situated deep in the mysterious bone-white swamps of the Wraithglades, Numa is famously difficult to attack or even find. A village of baked mud bricks built upon the swamp itself, it does not have one fixed location but gradually moves as the Wraithglades is reshaped by the flow of the Dreamstone River.

Leader: Oyokawa Komachi the Silent.

Shinobi: ~600.

Notable Clans: Fuuki, Oyokawa, Shigeru.

Fighting Style: stealth and ambush. Similar to the fighting style of Ame. Swamp-nins utilize many different kinds of summons to help entrap and ambush enemies. The Fuuki clan is known for their use of insects.

Uniform: camouflaged wetsuits with purple flak jacket and headband. Genin wear identical camouflaged suits.

Village Symbol: six curved lines converging on one center point, like the sucking motion of quicksand.

**Oto:** the hidden village of Sound. Based in the Sound Country. Supposedly a small neutral village in the desolate black canyons of the Pine Wastes, Otogakure was in fact established by Nomo Orochimaru as a base for secret Akatsuki operations. Obliterated by a Konoha task force led by Maito Gai after the failure of the December 7th attack.

Leader: N/A; formerly Nomo Orochimaru the White Snake.

Shinobi: N/A.

Notable Clans: N/A.

Fighting Style: aggressive offense from range. Sound-based attacks are standard for all sound-nins.

Uniform: mottled black and white nylon bodysuits with headband. Genin wear mottled black and white nylon suits.

Village Symbol: a note of music, symbolizing the importance of sound to Oto.

**Suna:** the hidden village of Sand. One of the five greater villages. Based in the Wind Country.
Member of the United Countries. The weakest of the greater villages, Sunagakure has never shied away from any opportunity to seize the advantage. This bold risk-taking led to disaster when Suna was duped by Akatsuki into invading Konoha in the failed December 7th attack. Faced with the destruction of the village, the new Kazekage Sabaku Gaara accepted an alliance with Konoha over the objection of many hardliner factions; Gaara's political position remains precarious. Located within a sandstone canyon in the Hiroi Desert, Suna is a place of famously stark beauty. Rows of torches flicker along walls and windswept domes of scarred red rock.

⇒ Leader: Sabaku Gaara of the Sand Waterfall.
⇒ Notable Clans: Anayama, Hattori, Ryokan, Sabaku.
⇒ Fighting Style: efficient and extremely quick. Sand-nins are famous for killing the most enemies in the least amount of time possible. Instead of a diversity of techniques, sand-nins utilize a few key jutsu balanced between offense and defense. Wind jutsu are common for all sand-nins.
⇒ Uniform: blue nylon suits with beige flak jacket and headband. Genin wear blue and beige nylon suits. Some sand-nins wear white cloth head-wraps.
⇒ Village Symbol: an upside-down hourglass, representing the passage of time toward death.

Taki: the hidden village of Waterfall. Based in the Waterfall Country. Member of the Confederacy. Founded by the infamous Misain Seve during the First Ninja War, Takigakure remains a village dominated by Seve's single personality. The undisputed despot of the ruling Misain clan, Seve is the father by polygamy and incest of all the members of the Misain bloodline, including the daughters and granddaughters he has taken as wives. In addition to this sordid history, Taki is famous as the most beautiful of all hidden villages. Located at the top of Torrentrage Falls, its buildings of glistening white dreamstone are commonly compared to the elegance of a exquisite woman.

⇒ Leader: Misain Seve the Thrice-Dead.
⇒ Shinobi: ~500.
⇒ Notable Clans: Misain, Onira, Rokusho.
⇒ Fighting Style: focused offense. Waterfall-nins will attempt to identify enemy weak points and then direct concentrated attacks against those points. Water-based and fire-based jutsu are common elements of the waterfall-nin fighting style.
⇒ Uniform: red nylon suits with blue flak jacket and headband. Genin wear red and blue spandex suits.
⇒ Village Symbol: an arrow pointing downward with the tip of the point missing. Represents the rushing power of a waterfall.

V. GENERAL:

Note: the information in this glossary is accurate as of Chapter 31.

Academy Student: a child studying at the Ninja Academy of a hidden village. Trained in the ninja arts, but not yet considered full shinobi, academy students are typically classified as "E rank."

Akatsuki: eng. New Dawn. A transnational terrorist and mercenary organization based in Rain and led by Nomo Orochimaru. Founded in the latter stages of the Third Ninja War by disaffected rain-nins as a resistance movement against Lord Hanzou, it was eventually taken over by Orochimaru and turned into a major international criminal ring, with cells in every country and dozens of yearly operations. Responsible for the December 7th Attack, the Massacre of Caiaden, among other atrocities. Akatsuki's declared goal is to destroy the entire ninja system, which it considers irredeemably corrupt. Its members include the infamous missing-nins Uchiha Itachi, Yoshitomo Nagato, Deshii Konan, Hoshigaki Kisame, Anayama Sasori, Onira Kakuzu, Yasunari Zetsu, Gifuu Hidan, and Chuzuru Deidara.

Age: refers to the six major periods of history in the North. They are, in order, the Age of Myth, the
Age of Glory, the Age of Blood, the Age of Revelation, the Age of Chaos, and the Age of Enmity.

**Age of Blood:** the Third Age. The historical period from the fall of the Birthright Empire in 533 BS to the coming of the Sage of Six Paths in 0 AS. A feudal era of warring shoguns, the Age of Blood was primarily dominated by two powerful countries, the Blood Country centered around Sawara, and the Wood Country centered around Kiushu. The present-day Iron Country dates back to this era.

**Age of Chaos:** the Fifth Age. The historical period from the death of the Sage of Six Paths in 128 AS to the Sixty Clan Conference in 461 AS. The Age of Chaos is defined by the emergence of the ninja in all aspects of Northern life, including as the primary instrument of warfare. Instead of huge traditional armies, war was waged instead between small mercenary shinobi clans, such as the Senju, Uchiha, Sougon, Chuzuru, Hoshigaki, Anayama, Kirazu, and Misain. The power of these clans became such that no country was safe without their support. Realizing their own ascendance, the ninja clans began to band together, resulting in the founding of hidden villages and the start of the Age of Enmity.

"Age of Concord": an alternate name for the Sixth Age. Abandoned after the start of the First Ninja War and the failure of the hidden village system to preserve the peace.

**Age of Enmity:** the Sixth Age. The historical period from the Sixty Clan Conference in 461 AS to the current year in 526 AS. Major events in the Age of Enmity include: the founding of the hidden villages, the Sixty Clan Conference, the Prewar Period, the Shadowstar Earthquake, the First Ninja War, the Midsummer's Armistice, the Second Ninja War, the Ceasefire, the Leper Sickness, the Treaty of Miyawe, the Third Ninja War, the Ashwarren Accords, the Kyuubi Attack, the rise and fall of the Silla Brotherhood, the Undeclared War, the rise of Akatsuki, and the December 7th Attack. Dominated by the shadow of the three Ninja Wars, even seventeen years into the Postwar Period, the Age of Enmity is considered the bloodiest and most violent era in history.

**Age of Glory:** the Second Age. The historical period from the founding of the Birthright Empire in 1607 BS to the fall of the Birthright Empire in 533 BS. The undisputed peak of pagan civilization, the Age of Glory spawned the world's most powerful empire of all time. For over a thousand years the legendary Birthright Empire ruled the North, leaving behind a political, technological, and cultural inheritance that endures to this day. The philosophies of Kishimo Jiraiya, the stories of Okki of Kyouko, and the art of Hotaru Eshidae all date back to this era.

**Age of Myth:** the First Age. The historical period from the beginning of human civilization to the founding of the Birthright Empire in 1607 BS. There is little reliable information about the Age of Myth; symbolic origin stories and conflicting mythologies contribute to a general fog of historical fact. However, recent archaeological evidence has confirmed that the present-day Earth and Glacier countries date back to this era.

**Age of Revelation:** the Fourth Age. The historical period from the coming of the Sage of Six Paths in 0 AS to the death of the Sage of Six Paths in 128 AS. Dominated by the Crusades, the religious wars between the Sage of Six Paths and his enemies for control of the North, and the subsequent hundred year Sage's Peace which followed. Generally considered the beginning of modern civilization, the Age of Revelation unified the entire North under Kiyome and brought forth knowledge of chakra jutsu, leading to the rise of shinobi clans. Its vast impact on the current age cannot be overstated.

ANBU: a hidden ninja village's "special forces" division. Specially selected from the strongest ninja in the village, ANBU are used to carry out important but extremely dangerous operations. Due to the clandestine and often illegal nature of ANBU missions, ANBU ninja wear masks in order to protect their secret identities.

Angelfall Stone: a famous stone outcropping in the Dreamstone Mountains of the Earth Country, near Canyon City. Looks like the broken wings of a fallen angel.

Annihilation Device: an experimental doomsday weapon, its existence only known to select government and military leaders. Created by the stone-nin physicist Azuraki Hataya during the Third Ninja War, the Annihilation Device has the theoretical power to destroy an entire country in a single instant. However, Dr. Azuraki was killed in the Battle of Deathtrap, and the Device was never
completed. Another prototype Annihilation Device has recently resurfaced in Iwa; its operational status is not known.

**Annihilation Heart:** the core of the Annihilation Device, an immense chakra power source formed from the soul of a bijuu. The Annihilation Device is a mechanism to detonate the energy of the Annihilation Heart.

**ANBU:** a hidden ninja village's "special forces" division. Specially selected from the strongest ninja in the village, ANBU are used to carry out important but extremely dangerous operations. Due to the clandestine and often illegal nature of ANBU missions, ANBU ninja wear masks in order to protect their secret identities.

**ANBU ROOT:** see Root.

**AS:** short for "After Sage." The solar-based calender system currently in use throughout the North. Calendar years are dated from 0 AS, which marks the year of the Sage of Six Paths' return to the North.

**Asan Reef:** a massive coral reef in the Sea of Splinters, renowned as one of the wonders of the natural world. Borders Tea, Wave, Coral, and Water. Asan Reef is especially known for its lustrous black pearls and giant pufferfish. Site of Asan Point, the Turtle Islands, and the Battle of Asan Reef.

**Asan Point:** an exceptionally beautiful atoll in the Coral Country. Considered the southern end of Asan Reef.

**Ash Mountains:** a large volcanic mountain chain in the Fire Country. Though most of the mountains are now dormant, several volcanoes are still active, including Mount Shikoke. Site of the Ash Valleys and the origin point of the Jade River.

**Ash Valleys:** a series of valleys in the Ash Mountains of the Fire Country. Formed by the same volcanic activity that created the Ash Mountains. Site of Ashwarren and the Jade River.

**Ashwarren:** the capital of the Fire Country. Though barely a hundred years old, Ashwarren is nevertheless the undisputed political, economic, and cultural hub of the North. The second largest city in the North, after Sawara. Built in the shadow of Mount Enasei in the Ash Valleys. Site of the Five Towers of Ashwarren, the Sixty Clan Conference, the Battle of Ashwarren, and the Ashwarren Accords.

**Ashwarren Accords:** the peace treaty that ended the Third Ninja War and established the postwar system of power. Negotiated by Uchiha Fugaku the Calculator and signed by all countries in the North in 509 AS, seventeen years ago. The Ashwarren Accords had three primary provisions. Article One redrew the world's territorial map, creating multiple "buffer" countries between the greater countries. Article Two established a system of free trade and freedom of navigation across the entire North. Article Three, the most contentious, obliged the losing countries to pay an extraordinary series of monetary reparations to the winners over a period of twenty years. While these reparations were later modified to be far less onerous, they achieved their designed goal of cementing Fire and Lightning as the premier powers in the Postwar Period. To this day, the Ashwarren Accords remain intensely controversial, receiving both effusive praise and severe condemnation.

**Asylum, The:** an infamous skyscraper at the center of Bliss. The seat of Lord Hanzou's power, it houses hundreds of his "martyrs," human sacrifices to the Death God in exchange for which Hanzou is granted immortality. It is also the center of a religious cult that worships Hanzou as a god and the reincarnation of the Sage of Six Paths.

"At Dawn from Karasaki Town": a famous poem by Kishimo Jiraiya. Its most famous lines read: "I see with eyes in their last extremity/Long is the night to I who am awake."

**Atropus:** called the Death-Judge. One of the Five Gods of Zen, subsequently absorbed into Kiyome. The Earth God and the God of Time. Generally depicted as a faceless man holding a dark hourglass, Atropus is the god of fate, reincarnation, and change. While popular with all Kiyome faithful, particular patrons of the Earth God include farmers, merchants, and the elderly.

**Aurora:** an extraordinary display of colored lights in the sky. Caused by magnetic storms in the far north, they are a common occurrence in the Glacier, Earth, and Lightning Countries.
**Baata:** a major city in the Earth Country. Nestled at the foot of the Yonoro Mountains, the mines of Baata are an important source of precious metals, most notably gold.

**Barrens, The:** a famous desert valley in the Dust Country, stretching across its western interior. Part of the Hiroi Desert. The Barrens are known for their intense dust storms, hidden scorpion caves, and flocks of vultures. Site of Dasutogakure and Chasm Lake.

**Battery Watch:** a major city in the Lightning Country. Drawing on the electromagnetic storms in the surrounding Cojira Mountains for power, Battery Watch is one of the most technologically advanced cities in the world. Protected from the ravages of Howling Scream Canyon by the Bulwark.

**Battle of Asan Reef:** a famous three-way battle across Asan Reef between Water, Lightning, and Whirlpool; one of the decisive battles of the Second Ninja War. Resulted in the catastrophic defeat and then destruction of the Whirlpool Country.

**Battle of Ashwarren:** a famous battle at Ashwarren between Fire versus Earth and Wind; one of the decisive battles of the Second Ninja War. Following a prolonged siege by the Earth and Wind forces led by Sougon Onoki, Ashwarren was close to being taken, but critical reinforcements from Konoha led by the Sannin arrived at the last moment to thwart Earth. Under dangerous pressure from the Sannin, Onoki was forced to retreat back into Rain. This battle represented the furthest extent of Earth advances into Fire during the Second Ninja War.

**Battle of the Asylum:** a battle for control of the Asylum between Akatsuki attackers and Rain and UC defenders, simultaneous with the Battle of Darkness Barrier. While the Akatsuki assault was thwarted by Densuke Tosuken and Maito Gai, much of the Asylum was nonetheless destroyed. Subsequent to this battle, Rain agreed to join the United Countries.

**Battle of the Beggars:** a famous battle across the Weeping Lands between Fire, Wind, Rain, and Waterfall versus Earth, River, and Water; one of the decisive battles of the Third Ninja War. Following the Battle of Kannabi Bridge, Haruno Arashi led a combined allied assault into Earth, but met fierce resistance from enemy forces led by Sougon Sawar. Withdrawing to Rain, Arashi re-assembled his army at a series of refugee camps along the Grass and Earth border. Sawar attacked but was forced to split his strength to engage effectively. Pitched fighting resulted in extreme casualties on both sides, and both Arashi and Sawar claimed victory. However, later events would prove that Earth was not equipped to win the war of attrition begun by this battle. So named for the many innocent refugees who were caught in the crossfire of the battle and killed.

**Battle of Darkness Barrier:** a battle at Caiaden between Rain, aided by the United Countries, and Akatsuki; the first major battle of the United Countries Embassy. Darkness Barrier was a partially completed fuinjutsu wall at Caiaden, meant to protect the city from outside attack or intrusion. Rain and UC ninja led by Mukai Hanzou and Senju Tsunade the Fifth Hokage launched a surprise attack on the Barrier in the middle of the night, successfully destroying it. Simultaneously, Akatsuki sneaked a counterattack force into Bliss, resulting in the Battle of the Asylum. Subsequent to this battle, Rain agreed to join the United Countries.

**Battle of Deathtrap Mountain:** a famous battle on Deathtrap Mountain between Earth and Fire; the last and decisive battle of the Third Ninja War. In an attempt to reverse the tide of the war, Seurin Shadowstar and Azuraki Hataya began to secretly develop the Annihilation Device, a superweapon with the power to destroy an entire country in a single instant. A shinobi task force led by Senju Tsunade and Katou Dan attacked Seurin Shadowstar’s hidden base at the top of Deathtrap Mountain for three days and three nights. Resulted in the death of Seurin, Hataya, and Dan, the destruction of the Annihilation Device, and the unconditional surrender of Earth the next day.

**Battle of the Gongs:** a famous battle at Lussajis between Earth versus Waterfall, River, and Fire; one of the decisive battles of the Second Ninja War. Attempting to counterattack Earth's westward offensive, Waterfall, River, and Fire forces led by Misain Seve landed an invasion fleet off the northern coast of Earth. The invasion was intercepted at Lussajis by Seurin Shadowstar. Heavily outnumbered, Seurin routed the enemy on the streets of the city with minimal civilian causalities, forcing Seve to retreat from Earth entirely. A duel between Seurin and Haruno Arashi ended the final
fighting. So named for the thousands of temple gongs that rang throughout the battle, warning the
people of the city to stay inside their homes.

**Battle of Five Kages:** also called the Battle of Fire Fan Bay. A famous battle at Sawara between all
five greater countries; the last and decisive battle of the First Ninja War. Generally regarded as the
largest single battle ever fought in the North. All five kages participated directly in the fighting, along
with nearly a dozen lesser village leaders and millions of regular soldiers. Catastrophically bloody,
the Battle of Five Kages resulted in the depletion of all major armies and the death of multiple village
leaders, including Senju Hashirama the First Hokage, paving the way for the Midsummer's Armistice
shortly afterward.

**Battle of Kannabi Bridge:** a famous battle at Kannabi Bridge between Earth, River, and Grass
versus Fire, Rain and Waterfall; one of the decisive battles of the Third Ninja War. A shinobi task
force led by Namikaze Minato attacked the Kannabi Bridge in Grass, a vital transportation link
across the Dreamstone River for Earth reinforcements. Resulted in the destruction of Kannabi Bridge
and opened up the Earth Country itself to a direct ground invasion.

**Battle of Kurenkara:** a famous battle at Kurenkara between Swamp and Earth versus Fire, Wind,
and Rain; one of the first and decisive battles of the Third Ninja War. Disregarding the Treaty of
Miyawe, a combined Fire, Wind, and Rain army spearheaded by Sarutobi Hiruzen the Third Hokage
invaded Swamp with the objective of preemptive conquest. Hastily assembled troops from Earth and
Swamp met the invasion at Kurenkara, but were utterly routed. Resulted in the fall of the Swamp
Country and opened an additional southern front between Earth and Wind.

**Battle of Red Rock Cliff:** a battle between two warring factions of Suna in Red Rock Cliff; the
second major battle of the United Countries Embassy. Sabaku Gaara the Fifth Kazekage fought
Ryokan Mukade for control of the village, aided by the United Countries and Akatsuki respectively.
Resulted in Mukade's death and the destruction of his isolationist faction. Subsequent to this battle,
Wind agreed to join the United Countries.

**Battle of Shikoke:** a famous four-way battle on the slopes of Mount Shikoke between Fire and Water; one
of the decisive battles of the First Ninja War. A Water invasion force led by all the Seven Swordsmen
of the Mist pushed deep inland into Fire. A Fire army led by Senju Tobirama and Sarutobi Hiruzen
marched to oppose them at Shikoke. Despite their efforts, the Water forces were winning the battle
when Mount Shikoke, an active volcano, began to erupt, drowning much of the Water army in rivers
of molten lava. This battle resulted in the retreat of Water across the Sea of Splinters and the end of
direct threats to the Fire homeland during the rest of the war.

**Battle of Silence:** a famous four-way battle on the outskirts of Caiaden between Earth, Wind,
Swamp, and River against Fire and Lightning against Rain against Grass and Waterfall; the largest
and decisive battle of the Second Ninja War. Unable to negotiate even a temporary alliance, badly
fractured enemy forces engaged the ascendant army of Sougon Muu the Second Tsuchikage. Despite
being outnumbered two to one, Muu used swift concentrated attacks to smash each enemy, one after
the other. While attacking the last army, the Fire forces led by Sarutobi Hiruzen the Third Hokage
and Shimura Danzou, Muu sacrificed his own life in order to ensure total victory. Utterly routed, the
losers no longer had the strength to challenge Earth and willingly accepted the Ceasefire offered by
the new Tsuchikage Sougon Onoki. The Battle of Silence is so named for the way the endless storms
above Caiaden cleared as soon as the fighting stopped, casting a pall of sudden silence over the
bloody battlefield.

**Battle of Taitan Temple:** a famous battle at Taitan between Lightning and Fire against Water; one
of the decisive battles of the Third Ninja War. With its enemies preoccupied on the western front
against Earth, Water launched an aggressive sea and land campaign against Lightning. A series of
quick victories brought Water armies led by Ningeni Yagura the Fourth Mizukage and Nobunaga
Kikuko directly to the doorstep of the capital city Taitan. Opposing them were Lightning forces led
by Arakida Moritake and Fire forces led by Namikaze Minato and Katou Dan. Kikuko spearheaded
an attack that reached all the way to Taitan Temple at the center of the city, but was turned back after
a night of fighting by the heroics of Dan. Their armies depleted, Yagura retreated back to Kirigakure,
but Kikuko was able to remain in Lightning as a guerrilla force until the Battle of the Witching Water forced her to return to defend Seija Island from invasion.

**Battle of Three Wolves:** a famous battle at the Three Wolves Mountains near Silla between the Silla Brotherhood and the transnational Shinobi Criminal Task Force led by Sougon Sawar. On the run, the Silla Brotherhood was trapped in the Three Wolves mountains and forced to engage in open combat. Resulted in the total destruction of the Silla Brotherhood; the Dancing Ninja was killed by Sawar in single combat, and any survivors were summarily executed.

**Battle of the Unbroken:** a legendary battle at the Samurai Bridge in Silla between Iron samurai and Senju clan ninja during the Age of Chaos. With the ranks of traditional samurai dwindling rapidly, the Iron Country was repeatedly defeated by mercenary shinobi and forced to cede territory to them, the Senju clan in particular. Reduced to a rump kingdom around Silla, a group of Iron samurai vowed to make a last stand at the Samurai Bridge. Calling themselves the Unbroken, they swore to prevent the Senju from crossing the bridge at any cost. All the samurai except one died, but in the end it was the ninja that fled. This was the first time that samurai had ever defeated ninja in battle.

**Battle of the Witching Water:** a famous battle in the Witching Water off the coast of Seija Island between Fire and Water; one of the last and decisive battles of the Third Ninja War. Attempting to end Water raids on their western coast, a Fire fleet led by Haruno Arashi and Uchiha Fugaku crossed directly through the Maelstrom to attack Water's main population centers on Seija Island. The bulk of Water naval power under Houzuki Mangetsu and Hoshigaki Kisame intercepted the attack but was defeated as a result of highly unusual weather conditions which caused the Maelstrom tempests to engulf the Water ships instead of the Fire ships. Resulted in the death of Mangetsu, the capture of Seija City, and the removal of Water as a major actor in the war.

**Battle of the Valley of the End:** a famous duel between Senju Hashirama and Uchiha Madara at the Valley of the End. Very little is known about this battle besides the final outcome: Hashirama was victorious and Madara was killed, never again to threaten world peace.

**Bayon:** the capital of Ru Daunu. The largest city by population in the world, Bayon is also considered the world's preeminent center for scientific research, technological innovation, and medical care.

**Bijuu:** eng. *tailed beast*. Legendary demons of unknown age and origin, though Kiyome tradition claims they were tamed by the Sage of Six Paths. Nine are currently known to exist in the North, each with a different numbers of tails. While long feared as uncontrollable forces of destruction, modern fuinjutsu has allowed powerful ninja to defeat and control the bijuu, usually as weapons of war. The nine bijuu are, in order: the Ichibi, the Nibi, the Sanbi, the Yonbi, the Gobi, the Rokubi, the Nanabi, the Hachibi, and the Kyuubi.

**Birthright Empire:** an ancient slave empire, centered at Sawara, which dominated the entire Northern continent for a thousand years. Eventually splintering due to a combination of weak leadership and defeats in various wars, it remains the crowning achievement of pagan civilization. The art, culture, and philosophy of the Birthright Empire are potent influences even to this day. Notable personages include Kishimo Jiraiya the Master, Okki of Kyouko the Bard, Hotaru Eshidae the Seer, and Emperor Sawar III the Great.

**Bitter Sea:** one of the five major seas in the North. An arctic ocean to the northwest, bordering Glacier and Lightning. So named for the bitter taste of the water.

**Blade's Light Valley:** a famous river canyon in the Bright Country. So named for the way that crystal deposits in the canyon walls glitter during daytime, like the edges of a thousand blades.

**Bliss:** also called Amegakure. The capital of the Rain Country and the hidden village of Rain. Originally founded at the beginning of the hidden village era as a peaceful republic, the city of Bliss was ravaged by the Ninja Wars and environmental collapse. Lord Mukai Hanzou emerged to assume dictatorial control and found Amegakure. Now a rusted city of metal skyscrapers from a bygone age, the village has returned to a position of influence. The northern end of the Sohkaido Road along the Haven River, though much of the road is no longer accessible. See *Ame*.

**Blood Country (ancient):** a powerful feudal kingdom in the Age of Blood. During the fall of the
Birthright Empire, the Uchiha clan, shoguns to the Birthright emperors, seized control of Sawara and founded the Blood Country in its place. Claiming mantle to the imperial legacy, a succession of Uchiha warlords attempted to reunite the North under their rule. This effort failed, first due to the strength of the neighboring Wood Country, and then to the coming of the Sage of Six Paths. The present-day Blood Country is named for this ancient kingdom. **Bloodline:** special jutsu passed down genetically within specific shinobi clans. Unlike clan jutsu, bloodlines cannot be stolen by outsiders. Bloodline jutsu are generally very powerful and the clans who possess them are often the leaders of a hidden village. However, due to their very power, these clans also face discrimination and occasional oppression. In order to maintain the power and purity of their bloodline, bloodline clans often forbid marriage outside the clan. Some clans have even adopted the practice of incest, marrying brother to sister, or father to daughter. See Glossary C for a list of bloodlines in WILL OF STONE. **Bloodthirst:** also called Chikgakure. The capital of the Blood Country and the hidden village of Blood. Founded in the aftermath of the Third Ninja War by Makoto Muro, Bloodthirst is one of the largest and most militant cities in the west. A city of black marble arches and red brick streets on the banks of the Dreamstone River, Bloodthirst has recently been destabilized by a conflict between Muro and followers of the cult religion of Jashin. See Chi. **Blossom Viewing Festival:** a major holiday in the Earth Country that celebrates the start of the spring planting season. During this time, Earth-kin gather in picnic parties around cherry trees to watch the cherry blossoms in full bloom. Usually observed in late March and early April. **BLOSSOMS:** a flower shop in Konoha owned by the Yamanaka clan. **BS:** short for "Before Sage." Under the AS calendar system, years are dated from 0 AS, the year of the Sage of Six Paths' return to the North. All years prior to 0 AS are marked as BS. **Bulwark, The:** a massive metal castle in the Lightning Country, near Battery Watch. The Bulwark protects Battery Watch from the chaotic electromagnetic storms inside Howling Scream Canyon. **Caiaden:** a major city in the Rain Country. The second largest city, after Bliss, and the headquarters of Akatsuki. One of the oldest cities in the North, Caiaden is littered with relics from each period in its history: first as a major commercial center of the Birthright Empire, then a famous military castle of the Blood Country, then a holy Kiyome jungle city, and now the war-torn slum which has the highest level of poverty in the entire world. Site of the Battle of Silence, the Massacre of Caiaden, and the Battle of Darkness Barrier. **Canaltown:** a major city in the River Country. Built on the northern coast of the Grasswave Sea, Canaltown is famed for its maze of meandering canals and fleets of water taxis; it is a very popular romantic destination. **Candlelit Monastery:** a holy Kiyome monastery in the Hiroi Desert in the Wind Country. Generally believed to be the place where the Sage of Six Paths wrote the Toso. **Canyon City:** a major city in the Earth Country, deep in the Dreamstone Mountains. So named for the steep canyon which bisects the city in two; each half is connected to the other by numerous bridges. **Cathedral of the Faith:** an ancient temple in Hiroshiki in the Earth Country. Founded as a Shiva cathedral dedicated to the worship of Atropus the Death-Judge, one of the Five Gods of Zen, but repurposed into a Kiyome sanctuary after the coming of the Sage of Six Paths. The largest religious complex in the Earth Country. **Ceasefire, The:** refers to the six year ceasefire between the Second and Third Ninja Wars from 498 to 504 AS. After the Battle of Silence ended in decisive victory for the Earth Country, Sougon Onoki the Third Tsuchikage unilaterally decided to cease hostilities with all parties. The losers quickly agreed in turn. Onoki attempted to use the Ceasefire to consolidate the territorial, military, and political gains made by Earth in the Second Ninja War. Through deft diplomacy he established a shinobi exchange program, in which ninja from other villages would come to Iwa to train and build cross-cultural relationships. He also organized the first international chuunin exam, held in Iwa in 500 AS. However, despite Onoki's diplomatic gestures, tensions steadily rose during the six year
Ceasefire. Rain, Grass, and Waterfall were all intent on reclaiming the territory they had lost to Earth. Sarutobi Hiruzen the Third Hokage saw Earth's growing power as a direct threat to the security of the Fire Country. Finally, the devastating Leper Sickness in 502 AS threw much of the continent into economic chaos. These tensions came to a head during the Treaty of Miyawe, a failed border agreement negotiated between Earth, Fire, Wind, and other parties in the months leading up to the Third Ninja War. Never more than an temporary truce, the Ceasefire is generally regarded either as a noble experiment, the precursor to a lasting peace, or as a sinister conspiracy that could only end in violence.

**Chakra:** eng. *spiritual energy*. A latent energy source in all living organisms, chakra can be harnessed and manipulated to alter the fabric of physical reality, up to and including the resurrection of the dead. Essential to even the most basic ninjutsu.

**Chakra Circulatory System:** the spiritual arteries, veins, and nodes by which chakra circulates through the body, parallel to the physical circulatory system.

**Chakra Control:** the ability to precisely manipulate chakra without wasting energy. Higher chakra control is effectively equivalent to having more chakra. Many jutsu, such as medical jutsu and genjutsu, also rely on chakra control.

**Chakra Gates:** eight spiritual gates within the chakra circulatory system that regulate and control the flow of chakra.

**Chasm Lake:** a large dry lake in the Barrens of the the Dust Country. Famous for the crust of smooth white salt which covers its surface.

**Chuunin:** the second rank in the shinobi hierarchy. Approximately 60% of all shinobi, chuunin are qualified to run solo missions and participate fully in the affairs of a hidden village. Chuunin are typically classified as "C rank".

**Chuunin Exam:** a high-stakes examination for genin who wish to be promoted to chuunin. Teams of genin enter the exam and attempt to complete a series of increasingly challenging tasks, culminating in a combat duel against other entrants; their performance is judged by a council of village elders in order to determine whether they meet the qualifications to become a chuunin. In the past, each hidden village held its own chuunin exam, but during the Ceasefire Sougon Onoki the Third Tsuchikage expanded the exam system to accept international entrants, a practice that has continued in the Postwar Period. Exams are held twice a year and rotate among each of the greater villages, with the exception of Iwagakure, which always hosts an independent chuunin exam annually; the current Iwa Chuunin Exam is its 54th incarnation.

**Chuunin Examiner:** a ninja in charge of designing, organizing, and administrating the chuunin exam. Chuunin exams typically have dozens of examiners drawn from many different hidden villages. However, the most important examiners are always jounin.

**Cirsa:** called the Life-Giver. One of the Five Gods of Zen, subsequently absorbed into Kiyome. The Lightning Goddess and the Goddess of Spirit. Generally depicted as a beautiful young woman with eyes shaped like twin lightning bolts, Cirsa is the goddess of instinct, creativity, and dreams. While popular with all Kiyome faithful, particular patrons of the Lightning Goddess include artists, lovers, and the young.

**Clan Jutsu:** secret jutsu possessed by certain ninja clans. Unlike bloodlines, clan jutsu can potentially be stolen by outsiders, and therefore are jealously guarded. See Glossary C for a list of clan jutsu in WILL OF STONE.

**Cojira Desert:** a large tundra desert in the north of the Lightning Country, beyond the Cojira Mountains. Site of Sakya.

**Cojira Mountains:** a large mountain chain in the Lightning Country which bisects it in two from west to east. The starting point of the Yasakani River. Site of Kumogakure, Battery Watch, the Sea of Clouds, the Bulwark, and Howling Scream Canyon.

**Confederacy:** an international political and military alliance established in opposition to the United Countries by Sougon Sawar the Fourth Tsuchikage. Closely related to the original Earth and Water alliance which was defeated in the Third Ninja War. There are currently four members of the
Confederacy: Earth, Water, Swamp, and Waterfall.

Curse of Rain: refers to the constant, uninterrupted rain which has been falling on the Rain Country since the latter days of the First Ninja War. Once the most fertile country in the whole North, Rain has been utterly devastated by this decades-long flooding of its environment. Similar to the storms in the Sea of the Sage and to the Maelstrom, the Curse of Rain is a permanent weather phenomena of unknown origin. Followers of Akatsuki believe that God has cursed the people of Rain for their sins.

Crusades: the violent religious wars between the Sage of Six Paths and his enemies for control of the North. Starting from Sawara, the Sage and his followers swept out in all directions, eventually conquering the whole world in the name of Kiyome. The Earth Country was the last to fall. An unprecedented historical event, the Crusades unified the North under one religion, one culture, and one language.

Daimyo: the feudal rulers of the countries in the North. Each country has its own nominal daimyo; however, in practice, hidden village leaders are far more politically powerful.

Darkness Barrier: a vast fuinjutsu barrier wall erected at Caiaden by Akatsuki, meant to protect Caiaden from outside attack and intrusion. Only partially completed before being destroyed by Rain and UC forces in the Battle of Darkness Barrier.

Day of Kindness: a major religious holiday in the Wind Country, celebrating the day that the Sage of Six Paths arrived in Sawara to spread the word of Kiyome. Kiyome worshipers fly decorative kites and shine lights into the night sky. Though the precise historical date is unclear, the Day of Kindness is generally observed on June 13th.

Day of Silence: a major holiday in Iwa that commemorates Earth’s victory in the Battle of Silence, the decisive battle of the Second Ninja War. Villagers abstain from both food and water, engaging instead in silent contemplative prayer; many visit Shinjuku Burial Ground and worship at the shrine of Sougon Muu in Katsu-ji Temple. Observed on May 3rd.

Deathtrap Mountain: a mountain in the Dreamstone Mountains of the Earth Country. Site of the Battle of Deathtrap.

December 7th Attack: an unprecedented terrorist attack against Konoha by Akatsuki and its duped allies in Suna, six months before the current year in 525 AS. Nomo Orochimaru assassinated the Fourth Kazekage and assumed his identity, manipulating Suna to attack Konoha. Simultaneously, he took on a false identity to form Otoagakure, in reality a collection of secret Akatsuki operatives. Under the guise of the 78th Konoha Chuunin Exam, Suna and Oto invaded Konoha and attempted to destroy it. While the attempt failed, Konoha was badly weakened, the Third Hokage was killed, and the postwar order was severely destabilized. Only the return of Senju Tsunade to lead Konoha, and her brokering of a dramatic alliance with Suna, was able to forestall another Ninja War.

Demiurge: an important concept in Southern philosophy and a central figure in the theology of the religious cult Jashin. The Demiurge is a artisan-like fashioner of the physical universe, often held by philosophers to be an evil demon in opposition to a benevolent god. The Demiurge embodies wickedness and the suffering of material existence.

Discourses: a famous philosophical work by Kishimo Jiraiya. Along with the Toso of Kiyome, it remains the foundation of modern scholarly education.

Doujutsu: eng. eye techniques. Refers to three bloodlines which grant special eyesight powers: the Sharingan, the Byakugan, and the Enshogan. Doujutsu are rumored to be descended from the Sage of Six Paths himself. See Eyes of the Three Secrets.

Dreamsteel: a special white steel alloy made from steel and melted dreamstone. Extremely strong, sharp, and durable; however, also very difficult and expensive to manufacture. Due to its great rarity, dreamsteel is reserved exclusively for aristocratic armor and weaponry, especially swords. There are as few as fifty known dreamsteel blades in existence, each worth a thousand times its weight in gold. The Masamune is the most famous such sword.

Dreamstone: a rare white stone found in the Dreamstone Mountains. Dreamstone has a number of unique properties, including extreme hardness, density, and lightness. When ground into powder and imbibed into the bloodstream, it also has powerful hallucinatory and narcotic effects. Coveted the
world over as a priceless military, architectural, and spiritual good. Dreamstone is of unknown origin; however, a popular theory holds that the stones are actually remnants of a huge meteor that crashed into the Earth Country in the distant past. The Overlook is the largest single piece of dreamstone known to exist.

**Dreamstone Glacier:** a huge glacial sheet covering the northern reaches of the Dreamstone Mountains, stretching over much of the Earth and Glacier Countries. The Dreamstone River originates as runoff melt from the Dreamstone Glacier.

**Dreamstone Mountains:** a great mountain chain in the west, stretching across the Glacier, Earth, and the Swamp Countries; the largest mountain chain in the world. Named after the eponymous dreamstones found within it. Site of Iwagakure, Canyon City, Kurenkara, the Dreamstone River Valley, the Dreamstone Glacier, the Dreamstone River, the Sagewood, the Scar, the Ice Spear, and Deathtrap Mountain.

**Dreamstone River:** a major river flowing down through the Earth, Swamp, Blood, and Steam Countries; the largest river system in the world by volume. Originates at the Ice Spear and empties into the Sea of Solitude at Jetswallow Beach. Notable areas along the Dreamstone River include the Dreamstone Glacier, the Dreamstone River Valley, the Scar, Iwagakure, Hanyu, Hiroshiki, Nethara, the Wraithglades, Izu, Kurenkara, Tanami, Bloodthirst, and Jetswallow Beach.

**Dreamstone River Valley:** a series of large canyons in the interior of the Earth Country, carved by the Dreamstone River. Site of Iwagakure and the Scar.

**Dymeter:** called the All-Seeing. One of the Five Gods of Zen, subsequently absorbed into Kiyome. The Wind God and the God of Mind. Generally depicted as a bearded old man with a set of golden scales, Dymeter is the god of justice, reason, and wisdom. While popular with all Kiyome faithful, particular patrons of the Wind God include intellectuals, politicians, and criminals.

**Elea:** the capital of the Crescent Country. The historic center of Hoka culture and art.

**Enishi:** eng. *fate*. An important concept in Kiyome and the Shiva faith from which it originally comes. Often used to explain human relationships, particularly the mysterious bonds of destiny that bind people together. Also refers to the transience of life and the romantic beauty of suffering.

**Endless Sea:** see Sea of the Sage.

**Eyes of the Three Secrets:** refers to the three most famous bloodlines in the world: the Sharingan, the Byakugan, and the Enshogan. All doujutsu, they are said to be descended directly from the Sage of Six Paths himself. So named for their unique abilities to see into the underlying fabric of Sharingan can see thought; the Byakugan can see spirit; and the Enshogan can see life. The Eyes of the Three Secrets are generally considered to be the strongest jutsu in existence.

**Far Harbor:** a major city in the Steam Country, bordering the Sea of Solitude. One of the most important port cities on the western coast.

**Fire Fan Bay:** also known as Haven Bay. A large bay at the mouth of the Haven River in Sawara. So named for its circular shape, which resembles a paper fire fan. Site of the Battle of the Five Kages.

**Firefly Nest:** an enclosed area in the Steam Gardens of Konoha filled with fireflies.

**Firefurnace:** a major holiday in Iwa that celebrates the village's founding by Sougon Uzaemo of the Furnace. Iwa citizens gather at the Overlook to watch fire performances and make public vows to defend the village in the coming year. Sougon Castle is also opened as a place of sanctuary during this time. Observed for two consecutive nights on December 17th and 18th.

**Five Gods of Zen:** also called the Godai. Refers to Khiton the Strength-Spinner, Tethis the Tear-Wiper, Dymeter the All-Seeing, Cirsa the Life-Giver, and Atropus the Death-Judge. The most important deities of traditional Zen, the Five Gods were absorbed into the Kiyome pantheon during the Crusades, reinterpreted as symbolic aspects of the one true God. They continue to be worshiped in many temples, placed on an equal pedestal to the Sage of Six Paths.

**Five Towers of Ashwarren:** a famous set of skyscrapers in Ashwarren. Often compared to the five fingers of an open hand grasping toward the sky.
**Floating World, The:** an ancient philosophical, religious, and aesthetic movement that celebrates death, enishi, and the meaningless pleasure of existence. Originating in the teahouses of Sawara during the last years of the Age of Blood, it was revived by the woodcutter artist Anayama Tokusai of Iwa during the Age of Chaos. Reached its apogee during the destruction of the Ninja Wars, and remains highly influential in the Earth Country, particularly among the upper classes.

**Fodder:** refers to non-shinobi soldiers. So named for their ineffectiveness in direct combat against shinobi. Despite their subordinate status, fodder make up the vast majority of traditional armies and are still necessary for the waging of large-scale military campaigns. Millions of fodder participated in the Ninja Wars on all sides, with casualty rates that approached 70%. Can also refer to weak or useless shinobi.

"**Forgetting Grass, The**": a famous poem fragment by Okki of Kyouko. Thought to be a full sonnet, only its last two lines survive to the present day: "The Forgetting Grass withers with frost/and no trace of it remains."

**Forehead Protector:** a steel headband plate that all shinobi receive upon graduation from the Ninja Academy. Inscribed with the symbol of their respective hidden village, forehead protectors are the most recognizable part of the ninja uniform.

**Forest of Death:** a ninja training ground in the Shadowspring Forest on the outskirts of Konoha. Filled with giant snakes and man-eating plants, among other dangerous lifeforms. Site of the second trial of the 78th Konoha Chuunin Exam.

**Founding Day:** a major holiday in Konoha that celebrates the village's founding by the Senju and Uchiha clans. Konoha citizens grow plants, visit Madara Cemetery, and watch a ceremonial parade which reenacts the history of the village. Observed on July 19th.

**Fuinjutsu:** eng. sealing techniques. A type of jutsu that seals physical objects or energy within another kind of object, such as a sealing scroll. Generally requires precision chakra control.

**Fukushima River:** a major river flowing through Crescent and Bright. Originates in the interior of the Bright Country and empties into the Sea of Splinters at Elea. Notable areas along the Fukushima River include Linan and Elea.

**Fulling Block:** a flat stone block covered with paper, used to beat clothes smooth. When pounded with a wooden stick, the fulling block makes a distinctive musical sound. Traditionally popular in the Earth Country.

**Genin:** the first and lowest rank in the shinobi hierarchy. Despite being the most accessible rank, genin make up only approximately 20% of all shinobi due to an extremely high attrition rate. It is said that by the age of twenty a genin should be either promoted, retired, or dead. Upon graduation from the Ninja Academy, genin are placed in four-man teams with two other genin and a jounin sensei; the jounin sensei is responsible for guiding the genin in the ways of shinobi life. Genin are typically classified as "D rank."

**Genjutsu:** eng. illusion techniques. A type of jutsu that alters the flow of chakra in the target's nervous system, creating false sensory illusions and other kinds of mind manipulations. Generally requires precision chakra control.

**Gentaijutsu:** eng. illusion-body techniques. A fighting style that combines genjutsu and taijutsu, famously used by Senju Tsunade the Fifth Hokage.

**Giving of Fire:** a major holiday in the Fire Country that celebrates the end of the harvest season, as well as the name of the dance that is performed during this holiday. Fire-kin gather for thanksgiving feasts, light bonfires, and dance beneath the moon.

**Gobi:** eng. five-tailed dolphin horse. One of the nine bijuu.

**Godai, The:** see Five Gods.

**Golden River:** a river in the Steam Country, one of the major distributaries of the Dreamstone River. So named for the mineral-rich yellow silt which is deposited on its banks during annual floods. Notable areas along the Golden River include Steam City and the Steam Fields.

**Grasswave Sea:** one of the five major seas in the North. A small ocean to the northeast, bordering
River, Sound, Iron, and Lightning. So named for the huge blooms of green algae which float on the sea like beds of rippling grass. Flows into the larger Bitter Sea to the west and north.

**Great Naruto Bridge:** see Tazuna Bridge.

**Greater Country:** refers to the five major political and military powers in the North. They are, in order of relative size: the Fire Country, the Earth Country, the Lightning Country, the Water Country, and the Wind Country.

**Greater Village:** refers to the five hidden villages based in the Greater Countries. They are, in order of relative size: Iwagakure, Konohagakure, Kumogakure, Kirigakure, and Sunagakure.

**Grebe:** a freshwater diving bird unique to the Earth Country. In summer, female grebes display ornate plumage with orange and red frills.

**Greensun:** a major city in the Grass Country. So named for the distinctive color the sun seems to tint as it rises over the endless Manoatari Plains.

**Hachibi:** eng. *eight-tailed giant ox*. One of the nine bijuu. Currently sealed into the cloud-nin jinchuriki Juukan Bee.

**Hand Seals:** special hand movements that ninja use to help them perform jutsu. Hand seals exploit the density of tenketsu in the hands, which allows for a very precise kind of chakra manipulation that is otherwise far more difficult, if not impossible.

**Hanyu:** a major city in the Earth Country. Located along the Dreamstone River. Hanyu is famed for the ancient stone fortifications which pockmark its borders, many of which date back to the Age of Glory.

**Hashirama Square:** a famous square in the center of Konoha, at the base of Hokage Mountain and bordering the Steam Gardens. Named after Senju Hashirama the First Hokage.

**Haven River:** a major river flowing down through River, Waterfall, Grass, Rain, and Wind; the largest river system in the world by length. Originates in the Haven River Basin and empties into the Sea of the Sage at Sawara. Notable areas along the Haven River include the Haven River Basin, Kawagakure, Saitoi, Miyawe, Takigakure, Torrentrage Falls, Reel, the Manoatari Plains, Ratai, Rinan, the Weeping Lands, Amegakure, Sagehall, Yayoi, Soruto, Sawara, and the Haven River Delta.

**Haven River Basin:** a massive drainage basin that covers most of the River Country. Its many tributary streams and lakes flow together to form the main stem of the Haven River. Site of Saitoi, Canaltown, and Kawagakure.

**Haven River Delta:** a large river delta at the mouth of the Haven River. Centered around Sawara, the Haven River Delta is by far the most prosperous region in the Wind Country, containing all its wealthiest cities with the single exception of Soruto. The major center of agricultural production in the southwest.

**Hidden Village:** see Part Four of Glossary A above.

**Hiroi Desert:** a great desert in the Wind and Dust Countries; the largest desert in the North. Formed by the Hiroi Mountains to its south and west, which prevent moisture from reaching further into the interior. Site of Sunagakure, the Candlelit Monastery, the Barrens, Dasutogakure, and Tanami.

**Hiroi Mountains:** a large mountain chain in the southwest of the Wind Country, bordering the Sea of Splinters. Prevents sea-borne moisture from reaching further into the interior, forming the Hiroi Desert.

**Hiroshiki:** the capital of the Earth Country. Located on the banks of the Dreamstone River, Hiroshiki is of the oldest cities in the world and the spiritual center of the ancient Shiva religion. Site of the Cathedral of the Faith and the Midsummer's Armistice.

**Hoath:** the capital of the United Republic of Genoa. Built on a small peninsula at the northern tip of Genoa, it is by far the densest and wealthiest city in the world. One of the world's leading centers of industrial production.

**Hoka:** a race of dwarf-like pygmy people. Though predominately clustered in the Crescent Country, a diaspora of Hoka immigrants is scattered throughout every country in the world. The Hoka are
known for their distinctive artistic and intellectual achievements, including the construction of Ashwarren, Sougon Castle, Taitan, Battery Watch, and Takigakure.

**Hokage:** eng. *fire shadow*. The military leader of Konohagakure and one of the most powerful ninja in the world.

**Hokage Mountain:** a large mountain in Konoha, located behind Hashirama Square and rising out of the Steam Gardens. Encloses a large underground hydrothermal vent. So named for the five Hokages of Konoha which are caved into its side.

**Hokage Tower:** a large circular mansion built into the side of Hokage Mountain. The executive headquarters of Konoha as well as the personal residence of the Hokage.

**Hokuto:** a major city in the Fire Country. Located along the Naka River, Hokuto is known for its extensive series of coal mines, thus its nickname, "The City of Soot."

**Honjo Laboratory:** a major scientific research laboratory located in the Forest of Death near Konoha, affiliated with Kiushu University. Founded and directed by the physicist Honjo Soeru.

**Howling Scream Canyon:** a canyon in the Cojira Mountains of the Lightning Country. So named for the intense electromagnetic storms which constantly surge along its walls. Separated from Battery Watch by the Bulwark.

**Hunter-nin:** a "hunter ninja." Refers to ninja that are specially trained to hunt down, capture, and assassinate missing-nin. Each of the greater villages has multiple teams of hunter-nin.

**Huyuuga Affair:** refers to the failed abduction of Huyuuga Hinata by Kirazu Fushimi in 514 AS; one of the final incidents of the Undeclared War. Under pretense of a peace treaty between Konoha and Kumo, Fushimi tried to kidnap Hinata in order to obtain the secrets of Byakugan, but was killed by Huyuuga Hiashi in the attempt. Kumo denied all allegations of kidnapping and demanded Hiashi's corpse as recompense for the death of Fushimi. Hiashi's twin brother Hizashi willingly sacrificed himself in Hiashi's place, forestalling open war and protecting the Huyuuga clan.

**Ice Spear, The:** a great mountain on the border of Earth and Glacier, part of the Dreamstone Mountains. Located in the Gorge of Stones in the Scar. The tallest mountain in the world and the origin point of the Dreamstone River.

**Ichibi:** eng. *one-tailed raccoon dog*. Also called Shukaku. One of the nine bijuu. Currently sealed into the jinchuriki Sabaku Gaara the Fifth Kazekage.

**Ishii Island:** a large island in the River Country, located in the Grasswave Sea. Site of the city of Mistra.

**Isle of Regrets:** a small island in the Blood Country, located in the Sea of Solitude off the coast near Jetswallow Beach. So named for its role as a prison for exiled imperial officials in the days of the Birthright Empire.

**Iwa:** see Part One of Glossary A above.

**Izu:** a major city in the Swamp Country; the second largest after Kurenkara. A cosmopolitan city on the banks of the Dreamstone River, Izu is famous for its leisurely culture and distinctive open-air architecture. The adopted home of Sir Thayan Egbert of Izu.

**Jade River:** a major river flowing through Fire. Originates in the Ash Mountains and empties into the Sea of Splinters at Onya. Notable areas along the Ash Mountains, the Ash Valleys, Kiushu, Shikoke, Mount Shikoke, and Onya.

**Jashin:** eng. *Evil Design*. An upstart religious cult of the Postwar Period, especially in the southwest. Influenced by Southern philosophy. Jashinists believe that the Kiyome god which created the physical world is actually an evil demon called the Demiurge, the antithesis of the one true god. The physical world, therefore, must be utterly destroyed in order to free living souls from the suffering of material existence. Jashinists led by Gifuu Hidan recently attempted to take over the Blood Country, but were defeated and expelled after a violent power struggle with Makoto Muro.

**Jikuuukan Jutsu:** eng. *space-time techniques*. A powerful type of jutsu that allows the user to manipulate the space-time continuum.

**Jinchuriki:** eng. *tailed beast hosts*. A ninja with the soul of a bijuu sealed inside him, used by
hidden villages as weapons of mass destruction. Jinchuriki face discrimination and isolation throughout their lives. Known jinchuriki include Sabaku Gaara the Fifth Kazekage, the stone-nin Nimiya Roshi, the stone-nin Azuraki Han, the waterfall-nin Rokusho Fuu, the cloud-nin Juukan Bee, and the leaf-nin Uzumaki Naruto.

**Jinzu:** a major city in the Water Country. Located on an island in the Sea of Splinters, Jinzu is known for both the beauty of its natural landscape as well as for xenophobia of its inhabitants.

**Jounin:** the fourth rank in the shinobi hierarchy. Approximately 10% of all shinobi, jounin are highly experienced and powerful leaders, responsible for training genin and for undertaking the most dangerous missions. Jounin are typically classified as "A rank".

**Jutsu:** eng. technique. Special ninja techniques. See Glossary C for a list of jutsu in WILL OF STONE.

**Kage:** the fifth and highest rank in the shinobi hierarchy. Typically refers to the leaders of the five greater villages; however, leaders of lesser villages can also be considered kages. The kages of the greater villages are: the Hokage, the Tsuchikage, the Raikage, the Mizukage, and the Kazekage.

**Kami:** eng. spirit. In traditional Shiva theology, kami are the spirits inherent in all nature. Kami act as personified deities for specific objects, places, or ideas. Many clans have special guardian kami, often the spirits of their revered ancestors. The worship of kami has been incorporated into Kiyome customs throughout the Earth Country.

**Kasai:** a major city in the Water Country, located on a small island in the Sea of Splinters. Kasai is known for its exceptionally beautiful beaches and idyllic coral coves. Site of the Kasai Stone.

**Kasai Stone:** a famous magic stone in Kasai in the Water Country. An inextinguishable red fire burns on the surface of the white stone, throwing up billows of hissing steam whenever the tide from the beach rises sufficiently to touch it. The Kasai Stone is considered a holy Zen relic.

**Kazekage:** eng. wind shadow. The military leader of Sunagakure and one of the most powerful ninja in the world.

**Kekkei Genkai:** eng. bloodline limit. See Bloodline.

**Khiton:** called the Strength-Spinner. One of the Five Gods of Zen, subsequently absorbed into Kiyome. The Fire God and the God of War. Generally depicted as a tall man with a burning spear in his left hand and a sprouting seed in his right hand, Khiton is the god of strength, masculinity, and wrath. Popular patrons of the Fire God include soldiers, shinobi, and young men.

**Kinjutsu:** eng. forbidden techniques. Jutsu that have been banned from ordinary use due to the danger of self-injury, the likelihood of excessive collateral damage, or the violation of ethical laws.

**Kinsei:** eng. symmetry. An important concept in Kiyome and the Zen faith from which it originally comes. Used to describe the cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

**Kishimon:** the capital of the Wave Country. One of the most important fishing and whaling ports in the Sea of Splinters. Site of Namigakure and Tazuna Bridge.

**Kiushu:** a major city in the Fire Country. Located in the Ash Valleys along the Jade River, Kiushu is the preeminent center of religious and intellectual learning in the North. Site of Kiushu University and the White Temple.

**Kiushu University:** an university in Kiushu in the Fire Country. Widely considered the most prestigious university in the North.

**Kiyome:** eng. Cleansing. The dominant religion in both the North and South, a monotheist faith that preaches kindness towards others and the equality of all men under God. Founded by Senju Hagoromo the Sage of Six Paths in 0 AS. While easily accepted in the South, Kiyome was met with fierce resistance in the North due to its prohibition on slavery. Against these many enemies the Sage spearheaded a violent religious campaign called the Crusades, eventually culminating in total victory. In the process of its adoption in the North, Kiyome was influenced by the existing religions of Zen and Shiva, and absorbed a number of pagan beliefs and customs, including the philosophy of Kishimo Jiraiya and the Five Gods of Zen. The sacred text of Kiyome is the *Toso*, a collection of 114 sutras authored by the Sage himself. Important Kiyome concepts include: "kinsei," "onnai," and
"enishi."

**Kiyomen:** a follower of Kiyome.

**Koi:** a colorful carp fish popular in the Earth Country for ornamental purposes. Often raised in koi ponds.

**Koi Pond:** special ponds for raising koi, common in Earth Country gardens.

**Koizumi:** the capital of the Tea Country, located at the mouth of the Marchpool River. Koizumi is known for its distinctive landscape of rounded limestone hills.

**Konoha Chuunin Exam:** refers to the 78th Konoha Chuunin Exam. Under the guise of this chuunin exam, Suna and Oto invaded Konoha and attempted to destroy it during the December 7th attack.

**Kunoichi:** a female ninja. Approximately 15% of all shinobi are kunoichi.

**Kurenkara:** the capital of the Swamp Country. Situated in a small triangle between the Dreamstone River to the south and east, the Dreamstone Mountains to the north, and the Wraithglades to the west, Kurenkara is one of the most geographically diverse places in the world. An industrial city, is a major source of iron and steel in the North. Site of the Battle of Kurenkara.

**Kusanagi:** the legendary dreamsteel sword of the Sage of Six Paths. Forged for the Sage by the great Earth blacksmith Mitarashi Montonobu; whereabouts currently unknown.

**Kyouko:** the capital of the Water Country. Located at the mouth of the Sanzu River on Seija Island, Kyouko is by far the largest city in Water, and the most important trading port in the North.

**Kyuubi:** eng. *nine-tailed demon fox*. Also called the Kyuubi Kitsune. The most powerful and infamous of the nine bijuu. Feared for thousands of years as an unstoppable force of destruction, the Kyuubi was tamed by Senju Hagoromo the Sage of Six Paths and sealed away in a magical urn. After the Sage's death, control of the Kyuubi passed to his sons, but they fought amongst each other and the Kyuubi escaped. Many years later, Senju Hashirama the First Hokage was able to tame the Kyuubi once more, placing it under the control of Konoha. Currently sealed into the jinchuriki Uzumaki Naruto.

**Kyuubi Attack:** a devastating attack by the Kyuubi against Konoha fifteen years ago, in 511 AS. While the Kyuubi was eventually defeated by the self-sacrifice of the Fourth Hokage, the attack weakened Konoha to the extent that Kumo began a series of border skirmishes shortly after. See *Undeclared War*.

**Lake of Eternity:** a large lake in the Waterfall Country. So named for its isolated pastoral splendor.

**Leper Sickness:** an epidemic plague which swept the North in the latter years of the Ceasefire, in 502 AS. So named for the painful leprosy-like symptoms that afflicted its victims, including skin lesions and the detachment of body appendages, prior to death by respiratory arrest. An extremely virulent air-borne infection, the Leper Sickness originated in the slums of Sawara and quickly spread to much of the rest of the continent. Resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of people, especially in the Wind, Earth, and Lightning Countries, and the crippling of hundreds of thousands more. The economic and social chaos caused by the Leper Sickness played a significant role in the unraveling of the Ceasefire.

**Lesser Country:** refers to any country in the North that is not one of the five Greater Countries. While significantly weaker than any Greater Country, Lesser Countries greatly vary in power and influence.

**Lesser Village:** refers to the hidden villages based in the Lesser Countries. Like the countries they are based in, Lesser Villages greatly vary in power and influence.

**Lighthouse, The:** a famous lighthouse built at the center of Suna. Meant to represent a symbol of hope in times of trial and darkness.

**Linan:** the capital of the Bright Country, located along the Fukushima River. Linan is also known as the "City of Flying Birds" for the large flocks of migrating birds which nestle within its walls during the summer season.

**Lover's Eve:** a major holiday in the Earth Country that celebrates romantic love. Based on the folk
story of Goyu and Akasaka, legendary lovers who were turned into stars so they could live forever, yet are destined to meet only once a year. People write love poems on strips of colored papers and hang them on bamboo branches. Lovers meet at night to exchange gifts and watch the stars. Observed on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, usually in mid August.

**Lussajis:** a major city in the Earth Country, located on the banks of Lussajis Lake. The largest settlement in the northeast of earth, Lussajis is strategically key to the control of Earth's coastal borders. The city is known for its steep mountainous terrain and hundreds of Kiyome temples. Site of the Battle of the Gongs.

**Lussajis Lake:** the largest lake in the Earth Country. A holy place according to Shiva tradition; it is said that bathing in the deep green waters of Lussajis Lake will cure any disease. Site of Lussajis city.

**Madara Cemetery:** the main military cemetery of Konoha, specially reserved for ninja killed in the line of duty. Named after Uchiha Madara the Bloodhawk, one of the founders of Konoha.

**Maelstrom, The:** an area of famously violent storms in the Sea of Splinters, between the Wave and Water Countries. Similar to the storms in the Sea of the Sage and to the Curse of Rain, the Maelstrom is a permanent weather phenomena of unknown origin. Generally considered impassable by ships, a Fire fleet led by Haruno Arashi and Uchiha Fugaku was able to dramatically cross the Maelstrom during the Battle of the Witching Water.

**Mammoth Caves:** a famous cave system in the mountains of the United Republic of Genoa. So named for their immense size and for the bones of the woolly mammoths which were discovered inside.

**Manoatari Plains:** a vast prairie in the Grass Country, by far the largest in the North. Manoatari Plains is famous for the roaming buffalo herds which graze within its endless valleys of green grass. Site of Rinan, Kusagakure, Greensun, Ratai, the Dreamstone River, and Kannabi Bridge.

**Marchpool River:** a river in the Tea Country. Originates in the rolling hills of the Tea Country and empties into the Sea of Splinters at Koizumi.

**Massacre of Caiaden:** an infamous massacre committed by Akatsuki at Caiaden in 520 AS, part of the ongoing civil war in the Rain Country. Upon seizing control of Caiaden for the first time, Akatsuki troops led by Nomo Orochimaru the White Snake systematically eliminated every person in the whole city who was suspected to be sympathetic to Lord Mukai Hanzou. Tens of thousands were brutally slaughtered.

**Medical Jutsu:** a type of jutsu associated with healing and medical care. Generally requires precision chakra control.

**Midsummer's Armistice:** the armistice that ended the First Ninja War. Refers both to the agreement itself and to the three year period of uneasy truce which followed. Negotiated in three days during the Midsummer Festival in Hiroshiki, the Midsummer's Armistice called for the mutual demobilization of standing armies and for neutral diplomatic arbitration to resolve international disputes. In practice, however, there were no mechanisms to enforce the provisions of the armistice.

**Midsummer Festival:** a major religious holiday in the Earth Country that honors the ancestral spirits. Originally a Shiva tradition, the Midsummer Festival was incorporated into Kiyome but still follows the lunar calendar. Earth-kin return to their hometowns, clean the graves of their ancestors, and make votive offerings. On the last day of the festival, paper lanterns are floated down rivers to help guide the ancestral spirits back to the world of the dead. In modern times, the Midsummer Festival is also celebrated with large public carnivals, including dancing, games, and food. Usually observed for three days in late July.

**Mino:** a town in the Fire Country, near the border between Fire and Wind. Controversially razed by Fire authorities in an attempt to control the spread of the Leper Sickness.

**Minoji Road:** a major road in the Earth Country, running east to west from Iwa to Hiroshiki. Closely follows the flow of the Dreamstone River.

**Missing-nin:** a "missing ninja." Refers to ninjas that have renounced their loyalties to their hidden
Branded as criminals and traitors, and targeted for death by teams of hunter-nin, missing-nin often attempt to band together to ensure their mutual survival. Akatsuki is the most infamous such organization.

Mistra: a major city in the River Country. Located on Ishii Island, Mistra is the largest trading and fishing port in the northeast.

Miyawe: the capital of the Waterfall Country. Located along the Haven River, Miyawe is a prosperous industrial city, specializing in the producing of textiles and consumer products. Site of the Treaty of Miyawe.

Mizukage: eng. water shadow. The military leader of Kirigakure and one of the most powerful ninja in the world.

Moon Festival: a major holiday in the Earth Country that celebrates the end of the harvest season. Earth-kin gather to view the full moon, give thanks for a successful harvest, and eat cakes filled with red bean paste. Based on the lunar calendar, the Moon Festival is usually observed in late September.

Mount Enasei: a dormant volcanic mountain in the Fire Country, overlooking Ashwarren. Part of the Ash Mountains. The largest mountain in the east, rivaled only by the Three Wolves. It is said that the view from the top of Mount Enasei is one of the most magnificent in the world.


Naka River: a river flowing through Fire; one of the tributaries of the Jade River. Notable areas along the Naka River include Hokuto, the Shadowspring Forest, Konohagakure, and Shikoke.

Naka Shrine: a small Kiyome shrine in Konoha, located along along the Naka River. Dedicated to the Sage of Six Paths and Tethis the Tear-Wiper.

Nanabi: eng. seven-tailed horned beetle. One of the nine bijuu. Currently sealed into the waterfall-nin jinchuriki Rokusho Fuu.

Nethara: a major city in the Earth Country. The second largest city, after Hiroshiki, and its most important center of industrial production, especially for armor and weaponry. Located along the Dreamstone River.

New Year's Day: a major holiday throughout the world since the coming of the Sage of Six Paths. Dedicated to the coming of the new year, it is celebrated with family reunions, the ringing of temple bells, and fireworks. People are expected to exchange gifts with friends, co-workers, and family members. Observed on January 1st. See Spring Festival.

Nibi: eng. two-tailed monster cat. One of the nine bijuu.

Ninja: an elite soldier with the ability to use chakra jutsu. First appearing during the Age of Revelation, the ninja quickly became the primary instrument of warfare in the North; over time, they eventually grew in influence to dominate all aspects of society. Most ninja operate within the confines of the hidden village system. However, there is also a sizable minority of missing-nin. Approximately 25,000 ninja are currently active in the North.

Ninja Academy: a special school to train children in the ninja arts. Each hidden village has its own Ninja Academy. Upon successful graduation from the Ninja Academy, academy students become full-fledged shinobi, receiving a forehead protector and attaining the rank of genin.

Ninja War, First: a major military conflict fought in the North from 478 AS to 488 AS. Despite seventeen consecutive years of peace after the Sixty Clan Conference, tensions between the Greater Countries steadily rose as each attempted to jockey for political supremacy. War was seen as an increasingly likelihood, especially in Iwagakure. The Shadowstar Earthquake in 472 AS, which devastated the Earth Country, exposed Earth's economic vulnerability and highlighted the strategic importance of the resource-rich lands to the east. In response to an aggressive buildup of Earth armies along their shared border, Hattori Oosawa the Second Kazekage preemptively invaded the Valley Country in 478 AS, precipitating the entry of all the Greater Countries into the First Ninja War. During the ensuing ten years of world conflict, a complex web of shifting alliances prevented any one country from seizing the advantage, causing the war finally to stalemate at the Battle of Five
Kages. Having achieved none of their strategic objectives and exhausted in manpower, all parties agreed to a negotiated truce at the Midsummer's Armistice in 488 AS. The bloodiest war since the Crusades of the Age of Revelation, the First Ninja War resulted in the death of millions of soldiers and the destruction of the Valley Country, henceforth renamed the Rain Country. Notable events during the First Ninja War include the Battle of Shikoke and the Battle of Five Kages.

**Ninja War, Second:** a major military conflict fought in the North from 491 to 498 AS. Dissatisfied with the Midsummer's Armistice that ended the First Ninja War, Sougon Muu the Second Tsuchikage pursued a policy of aggressive re-armament. Widely regarded as the primary instigator of the Second Ninja War, which began a scant three years later in 491 AS, Muu's basic strategy was to attack his enemies to the east with sudden overwhelming force. This approach yielded great initial success, as Earth armies and their allies in Wind, Swamp, and River conquered a wide swath of territory all the way up to Ashwarren itself. However, Earth momentum was reversed in the Battle of Ashwarren by an alliance between Fire and Lightning. Hopes of a quick end to the conflict gave way to bitter trench warfare, with the Rain Country as its focal point. Muu's eventual victory in the decisive Battle of Silence, at the cost of his own life, ensured a favorable outcome for Earth when the war ended by mutual ceasefire in 498 AS. The Earth Country enlarged its territory to engulf much of the Rain, Grass, and Waterfall Countries; and Iwa's military power grew to rival even that of Konoha. Notable events during the Second Ninja War include the the Battle of the Gongs, the Battle of Ashwarren, the Battle of Asan Reef, and the Battle of Silence.

**Ninja War, Third:** a major military conflict fought in the North from 504 to 509 AS. The origins of the Third Ninja War are highly controversial; both Sougon Onoki the Third Tsuchikage and Sarutobi Hiruzen the Third Hokage are generally acknowledged to play some critical role in breaking the six year Ceasefire. Whatever the cause, the Third Ninja War proved to be both the shortest as well as the most devastating war of all. Earth and its allies in Water, Swamp, Sound and River faced off against Fire and its allies in Lightning, Wind, Waterfall, Grass, and Rain. Despite an initial Fire victory at the Battle of Kurenkara in 504 AS, Earth and Water were able to rally their forces and strike deep into enemy territory in Wind and Lightning. However, Onoki's military blunders caused his forces to lose several decisive battles, most notably at Kannabi Bridge. Allied armies successfully invaded Water, removing it from the conflict, and then Earth, threatening Iwa itself. After a failed attempt to reverse the tide of the war in the Battle of Deathtrap in 509 AS, Earth was forced to surrender unconditionally. Notable events during the Third Ninja War include the Battle of Kurenkara, the Battle of Taitan Temple, the Shion Affair, the Battle of Kannabi Bridge, the Battle of the Beggars, the Battle of the Witching Water, and the Battle of Deathtrap.

**Ninjutsu:** eng. *ninja techniques*. A type of jutsu that uses chakra to manipulate the fabric of physical reality; the most distinctive element of ninja combat. Many kinds of jutsu, such as fuinjutsu or medical jutsu, fall under the broad umbrella of ninjutsu.

**Nintaijutsu:** eng. *ninja-body techniques*. A fighting style that combines ninjutsu and taijutsu, famously used by Juukan Aae the Fourth Raikage and Sougon Charasu of Fire and Ice.

**Noh:** a kind of musical theatre popular in the Earth Country. In keeping with Earth-kin aesthetics and the emphasis on enishi, Noh actors traditionally wear masks and rehearse only once before their highly stylized performances.

**Noroisen Forest:** a famous forest in the interior of the United Republic of Genoa. Often used as a setting for Genoan fairy tales or historical fiction.

**North, The:** refers to the Northern Continent; the canon continent of the NARUTOverse. See Part Three of Glossary A above.

"**The Old Woman**": a famous poem by Okki of Kyouko. It reads: "A life in vain./My looks, talents faded/Like these cherry blossoms/Palling in the endless rains/That I gaze out upon, alone."

**Onnai:** eng. *kindness*. The central concept of Kiyome, as expressed in the saying "Kindness at all cost." The primary duty of all Kiyome followers and the true essence of God. Kiyomen are exhorted to love their fellow man, protect the weak, and care for the suffering.

**Onya:** a major city in the Fire Country. Located at the mouth of the Jade River along the Sea of
Splinters. Noted as a center of high-end industrial products, such as plastics and electronic machinery.

**Otter Straits**: a series of narrow straits that separate the Wave Country from the Fire Country. So named after the many otters which inhabit it. Crossed by Tazuna Bridge.

**Peace Day**: also called Victory Day. A major holiday that commemorates the end of the Third Ninja War, celebrated throughout the North but especially in the victorious countries. People participate in parades, drink plum sake, and visit military graveyards. Observed on August 29th.

"**Pillar of Nine Demons**": a famous sculpture by Hotaru Eshidae. Depicts nine animal-like demons, often interpreted to be the bijuu, resting on an immense marble pillar. While partially destroyed by fire, the majority of the sculpture survives in Sawara.

**Pine Wastes**: a large forest in the Sound Country. So named for the black pine trees which dominate its landscape. Site of Otogakure.

**Piraeus**: the capital of the Ilithian Empire. The largest and busiest commercial port in the world. Piraeus is also known as the "the Impregnable City" for its extensive network of military defenses.

**Piraean River**: a major river flowing through the Ilithian Empire; the largest river by both length and volume in the South. Empties into the Sea of the Sage at Piraeus.

"**Pirate and the Princess, The**": a popular folk song celebrating the scandalous romance between the Dancing Ninja and Kikuchi Orino, the daughter of the Fire daimyo. According to the song, the Dancing Ninja kidnapped Orino in order to hold her for ransom, but ended up falling in love with her instead.

**Prewar Period**: a long period of peace in the North prior to the First Ninja War. Dated from the Sixty Clan Conference in 461 AS to the start of the First Ninja War in 478 AS. Marked by the absence of wars of any kind, major or minor. Notable events during the Prewar Period include the Shadowstar Earthquake.

**Postwar Period**: the current period of peace in the North. Dated from to the end of the Third Ninja War in 509 AS. Marked by the absence of major wars or revolutions; however, various minor conflicts have continued. Notable events during the Postwar Period include the Ashwarren Accords, the Kyuubi Attack, the rise and fall of the Silla Brotherhood, the Undeclared War, the rise of Akatsuki, and the December 7th Attack.

**Prayer of Life**: also called the Prayer of Death. A traditional Earth funeral prayer, mixing Zen, Shiva, and Kiyome traditions. It reads: "Fleeting alas are moments./subject to rise and fall./Having begun, they cease/their subsiding is bliss./So life goes on and on."

**Ramen Ichiraka**: a ramen stand in Konoha. Run by Yashiro Teuchi.

**Raikage**: eng. lightning shadow. The military leader of Kumogakure and one of the most powerful ninja in the world.

**Ratai**: a major city in Grass. Located along the Haven River in the Manoatari Plains. Ratai is the largest exporter of packed meat in the North.

**Red Rock Cliff**: a famous canyon in Suna, renowned for the hanging tombs that cover its cliff faces. Site of the Battle of Red Rock Cliff.

**Reel**: a major city in the Waterfall Country. The vast salt mines at Reel are an important source of the world's salt supply.

**Rinan**: the capital of the Grass Country. Located along the Haven River in the Manoatari Plains. In addition to being a major exporter of packed meat, Rinan is the major transportation hub in the continental center, with as many as one out of three international travelers passing through Rinan.

**Rokubi**: eng. six-tailed slug. One of the nine bijuu.

**ROOT**: a special division of ANBU within Konoha, controlled by Shimura Danzou the Whisperer.

**Roulette**: a gambling game that involves betting on a spinning wheel. Very popular among ninja.

**Ryo**: the prevailing currency in the North. Originally a hard money currency in the form of gold and silver coins, though in the Age of Enmity ryo most often circulates as paper notes. Ryo is backed by a strict gold standard in all the greater countries of the North.
"The Ruined Castle": a famous poem by Kishimo Jiraiya. It reads: "Countries may fall/But their rivers and mountains remain./When spring comes to the ruined castle/The grass is green again."

**Sagae Pass:** a narrow mountain pass into the Earth Country from the Swamp Country, along the Dreamstone River. One of the only accessible overland routes into the Earth Country.

**Sage of Six Paths:** refers to Senju Hagoromo, the founder of Kiyome and the creator of chakra jutsu. See Glossary B.

**Sage’s Peace:** the one hundred year period of peace in the North which followed the Crusades. Ended immediately upon the death of the Sage of Six Paths.

**Sage’s Wheel:** refers to the flag of the Sage of Six Paths. Usually depicted as a spiraling golden eye within a six-sided wheel, though the colors may vary. The Sage's Wheel is the emblematic religious symbol of Kiyome.

**Sagehall:** a major city in the Wind Country, along the banks of the lower Haven River. So named for the large Kiyome temple complex at its center.

**Saitoi:** the capital of the River Country. Located in the heart of the Haven Riven Basin, Saitoi is the major economic hub of the entire northeast coastal region, and the wealthiest city per capita in the North.

**Sakon Dam:** a large dam in the Water Country on the Sanzu River; one of the largest dams in the world. Sakon Dam provides the majority of the Water Country’s electricity through hydropower.

**Sakya:** a major city in the Lightning Country, located in the Cojira Desert north of the Cojira Mountains. Sakya is famous for its unique spices, sheep milk, and other food products.

**Samurai:** a traditional warrior caste in the days of the Birthright Empire, and later on during the Age of Blood. Supplanted by ninja as the premier military force during the Age of Chaos, samurai now only exist within the confines of the Iron Country. However, many of their traditions live on in the modern shinobi spirit.

**Samurai Bridge:** a famous drawbridge in Silla. Renowned as the site of the Battle of the Unbroken.

**Sand Siblings:** refers to the three children of Sabaku Tojuen and Sabaku Karura. They are, from oldest to youngest: Sabaku Temari, Sabaku Kankuro, and Sabaku Gaara.

**Sanbi:** eng. three-tailed giant turtle. One of the nine bijuu. Previously sealed into the jinchuriki Ningeni Yagura the Fourth Mizukage.

**Sannin:** eng. three legendary ninja. Refers to Team Sarutobi, composed of Wakanura Jiraiya, Nomo Orochimaru, and Senju Tsunade. The Sannin are renowned for their feats on the battlefield of the Second and Third Ninja Wars.

**Sanzu River:** a river flowing through the Water Country. Originates in the mountains near Jinzu and empties into the Sea of Splinters at Kyouko. Damed by Sakon Dam.

**Sawara:** the capital of the Wind Country. The oldest continually inhabited city in the North, Sawara was, at various times, the capital of the Birthright Empire; the home of the Zen Prophets; the capital of the ancient Blood Country; and the launching point of the Crusades. While it remains the largest city in the North, Sawara has drastically declined in political and economic influence since the founding of the hidden village system. The southern end of the Sohkaido Road. Site of the Battle of Fire Fan Bay.

**Sea of Clouds:** a famous valley in the Cojira Mountains of the Lightning Country. So named for the way the clouds seem to float upon the mountains like an ocean. Site of Kumogakure.

**Sea of Solitude:** one of the five major seas in the North. A large ocean to the west, bordering Earth, Steam, Blood and Wind. So named for its vast emptiness and very calm waters.

**Sea of the Sage:** also called the Endless Sea. One of the five major seas in the North; the largest ocean in the world. Borders Wind and Fire to the North, and the Ilithian Empire and the United Republic of Genoa to the South. Covered in violent, permanent storms of unknown origin. While historically very difficult to navigate, travel across the Sea of the Sage has become much more frequent in recent years. So named for the Sage of Six Paths, who crossed the sea in order to bring Kiyome from the South to the North.
Sea of Splinters: one of the five major seas in the North. A large ocean to the east, bordering Fire, Tea, Wave, Iron, Bright, Lightning, Water, and Coral. So named for the numerous islands which dot its face, like scattered drops in a mist.

Seija City: a major city in the Water Country. Located on Seija Island near the Witching Water. Famed for its lobsters and shellfish; widely considered the preeminent seafood destination in the North.

Seija Island: a large island in the Water Country, located in the Sea of Splinters. The political, economic, and military center of Water. Site of Kyouko, Seija City, Kirigakure, the Sanzu River, Sakon Dam, and the Witching Water.

Sekensei: a major city in the Iron Country. Founded during the Crusades as a Kiyome temple city, Sekensei is now a military base used primarily for samurai training. Site of the Tree of Sekensei.

Seppuku: a type of ritual suicide in which the victim cuts open his own stomach with a sword. Originally part of samurai tradition, seppuku remains a popular practice among disgraced or captured ninja.

Seven Swordsmen of the Mist, The: refers to an elite group of Kirigakure ninja. The village's most powerful shinobi after the Mizukage, each of the Seven Swordsmen is distinguished by a unique blade which is passed down from generation to generation. Current members of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist include Hachiko the Hound, Keel the Annihilator, and Nobunaga Kikuko the Spinster.

Shadowspring Forest: a vast forest in the interior of the Fire Country. Site of Konohagakure and the Forest of Death.

Shadowstar Comet: a mysterious comet that streaked across the world in 472 AS. So named for its unique invisibility; only detectable through its blotting effect on the stars in the night sky. Believed by some to be a black hole.

Shadowstar Earthquake: a massive earthquake in the Earth Country in 472 AS, coinciding with the Shadowstar Comet. Devastated wide swaths of the Earth Country and threw the northwest into economic chaos. Widely considered one of the causes of the First Ninja War. Sougon Seurin, born during this earthquake, received the nickname Seurin Shadowstar.

Shikoke: a major city in the Fire Country. Located at the base of Mount Shikoke where the Naka River flows into the Jade River. Site of the Battle of Shikoke.

Shinigami: the God of Death. An important figure in the Zen and Shiva pantheons; subsequently incorporated into Kiyome belief. As the symbolic representation of death, the Shinigami is central to a number of spiritual jutsu.

Shinobi: a ninja. Also refers to male ninjas.

Shion Affair: refers to the unsolved disappearance of the infant Uchiha Shion from Konoha during the Third Ninja War. The subject of multiple conspiracy theories.

Shinobi Criminal Task Force: a transnational shinobi task force created by Sougon Sawar to investigate, attack, and ultimately destroy the Silla Brotherhood. Formed in the wake of the botched kidnapping of the courtesan Enyo Kayura. The Shinobi Criminal Task Force successfully confronted the Silla Brotherhood in the Battle of Three Wolves and wiped them out totally. Among the members of the Shinobi Criminal Task Force numbered such illustrious personages as Hatake Kakashi, Kasuga Darui, Sougon Charasu, Ryokan Mukade, Akasun Baki, Densuke Tosuken, and Hiroshi Keel. Considered a precursor to the United Countries.

Shiva: the old pagan religion of the Earth Country. Strongly influenced by Zen during the days of the Birthright Empire, but remained distinct from it. Supplanted by Kiyome during the Age of Revelation, though many Shiva traditions survive in modern Kiyome practice. Shiva is known especially for its emphasis on ancestor worship, the veneration of an extremely large pantheon of kami, and the binding concept of "enishi" which governs human affairs.

Shogun: a warlord with dictatorial power in the latter years of the Birthright Empire, far more in fact than the nominal Emperor. Now used to refer to any shadow power behind the throne. The five
kages, in particular, operate as de facto Shogun warlords.

**Silla:** the capital of the Iron Country, near the Three Wolves. One of the oldest cities in the world and the only city in the North which has never been conquered or ruled by ninja. Founding headquarters of the Silla Brotherhood.

**Silla Brotherhood:** an infamous pirate gang of the Postwar Period, led by the Dancing Ninja and joined by several notorious missing-nin and outlaws, including Hyuuga Haru the White Hare, Arakida Moritake the Confessor, Kid Swan, Lee Sheeptamer, Butcho the Moonbandit, and Sir Thayan Egbert of Izu. Formed in Silla in the aftermath of the Third Ninja War and dedicated to the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Engaged in a spree of criminal operations up and down the entire Northern continent, including the kidnapping of the Fire daimyo's daughter. Also undertook charity missions to aid the downtrodden. Destroyed in the Battle of Three Wolves by the transnational Shinobi Criminal Task Force led by Sougon Sawar the Fourth Tsuchikage. To this day, still hugely popular with the civilian populace, and often romanticized in stories and songs, such as "The Pirate and the Princess."

"Sins of Blood": a famous poem by Kishimo Jiraiya. It reads: "And now it goes as it goes/and where it ends is Fate./And neither by bathing flesh/nor tipping cups of wine/nor shedding burning tears can you/wash away the Sins of Blood."

**Six Sacred Clans:** refers to the six ancestral clans of Iwa. They are: the Azuraki clan, the Chuzuru clan, the Bakura clan, the Haghira clan, the Noatari clan, and the Sougon clan. Powerful forces since the Age of Revelation, the Six Sacred Clans dominate village politics even today.

**Six Sacred Animals:** refers to the six traditional holy animals of the Earth Country. They are: the Deer, the Lion, the Wasp, the Spider, the Bat, and the Slug.

**Sixty Clan Conference:** a meeting between sixty different ninja clans in Ashwarren in 461 AS. Generally considered the beginning of the Age of Enmity, also called the hidden village era. Assembled by Senju Hashirama, the Sixty Clan Conference formalized the relationships between hidden villages and their respective countries, as well as established a rough balance of power between different villages. Territory, clans, jutsu, and even captive bijuu were divided up like slices of a cake; the world order thus created remains essentially unchanged to this day.

**Sohkaido Road:** a major road in the Wind and Rain Countries, stretching nearly a thousand kilometers between Sawara and Bliss. The northern section of the Sohkaido Road is submerged beneath the Weeping Lands and no longer accessible.

**Soruto:** a major city in the Wind Country, along the banks of the upper Haven River. Flooded by fertile sediment from the Haven River, Soruto is a major center of grain production in the North and the wealthiest city in Wind.

**Sougon Siblings:** refers to the three children of Sougon Onoki and Sougon Karumi. All legendary "S rank" shinobi, the Sougon Siblings are renowned as much for their bitter conflicts with each other as for their extraordinary talents. They are, from oldest to youngest: Sougon Seurin, Sougon Sawar, and Sougon Shirasu.

**South, The:** refers to the Southern Continent. See Part Three of Glossary A above.

**Special Jounin:** the third rank in the shinobi hierarchy. Approximately 10% of all shinobi, special jounin are more skilled than chuunin but do not have fully rounded leadership skills required of jounin. Special jounin are typically classified as "B rank."

**Spice Isles:** an island chain in Ru Daunu. Historically the world's most important center for spice production, though this role has been supplanted in recent years by other cities such as Hoath and Sakya.

**Spice Road:** see Whale Road.

**Spiritual Jutsu:** a special type of jutsu that invokes the power of the realms beyond the ordinary world. Spiritual jutsu transcend the limitations of physical reality, making possible feats such as immortality and the resurrection of the dead. They are considered among the most powerful jutsu in existence.
Spring Festival: also called Little New Year. Celebrates the start of the new year according to the lunar calender. Though superseded by New Year's Day in the "After Sage" calendar system, the Spring Festival is still a major holiday in the Earth Country. Roasted soybeans are scattered around houses and temples to drive out demons, sickness, and bad luck. Usually observed in early February. See New Year's Day.

Squad 1: refers to Konoha Squad 1, the strongest and most prestigious ANBU team in Konoha. Its current members are: the Captain, Rhino, Ink, and Honeybee.

Steam City: the capital of the Steam Country. Located in the Steam Fields along the Golden River, Steam City is the largest center for steam-based machine production in the North.

Steam Gardens: a forest park in Konoha, located by the base of Hokage Mountain. Built over a series of boiling hot springs, which fill the Steam Gardens with steam and heat. Site of the Firefly Nest.

Steam Fields: a large area covered with geothermal vents in the Steam Country. So named for the steam that ripples up from the boiling pools around the vents. Site of Steam City, Joukigakure, and the Golden River.


Summons: magical animals that shinobi summon to the battlefield using the Summoning Technique. Before summoning any given animal species, a ninja must first sign a Summoning Contract with that species. A powerful animal summon can easily turn the tide of a battle or even an entire war. See Glossary C for a list of summons in WILL OF STONE.

Summoning Contract: a contract between a species of magical animals and a shinobi.

Sutra: a chapter of a religious text, such as the Toso or the Zen scriptures.

Sutra 15: a famous sutra from the Toso. Its most famous lines read: "There is not even a moment of calmness/In the heart of this passing life/The wind is already blowing/Through the hollow of our bones./Oh, God, we yearn for Kindness—/Kindness at all cost."

Taijutsu: eng. body techniques. A type of jutsu that uses physical attacks and movement to damage opponents' bodies.

Taitan: the capital of the Lightning Country. Located in the rolling valleys of the lower Yasakani River, Taitan is famed as the birthplace and ancestral home of Kishimo Jiraiya. One of the major centers of steel production in the North. Site of the Battle of Taitan Temple.

Tailed Beast: see Bijuu.

Tanami: the capital of the Dust Country. A small, poor city along the Dreamstone River, Tanami is known as perhaps the world's preeminent hotbed for criminal activity.

Tazuna Bridge: a large bridge that crosses the Otter Straits to link the Wave and Fire Countries. Terminates in the Wave Country at Kishimon. Originally named the Great Naruto Bridge, after the genin Uzumaki Naruto for his role in the construction of the bridge. Later renamed Tazuna Bridge by the Wave government.

Team 7: refers to the defunct Team Kakashi, composed of Uzumaki Naruto, Uchiha Sasuke, and Haruno Sakura. Originally intended to be the next leadership team of Konoha, but dismantled when Sasuke became a missing-nin.

Team 10: refers to Team Asuma, originally composed of Nara Shikamaru, Yamanaka Ino, and Akimichi Chouji. After Shikamaru was promoted to chuunin in the 78th Konoha Chuunin Exam, Shikamaru was replaced with Shimura Anake.

Tempest Eye: a small lake in the Weeping Lands of the Rain Country. So named for the strange whirlpool motion of the lake water, like a swirling eye.

Tenketsu: eng. chakra pressure points. Nodes along the chakra circulatory system from which chakra can be released and manipulated.

Tethis: called the Tear-Wiper. One of the Five Gods of Zen, subsequently absorbed into Kiyome. The Water Goddess and the Goddess of Peace. Generally depicted as a crying woman with
outstretched hands, Tethis is the goddess of kindness, femininity, and love. Popular patrons of Water Goddess include mothers, priests, and the downtrodden.

**Third Training Ground:** a shinobi training ground in Konoha, located at the edge of the Shadowspring Forest.

**Three Wolves, The:** a famous mountain in the Iron Country. So named for its snowy crown which is shaped like a giant three-sided wolf head. Site of the Battle of Three Wolves.

**Tidewatch Keep:** a major city in the Water Country, located on a small island in the Sea of Splinters. So named for the massive defensive fortress which rises high above the city bluffs.

**Torrentrage Falls:** a famous waterfall in the Waterfall Country; the largest waterfall by height and volume in the North. Created by a series of cliffs along the Haven River, Torrentrage Falls is so named for the violent roar of the river as it falls hundreds of feet to the ground. Site of Takigakure.

**Toso, The:** eng. The Struggle. The central religious text of Kiyome, which Kiyomen consider the word of God. Believed to have been written by the Sage of Six Paths himself at the Candlelight Monastery. The Toso is composed of 114 sutras divided into thousands of individual verses; it records the Sage's personal journey of revelation to understand Kindness at all cost, as well as his exhortations for others to do the same.

**Treaty of Miyawe:** a failed peace agreement in 504 AS between Earth, Fire, Wind, and various lesser countries in the months leading up to the Third Ninja War. Negotiated personally by the Third Tsuchikage, the Third Hokage, and the Third Kazekage at Miyawe, it called for the return of large tracts of land to Rain, Grass, and Waterfall by Earth, in exchange for demilitarization of the new borders. The treaty was voided when Fire, Wind, and Rain invaded Swamp in the Battle of Kurenkara later that year.

**Tree of Sekensei:** a famous banyan tree in Sekensei in the Iron Country. Planted by the Sage of Six Paths himself during the city's founding, it has come to symbolize the enduring strength of Kiyome. The Tree of Sekensei is the largest tree by total weight in the North.

**Tsuchikage:** eng. earth shadow. The military leader of Iwagakure and one of the most powerful ninja in the world.

**Turtle Islands:** a series of small islands in the Water Country; part of Asan Reef. So named for the giant sea turtles which arrive at the islands every mating season to lay their eggs.

**Twelve Guardian Ninja:** a group of elite Konoha shinobi who acted as the personal fighting force of the Fire daimyo during the Postwar Period. Known especially for their role in rescuing the kidnapped Fire princess Kikuchi Orino from the Silla Brotherhood. Now disbanded, former members of the Twelve Guardian Ninja include Sarutobi Asuma and Wakanura Chiriku.

**UC:** short for the "United Countries."

**Uchiha Massacre:** refers to the betrayal and murder of the entire Uchiha clan by Uchiha Itachi in 519 AS. The sole survivor of the Massacre, Itachi's younger brother Sasuke, has vowed revenge on Itachi at all costs.

**Ukiyo:** a fermented dark tea grown in the Earth Country, famous for how its flavor intensifies and changes with age. Old ukiyo teas often smell strongly of camphor.

**Unbroken, The:** a group of legendary Iron samurai during the Age of Chaos. So named for their unyielding determination and loyalty to the old ways in the face of ninja domination. Defeated the Senju clan in the Battle of the Unbroken.

**Undeclared War, The:** a cold war between Konoha and Kumo at the beginning of the Postwar Period, from 512 AS to 514 AS. While allies and victors in the Third Ninja War, Konoha was weakened by the Kyuubi Attack and Kumo aggressively pressed its advantage. A series of border raids quickly escalated into full-blown skirmishes and furious threats on both sides. However, Juukan Aae the Fourth Raikage never dared to declare open war, and a stable peace treaty was eventually negotiated by Uchiha Fugaku the Calculator. Notable events during the Undeclared War include the Hyuuga Affair.

**United Countries:** an international political organization dedicated to the aim of maintaining world
peace and facilitating understanding between different peoples. Conceived and established by Senju
Tsunade the Fifth Hokage following the December 7th attack. There are currently three members of
the United Countries: Fire, Wind, and Rain.

**United Countries Embassy:** a diplomatic mission from Konoha to other ninja villages, with the
goal of recruiting new members to the United Countries. After traveling through Fire, River,
Waterfall, Grass, Rain, Wind, Swamp, and Earth, the United Countries Embassy arrived in
Iwagakure a disappointing three countries strong.

**Untouchable:** a popular name for the outcast caste during the days of the Birthright Empire and the
Age of Blood. Lower even than slaves in the caste order, untouchables performed spiritually unclean
tasks such as digging graves and butchering meat. After caste discrimination was prohibited in
Kiyome doctrine by the Sage of Six Paths, most untouchables were gradually integrated into the
general population. However, some untouchable traditions have survived in the Earth Country.
Usually disgraced soldiers or criminals, untouchables are segregated in their own villages and
prohibited from direct contact with normal members of Earth society.

**Uruwashai:** the capital of the Glacier Country. Located deep within the Dreamstone Glacier,
Uruwashai is less a city than it is a collection of small tribal outposts, protected from the hostile
outside environment by thick walls of melting ice.

**Uzushiogakure:** the former hidden village of the Whirlpool Country. Destroyed in the Second Ninja
War. See *Whirlpool Country*.

**Valley Country:** see *Rain Country*.

**Valley of the End:** a valley on the border between the Fire and Sound Countries. Known as the site
of the Battle of the Valley of the End.

**Wailing Caverns:** a famous cave system in the Dreamstone Mountains of the Glacier Country. So
named for the shrieking sound made by the wind as it rushes through the narrow caves.

"**Watermill at Onden**": a famous woodcut by Anayama Tokusai. Depicts the watermill at Onden
Barrier in Iwa. Originally kept in Tokusai's house in Iwa; whereabouts currently unknown.

"**Weapons of War**": a shinobi weapons and armor shop in Suna. Specializes in puppets and other
high-end weapons.

**Weeping Lands:** a vast flooded plain in the Rain Country. Formerly a series of fertile river valleys,
the Weeping Lands were created by the Curse of Rain which caused a constant flood of rain to
destroy the soil. Site of Bliss, Tempest Eye, and the Haven River.

**Westlake:** a large lake in the Crescent Country. So named for being the largest inland body of water
that is west of Taitan.

**Westlake Monastery:** a famous monastery on the shores of Westlake in the Crescent Country;
generally considered the oldest surviving monastery in the world. A place of spiritual refuge for the
young Kishimo Jiraiya.

**Whale Road:** an important trade route across the Sea of the Sage between the North and South.
Considered the only safe way to cross the Sea of the Sage, the "road" is made up of a series of small
islands and storm deadzones. These deadzones are notoriously erratic, often changing from year to
year, and a skilled navigator is essential to any successful crossing. During the days of the Birthright
Empire, navigators charted the changes by following herds of whales, from which the road takes its
name. Despite its inaccessibility, the Whale Road was historically the only trade route between the
two continents, making possible the exchange of different goods, culture, and technology. In the Age
of Enmity, the Whale Road has been somewhat superseded by more direct routes, but remains vitally
important. The Whale Road is also known as the Spice Road in the North, after its most famous
product. Originates in the South at the cities of Piraeus and Hoath, and terminates in the North at the
cities of Sawara and Kyouko.

**White Temple:** a Kiyome temple in Kiushu in the Fire Country; the most important temple in the
continental center. Headed by the monk Wakanura Chiriku.

**Whitefish:** a blind white fish found in the caves of the Earth Country.
**Whitewarren:** a major city in the Glacier Country. Located on the northern coast of Glacier by the Bitter Sea, Whitewarren is by far its largest city. A significant trading port and a major departure point for whaling expeditions into the Bitter Sea.

**Witching Water, The:** a long strait along the southern coast of Seija Island, flowing into the Sea of Splinters. One of the two terminal points of the Whale Road in the North. So named for the strange echoes made by the cliff walls along the strait, like the muttering of witches.

**Witherwood, The:** a large forest in the Blood Country. So named for the parched and withered appearance of the forest's extensive birch trees.

**Wood Country:** see *Fire Country*.

**Woodcut:** a type of artwork that is carved into wood. Anayama Tokusai is the most famous woodcut artist in history.

**Wraithglades:** a famous swamp of bone-like ash trees in the west of the Swamp Country, along the banks of the Dreamstone River. Said to be haunted with ghosts.

**Yakiniku Q:** a restaurant in Konoha. Popular with young shinobi.

**Yasakani:** a major city in the Lightning Country. Located in the Cojira Mountains near the origin point of the Yasakani River. The city's mines are a major supplier of the world's rare earth minerals.

**Yasakani River:** a major river flowing through Lightning. Originates in the Cojira Mountains near Yasakani and empties into the Sea of Splinters.

**Yashio:** a major city in the Tea Country. Located on the coast by the Sea of Splinters, Yashio is famed for its extremely rare and extremely expensive red tea.

**Yayoi:** a major city in the Wind Country. Located along the upper Haven River, Yayoi is traditionally considered the midway point of the Sohkaido Road. An important nexus of gang and criminal activity in the west.

**Yonbi:** *eng.* four-tailed gorilla. One of the nine bijuu. Currently sealed into the stone-nin jinchuriki Nimiya Roshi.

**Yonoro Mountains:** a large mountain chain in the Earth Country. Located along its western border, the Yonoro Mountains divides Earth from Waterfall, Grass, and Rain on the other side. Site of Baata.

**Yudaru:** the capital of the Coral Country. As the launching point for leisure cruises into Asan Reef, Yudaru is one of the largest tourist destinations in the east.

**Zen:** the old pagan religion of the Birthright Empire. Supplanted by Kiyome during the Age of Revelation, though many Zen traditions survive in modern Kiyome practice. Zen is known especially for its caste-based theology, its division of the physical and spiritual worlds into five elements as represented by the Five Gods of Zen, and its emphasis on the binding concept of "kinsei" which governs the cycle of life and death.

**Zen Prophets, The:** the high priests of Zen, with the sole right to interpret the Zen sutras and to govern the religious beliefs of the Zen faithful. Destroyed by the Sage of Six Paths during the Crusades.
Glossary B: Characters

Chapter Notes

This is a special glossary. To continue to the actual story, skip to Chapter 31.

Table of Contents:

I. Characters
II. Shinobi Strength Levels
III. Chuunin Exam Teams

I. CHARACTERS:

Note: the symbol [*] means the character is deceased as of Chapter 31.

Amegakure [Rain Village]:
Ajiro Yanagi: genin on Team Pou; kunoichi.
Densuke Tosuken: called the Chameleon; the Ghost of Rain; the Reaper's Blade. A famous "S rank" ninja. Jounin sensei of Team Tosuken. Hanzou's student.
Deshii Konan: "S rank" missing-nin from Ame. Member of Akatsuki. See Others.
Junichiro Tenshe: genin on Team Tosuken.
Kazuraki Matsudake: genin on Team Pou.
Kyoroku Erima: genin on Team Tosuken; kunoichi.
Mukai Aumono: genin on Team Tosuken. Hanzou's grandson and Mamoru's son.
Mukai Mamoru [*]: only son of Hanzou. Aumono's father. Assassinated ten years ago under mysterious circumstances.
Nichiren Pou: jounin sensei of Team Pou.
Ozawa Yahiko [*]: missing-nin from Ame. Member of Akatsuki. Killed by Mukai Hanzou during the Postwar Period.
Sakone Nasu: genin on Team Pou.
Yoshitomo Nagato: "S rank" missing-nin from Ame. Member of Akatsuki. See Others.

Chigakure [Blood Village]:
Gifuu Ashan: genin on Team Muro.
Gifuu Hidan: "S rank" missing-nin from Chi. Member of Others.
Makoto Mazu: genin on Team Muro. Muro's son.
Totomi Bunta: genin on Team Muro.
Dasutogakure [Dust Village]:
Ashuju Ryua: genin on Team Ikoma. Ikoma's nephew.
Ashuju Nyoko: called the Sandsnake; Nyoko Noseless. Founder of Dasutogakure. The Dasutokage. Ikoma's older brother.
Ashuju Chiri: genin on Team Ikoma. Originally an orphan outcast, adopted into the Ashuju clan by Ikoma.
Ashuju Yokota: genin on Team Ikoma. Originally an orphan outcast, adopted into the Ashuju clan by Ikoma.

Hyogakure [Glacier Village]:
Konoe Naraku: genin on Team Youko. Denzae's grandson.
Kozumi Saotome: genin on Team Youko. Youko's great-nephew.
Uraouji Memei: genin on Team Youko. Mana's younger sister.

Iwagakure [Stone Village]:
Azuraki Naishu: genin on Team Shonagon. Hataya and Han's younger brother.
Azuraki Han: Hataya's younger brother. Jinchuriki of the Gobi, the five-tailed dolphin horse.
Bakura Orajuchi: genin on Team Sawar. Shibito's son. Suchi and Bachi's younger brother.
Bakura Shibito [*]: jounin and member of the Iwa High Council. Father of Kurotsuchi, Kurobachi, and Orajuchi. Killed by Namikaze Minato during the Battle of Kannabi Bridge.
Chuzuru Deidara: "S rank" missing-nin from Iwa. Member of Akatsuki. See Others.
Chuzuru Pimi: genin on Team Zen; kunoichi. Deidara's younger sister.
Enyo Kayura [*]: famous courtesan at the Earth daimyo's court at Hiroshiki. Sougon Sawar's lover and Sougon Semele's mother. Killed shortly after giving birth to Semele by the outlaw Lee Sheeptamer.
Haghira Geigin: genin on Team Sawar. Doi's son.
Haghira Ikkyun: Doi's younger brother. Geigin's uncle.
Hamaguchi Zeze: genin on Team Chegga.
Iranki Okita: called the Fearless. Jounin and member of the Iwa High Council. Hero of the Third
Ninja War.

**Iwanu Gende**: genin on Team Chegga. Ittan's nephew.

**Iwanu Ittan**: chuunin. Gende's uncle.

**Kamizuki Manyou**: genin on Team Zen.

**Kasukutsei Gyusen**: genin on Team Shonagon.

**Momo**: Seurin's pet cuckoo and personal summon.

**Nimiya Roshi**: jounin and Jinchuriki of the Yonbi, the four-tailed gorilla. Umenia's son.

**Nimiya Umenia**: proprietor of Inaho Teahouse. Roshi's mother.

**Noatari Chusei**: genin on Team Jidaei. Ran's son and Zen's nephew.

**Noatari Ran**: jounin and member of the Iwa High Council. Chusei's father and Zen's brother.

**Noatari Zen**: jounin sensei of Team Zen.

**Omaatsu Shonagon**: jounin sensei of Team Shonagon.

**Sougon Charasu**: called Charasu of the Inferno; the Sun's Shadow. "S rank" ninja and member of the Iwa High Council. Third oldest of the Sougon Siblings. Famously loyal to his older brother Sougon Sawar. Leader of the team that stole the Annihilation Heart.

**Sougon Chegga**: jounin sensei of Team Chegga. Sosano's second-cousin.

**Sougon Heike**: a boy of ten. Iwa Ninja Academy student and ninja prodigy. Shirasu's son and Razu's half-brother.

**Sougon Joruri**: chuunin. Sosano's older cousin.

**Sougon Karumi**: matriarch of the Sougon clan; failed kunoichi. Onoki's wife and older sister; Shuichi's older brother. Uzaemo's daughter and Muu's niece. Mother of the Sougon Siblings. Sosano's grandmother.

**Sougon Mari**: jounin and Iwa ANBU Commander; kunoichi.

**Sougon Moya**: chuunin; kunoichi. Sosano's older cousin.


**Sougon Nachi [†]**: Sosano's second-cousin and strategic specialist. Member of the team that stole the Annihilation Heart. Killed by Haruno Sakura in the Battle of Red Rock Cliff.

**Sougon Onoki [†]**: called Onoki of the Third Light; the Appeaser. The Third Tsuchikage. Karumi's husband and younger brother; Shuichi's older brother. Uzaemo's son and Muu's nephew. Father of the Sougon Siblings. Deposed by Sawar after Iwa's defeat in the Third Ninja War and forced to commit seppuku.

**Sougon Razu**: chuunin; kunoichi. Shirasu's daughter and Heike's half-sister.

**Sougon Sawar**: called the Sun Breaker; the Second Son; the Lightslayer; Sawar of the Scar. The Fourth Tsuchikage and head of the Sougon clan. An "S rank" ninja. Second oldest of the Sougon Siblings. Seurin's wife and brother. Sosano and Semele's father. Enyo Kayura's lover. Sensei of Team Sawar.

**Sougon Semele**: a girl of ten. Iwa Ninja Academy student. Sawar's daughter by the courtesan Enyo Kayura and Sosano's half-sister.


**Sougon Shirasu**: called the Sword of Winter; the Black Sheep; the Widower. "S rank" ninja and member of the Iwa High Council. Wields the legendary sword Masamune. Youngest of the Sougon Siblings. Mari's husband. Razu and Heike's father.

**Sougon Shuichi**: retired "S rank" jounin ninja. Famous for exploits in all three Ninja Wars. Karumi and Onoki's younger brother. Uzaemo's son and Muu's nephew. Sosano's great-uncle. Believed to be suffering from dementia.
Sougon Sosano: called the Prince of Dawn. "S rank" genin on Team Sawar; considered the strongest genin in the world. Sawar and Seurin's son. Semele's half-brother.

Sougon Shune [*]: special jounin and physicist. Member of the team that stole the Annihilation Heart. Sawar's cousin. Committed suicide after a failed assassination attempt on Senju Tsunade.

Sougon Uzaemo [*] called Uzaemo of the Furnace; the Sower. The First Tsuchikage. Founder of Iwa and Shogun of the Earth Country. Muu's older brother; Karumi, Onoki, and Shuichi's father. Died of natural causes on the eve of the First Ninja War.

Tenka Himoro: genin on Team Shonagon.

Tohoku Iwata: a merchant of great wealth.

Tokako Matsushita: called the Stonecrusher. Jounin and influential member of the Iwa High Council. Hardline supporter of Sougon Sawar.

Tosetsu Domon: genin on Team Zen.

Zukuka Wamiko: genin on Team Chegga.

Joukigakure [Steam Village]:

Eguchi Shishio: genin on Team Dakun.

Ishikawa Goemon: called the Tinker; Mad-Face Goemon. Renowned inventor and the leader of Joukigakure. The Joukikage.

Naemura Dakun: jounin sensei of Team Dakun.

Naemura Jun: genin on Team Dakun.

Yeha Taree: genin on Team Dakun.

Kawagakure [River Village]:

Higeru Shinren: genin on Team Eneki.

Nekoto Kawabata: called Kawabata of Jade; the Crane. The leader of Kawagakure. The Kawakage.


Tadao Minbu: genin on Team Eneki.

Yuntoku Emon: special jounin. Eneki's husband and Yuu's older brother.

Yuntoku Yuu: genin on Team Eneki. Emon's younger sister.

Kirigakure [Mist Village]:

Hachiko: called the Hound. Jounin and one of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist; wields the legendary pair of swords Thunderfangs.

Hiroshi Fue: genin on Team Keel.

Hiroshi Keel: called the Annihilator. "S rank" jounin sensei of Team Keel and one of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist; wields the legendary sword Blast Sword. Fue's great-uncle.

Hoshigaki Kisame: "S rank" missing-nin from Kiri. Member of Akatsuki. See Others.

Hoshigaki Makera: called the Little Monster. Genin on Team Keel. Kisame's nephew.

Houzuki Mangetsu [*]: called the Demon of the Mist. Former member of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist. Suigetsu's older brother. Killed in the Battle of the Witching Water by Uchiha Fugaku.

Houzuki Suigetsu: genin on Team Keel. Mangetsu's younger brother.

Houzuki Mangetsu [*]: called the Demon of the Mist. Former member of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist. Suigetsu's older brother. Killed in the Battle of the Witching Water by Uchiha Fugaku.

Momochi Zabuza [*]: missing-nin from Kiri. See Others.

Momochi Kamina: chunin; kunoichi. Zabuza's niece.

Ningeni Yagura [*]: the Fourth Mizukage and Jinchuriki of the Sanbi, the three-tailed giant turtle. Disappeared under mysterious circumstances.

Nobunaga Kikuko: called the Spinster; the Red Hag; Kikuko of the Red Needle; the Bitch of the Mist. Legendary "S rank" kunoichi and jounin sensei of Team Kikuko. Only female member of the
Seven Swordsmen of the Mist; wields the legendary sword Red Needle. Considered by some to be the strongest kunoichi in the world. Avowed lesbian.

**Terumi Mei:** called the Lady of Dew; Mei of Two Bloodlines. The Fifth Mizukage. An "S rank ninja"; considered one of the strongest kunoichi in the world. Took power in Kiri after the mysterious disappearance of Ningeni Yagura.

**Touin Yukari:** genin on Team Kikuko. Kikuko's granddaughter. Avowed lesbian.

**Tsunaga Kuina:** genin on Team Kikuko. Avowed lesbian.

**Unchiku Onome:** genin on Team Kikuko. Avowed lesbian. Uchiku Nonou's cousin.

**Urasaki Yoma:** special envoy extraordinare of the Water daimyo. Renowned diplomat, politician, and financier. A close confidant of the daimyo and the Kyouko court.

**Konohagakure [Leaf Village]:**

**Aburame Auni:** genin on Team Ranka; kunoichi. Kuren's younger sister and Shino's younger cousin.

**Aburame Kuren:** chuunin. Operative in the Konoha Intelligence Division. Auni's older brother and Shino's older cousin.

**Aburame Muta:** jounin sensei of Team Muta. Shibi's younger brother and Shino, Auni, and Kuren's uncle.

**Aburame Shibi:** jounin and head of the Aburame clan. Shino's father and Auni and Kuren's uncle.

**Aburame Shino:** genin on Team Kurenai. Shibi's only son.

**Aburame Torune:** jounin. Shibi's cousin and Shino's uncle.

**Akamaru:** Inuzuka Kiba's pet dog.

**Akimichi Chouza:** jounin and leader of the Akimichi clan. Chouji's father. Member of Team Yanagi.

**Akimichi Chouji:** genin on Team Asama. Chouza's son.

**Echi Juju:** a boy of eight. Haruno Kyoki's friend.

**Hagane Kotetsu:** chuunin and special assistant to Senju Tsunade.

**Haruno Sakura:** genin on Team Tsunade; kunoichi. Senju Tsunade's student. Arashi's daughter and Kyoki's older sister. Former member of Team 7.

**Haruno Arashi:** called the Demonslayer. A famous "S rank" ninja, one of the heroes of the Third Ninja War. Sakura and Kyoki's father. Umeka's husband. Teammate of Uchiha Fugaku. Died eight years ago of tuberculosis.

**Haruno Umeka:** a Konoha librarian. Sakura and Kyoki's mother. Arashi's widow.

**Haruno Kyoki:** a girl of eight. Arashi and Umeka's daughter. Sakura's younger sister.

**Hatake Kakashi:** called The Copy Ninja; Sharingan Kakashi; The Perfect Ninja. "S rank" ninja and Acting Hokage during the United Countries Embassy. Sakumo's older son and member of Team Minato. Former jounin sensei of Team 7.

**Hatake Sakumo:** called the White Fang. An renowned "S rank" ninja during the Third Ninja War, fell into disgrace after failing a critical mission and committed seppuku. Kakashi's father.

**Hatsutori Yashi:** genin on Team Genma.

**Homura Mitokado:** called Old Whiskers. Member of the Konoha High Council. Jounin member of Team Tobirama.

"Honeybee": ANBU second lieutenant; member of Squad 1. Replacement for Saint. Wears the mask of a swarm of bees.

**Honjo Micho:** called Micho Manslayer; Micho of the Silent Slash. Konoha Chief of Medicine and member of the Konoha High Council. An "S rank" medic-nin and hero of the Second Ninja War. Soeru's older brother.

**Honjo Soeru:** a well-known Fire physicist. Founder and director of the Honjo Laboratory near Konoha. Micho's younger brother.
Hyuuga Haru [*]: "S rank" missing-nin from Konoha. Member of the Silla Brotherhood. See Others.

Hyuuga Hiashi: called the Whirlwind. "S rank" member of the Konoha High Council and head of the Hyuuga clan. Hinata's father, Hiashi's twin brother, and Neji's uncle.

Hyuuga Hizashi [*]: Hiashi's twin brother and Neji's father. Killed by Kumogakure as recompense for the death of Kirazu Fushimi during the Hyuuga Affair.

Hyuuga Hinata: genin on Team Kurenai; kunoichi. Hiashi's daughter and Neji's cousin.

Hyuuga Neji: genin on Team Gai. Hinata's cousin and Hiashi's nephew.


Hyuuga Tokuma [*]: also known as the ANBU "Saint." Killed protecting Gaara in the Battle of Red Rock Cliff. Neji's uncle. Wears a mask of the six-sided wheel of Kiyome.

"Ink": ANBU second lieutenant; member of Squad 1. Replacement for Beater. Wears a mask of black swirling water.

Inuzuka Kiba: genin on Team Kurenai. Tsume's son.

Inuzuka Tsume: special jounin and head of the Inuzuka clan. Kiba's mother.

Imagawa Tenten: genin on Team Gai; kunoichi.

Kamizuki Izumo: chuunin and special assistant to Senju Tsunade.


Katou Shizune [*]: genin kunoichi. Dan's niece and Tsunade's student. Left the village with Tsunade after the Third Ninja War, never to return. Killed by Yoshitomo Nagato during an ill-fated attempt to infiltrate Akatsuki.

Katou Taki: called the Judge. Renowned Fire lawyer and legal theorist.

Kikuchi Orino: the daughter and heir of the Fire daimyo. Kidnapped by the Dancing Ninja and returned for a royal ransom of unprecedented size. Main subject of the folk song "The Pirate and the Princess."

Koharu Utatane: called the Sleeper. The longest-reigned member of the Konoha High Council. Jounin member of Team Tobirama; kunoichi. Known to be one of the leading members of ANBU ROOT. Great-grandmother of Okazaki.

Koharu Okazaki: genin on Team Muta. Great-grandson of Utatane.

Maito Gai: called the Green Beast of Konoha; the Butcher Beast. "S rank" ninja and jounin sensei of Team Gai.

Morino Ibiki: special jounin and head of the Konoha Interrogation Division. Konoha chuunin examiner. Known to be a member of ANBU ROOT.

Namiashi Raido: special jounin.

Namikaze Minato [*]: called the Yellow Flash. The Fourth Hokage. Sensei of Team Minato. Wakanura Jiraiya's student. Sacrificed his life to stop the Kyuubi Attack.

Nara Shikaku: jounin and head of the Nara clan. Shikamaru's father. Member of Team Yanagi.

Nara Shikamaru: chuunin and former member of Team Asuma. Iwa chuunin examiner. Shikaku's son.


"Pug" [*]: ANBU second lieutenant; callsign of Sarutobi Saisen. Wears the mask of a pug-nosed bulldog.

"Rhino": ANBU first lieutenant; member of Squad 1. Wears the mask of a laughing rhino.

Rock Lee: genin on Team Gai.

"Saint" [*]: ANBU second lieutenant; callsign of Hyuuga Tokuma. Wears the mask of the six-sided wheel of Kiyome.

Sarutobi Asuma: called Asuma Trenchblade; the Prodigal. Former member of the Twelve Guardian
Ninja and jounin sensei of Team Asuma. Hiruzen and Biwako's oldest son. Younger brother of Ranka and older brother of Saisen.

**Sarutobi Biwako [*]**: Hiruzen's wife. Died in the Kyuubi attack.

**Sarutobi Hiraru**: genin on Team Ranka. Kanetsu's twin brother. Ranka and Asuma's nephew.

**Sarutobi Hiruzen [*]**: called the Professor; the God of Shinobi; the Warmaker. The Third Hokage. Member of Team Tobirama. Sensei of the sannin. Biwako's wife and father of Ranka, Asuma, and Saisen. Killed in the December 7th attack by Nomo Orochimaru.

**Sarutobi Iniden [*]**: chuunin and medic-nin. Inishu's son and Asuma's cousin. Akatsuki traitor who conspired with Ryokan Mukade to assassinate Sabaku Gaara; killed himself to protect the conspiracy.


**Sarutobi Kanetsu**: genin on Team Ranka. Hiraru's twin brother. Ranka and Asuma's nephew.

**Sarutobi Konohamaru**: a boy of nine. Konoha Ninja Academy student. Hiruzen's grandson and Asuma's nephew.

**Sarutobi Ranka**: jounin sensei of Team Ranka; kunoichi. Asuma's older sister, Saisen's older sister, and Hiraru and Kanetsu's aunt.

**Sarutobi Saisen [*]**: also known as the ANBU "Pug." Hiruzen's younger son and Asuma's younger brother. Killed while attempting to stop the theft of the Annihilation Heart from Honjo Laboratory.

**Senju Hashirama [*]**: called the Dragonheart; the God of Shinobi. The First Hokage and widely considered the strongest ninja to have ever lived. Co-founder of Konoha and architect of the hidden village system. Tsunade and Nawaki's grandfather. Killed during the Battle of Five Kages.

**Senju Nawaki [*]**: genin. Hashirama's grandson and Tsunade's younger brother. Killed by stone-nin in the Second Ninja War.


**Senju Tsunade**: called the Queen of Torment; the Princess; the Scarred Beauty; the Slug Woman; the Betrayer. The Fifth Hokage. An "S rank" ninja and one of the sannin. Widely considered the strongest kunoichi in the world. Hashirama's granddaughter and Nawaki's older sister. Sensei of Haruno Sakura and Katou Shizune.

**Shimura Danzou**: called the Whisperer; the Summoner of Shadows; the Termite. Famous "S rank" ninja, leader of ROOT, member of the Konoha High Council. Anake's grandfather.

**Shimura Anake**: a genin on Team Asuma. Danzou's grandson.

**Shiranui Genma**: special jounin. Sensei of Team Genma.

**Tonton**: Senju Tsunade's pet pig.

**Tsumiki Kido**: jounin. Known to be a member of ANBU ROOT.

**Uchiha Fugaku [*]**: called the Calculator. Chief of the Konoha Military Police. Famous "S rank" ninja and head of the Uchiha clan. Also a celebrated diplomat, and chief negotiator of the Ashwarren Accords that created the postwar order. Teammate of Haruno Arashi. Mikoto's husband; Sasuke and Itachi's father. Killed by his son Itachi during the Uchiha Massacre.

**Uchiha Itachi**: "S rank" missing-nin from Konoha. Member of Akatsuki. See *Others*.

**Uchiha Madara [*]**: "S rank" missing-nin from Konoha. See *Others*.

**Uchiha Mikoto [*]**: born Yashiro Mikoto. Jounin kunoichi. Fugaku wife; Sasuke and Itachi's mother. Killed by Itachi during the Uchiha Massacre.

**Uchiha Sasuke**: missing-nin from Konoha. See *Others*.

**Uchiha Shion [*]**: Shisui's older brother and Sasuke's cousin. Disappeared during the Third Ninja War under mysterious circumstances. See *Shion Affair* in Glossary A.
Uchiha Shisui [*]: called Shisui of the Body Flicker. Shion's younger brother and Sasuke's cousin. Killed by Itachi in the weeks preceding the Uchiha Massacre.

Umeta Leiko: genin on Team Genma; kunoichi.

Uzumaki Naruto: genin and Jinchuriki of the Kyuubi, the nine-tailed demon fox. Wakanura Jiraiya's student. Former member of Team 7.


Wakanura Jiraiya: called the Toad Sage; Jiraiya of the Red Brush; the Pervert Hermit. An "S rank" ninja; one of the sannin. Sensei of Namikaze Minato and Uzumaki Naruto. Chiriku's cousin.

Yakushi Kabuto: missing-nin from Konoha. Member of Akatsuki. See Others.


Yamanaka Fu: jounin. Inoichi's cousin and Ino's uncle.

Yamanaka Ino: genin on Team Gai. Inoichi's daughter.

Yamanaka Inoichi: jounin and Intelligence Chief for the United Countries Embassy. Head of the Yamanaka clan. Ino's father. Member of Team Yanagi.

Yamashiro Aoba: special jounin.

"Yamato"*: ANBU captain; leader of Squad 1. Konoha's strongest ANBU. Wears the mask of a forked branch.

Yashiro Ayame: waitress at the Ramen Ichiraka shop. Teuchi's daughter and Mikoto's niece.

Yashiro Mikoto [*]: birth name of Uchiha Mikoto.


Yuhi Kurenai: jounin sensei of Team Kurenai. Yanagi's daughter.


Kumogakure [*Cloud Village*]:

Akiko Yosano: genin on Team Anagen.

Arakida Moritake [*]: called the Confessor. "S rank" missing-nin from Kumo. See Others.

Fukunaga Kazuno: genin on Team Darui.

Hosokawa Amay: genin on Team Anagen.

Imidori Jouda: genin on Team Darui.

Juukan Aae: called the Stormfist; Aae of the Lariat; the Chicken of Lightning. The Fourth Raikage and an "S rank" ninja. Bee's adopted older brother and Dee's uncle.

Juukan Bee: called Killer Bee."S rank" Jinchuriki host of the Hachibi, the eight-tailed giant ox. Unchiku Onome's great-aunt. Aaye's adopted younger brother and Dee's uncle.

Juukan Dee: genin on Team Kaiza. Aaye's niece.

Kasuga Darui: called Darui of the Black Cloud; the Cloud Cutter. Powerful "S rank" ninja and member of the Kumo High Council. Jounin sensei of Team Darui.

Kirazu Fushimi [*]: called the White Flash. Jounin and the Head Ninja of Kumogakure during the Undeclared War. Killed by Hyuuga Hiashi while attempting to abduct Hyuuga Hinata during the Hyuuga Affair. Kaiza and Raiki's father.

Kirazu Kaiza: jounin sensei of Team Kaiza. Fushimi's son and Raiki's older brother.

Kirazu Raiki: genin on Team Darui. Fushimi's son and Kaiza's younger brother.

Komatsu Kanke: genin on Team Kaiza.

Murasu Anagen: jounin sensei of Team Anagen.

Saburai Ise: genin on Team Kaiza.

Tegaki Gin: genin on Team Anagen.

Kusagakure [*Grass Village*]:

Kirazu Fushimi [*]: called the White Flash. Jounin and the Head Ninja of Kumogakure during the Undeclared War. Killed by Hyuuga Hiashi while attempting to abduct Hyuuga Hinata during the Hyuuga Affair. Kaiza and Raiki's father.
Ikenobo Bae: called the Buffalo; the Queenslayer. Jounin sensei of Team Bae. Zeami's older brother.
Ikenobo Muma: genin on Team Bae. Bae's son and Zeami's niece.
Yahiro Izen: genin on Team Bae.
Yasunari Tontero: genin on Team Bae.

Namigakure [Wave Village]:
Arakida Gatou [*]: a powerful mafia kingpin based out of Kishimon. Killed by his own hired mercenary Momochi Zabuza after disrespecting Zabuza during the battle for Tazuna Bridge.
Ishii Inari: a young boy. Tazuna's grandson.
Unchiku Narumi: jounin sensei of Team Narumi; kunoichi. Sarashina's younger cousin. Nonou and Ouji's aunt.
Yasui Kabure: genin on Team Narumi.

Numagakure [Swamp Village]:
Fuuki Numazu: genin on Team Yorai.
Misono Cho: genin on Team Yoari.
Oyokawa Komachi: called the Weaver. Legendary "S rank" ninja, one of the heroes of the Second Ninja War; kunoichi. Matriarch of the Oyokawa clan. Sasori's grandmother, Tokusai's grandmother, and Ueno's aunt.
Shigeru Yorai: called Yorai of the Crag. Jounin sensei of Team Yorai.
Yoshimi Saori: genin on Team Yorai; kunoichi.

Sunagakure [Sand Village]:
Akasun Baki: called Baki of Two Faces. Trusted confidant of the Kazekage and member of the Suna High Council. Temari and Kankuro's sensei.
Anayama Chiyo: called the Weaver. Legendary "S rank" ninja, one of the heroes of the Second Ninja War; kunoichi. Matriarch of the Anayama clan. Sasori's grandmother, Tokusai's grandmother, and Ueno's aunt.
Anayama Sasori: "S rank" missing-nin from Suna. Member of Akatsuki. See Others.
Anayama Tokusai: genin on Team Basho. Chiyo's grandnephew and Sasori's cousin.
Anayama Ueno: Iwa chuunin examiner. Chiyo's nephew; Sasori and Tokusai's uncle.
Fuwa Uzume: genin on Team Wekku.
Hattori Bakan: genin on Team Basho. Otokaze's grandson and Oosawa's great-grandson.
Murakami Jueti: genin on Team Wekku.
Ryokan Satetsu: genin on Team Basho. Mukade's son.
Ryokan Yura: special jounin and member of the Suna High Council. Mukade's estranged cousin.

**Sabaku Temari:** genin on Team Tsunade; kunoichi. Tojuen and Karura's daughter. Eldest of the Sand Siblings.


**Sabaku Kankuro:** genin on Team Tsunade. Tojuen and Karura's son. Middle child of the Sand Siblings.

**Sabaku Karura [†]:** Tojuen's wife and mother to the Sand Siblings. Died giving birth to Gaara.

**Sajuko Bokuin:** genin on Team Wekku.

**Subashi Basho [†]:** jounin and ANBU operative. Akatsuki traitor; killed by Baki during the Battle of Red Rock Cliff. Sensei of Team Basho.

**Tangan Wekku:** jounin sensei of Team Wekku.

**Takigakure [Waterfall Village]:**

**Hagane Yukio:** genin on Team Osamu.

**Inukai Kuji:** Iwa chuunin examiner.

**Kinen Masoka:** genin on Team Osamu.

**Misain Dayu:** called the Cinder. "S-rank" jounin sensei of Team Dayu. Seve's son and grandson. Aruasu's brother. Sebi and Rei's uncle and half-brother.

**Misain Rei:** genin on Team Dayu. Seve's daughter and great-granddaughter. Sebi's older sister.

**Misain Sebi:** genin on Team Dayu. Seve's son and great-grandson. Rei's younger brother.

**Misain Aruasu [†]:** missing-nin from Taki. Member of Akatsuki. See Other(s).

**Misain Seve:** called the Thrice-Dead; Old Ruin; the Godcursed; the Pimp of Mizuho. "S rank" founder and undisputed despot of Takigakure. The Takikage. Head of the Misain clan. Infamous for the practice of incest and polygamy. Nearly a hundred years old, it is rumored Seve has used the secret jutsu of the Onira clan to extend his lifespan.

**Onira Kakuzu:** "S rank" missing-nin from Taki. Member of Akatsuki. See Other(s).

**Onira Kawai:** genin on Team Dayu. Kakuzu's great-grandson.

**Rokusho Fuu:** genin on Team Osamu. Jinchuriki of the Nanabi, the six-tailed horned beetle.

**Inamida Osamu:** jounin sensei.

**Others (Kashima Village):**

**Bakura Kurotsuchi:** called Suchi. An "untouchable" farmer, exiled from Iwa as a child in punishment for the military failures of her clan. Bachi's twin sister, Shibo'to's daughter, and Orajuchi's older sister.

**Bakura Kurobachi:** called Bachi. An "untouchable" farmer, exiled from Iwa as a child in punishment for the military failures of his clan. Suchi's twin brother, Shibo'to's son, and Orajuchi's older brother.

**Chikuda Yone:** an "untouchable" ex-Iwa blacksmith.

**Daiton Hagakure:** called the Black Preacher. An "untouchable" former priest of Katsu-ji Temple, exiled from Iwa for incurable sexual perversion.

**Itoya Eien:** an "untouchable" butcher's apprentice. Dreams of following in the footsteps of Lee Sheeptamer.

**Lee Sheeptamer [†]:** infamous criminal from the Earth Country and member of the Silla Brotherhood. Originally born an "untouchable" from Kashima Village, escaped to join the mafia at the age of ten and rose through the ranks to become the most powerful boss in the North. After being defeated by the Dancing Ninja, abandoned the mafia to join the Silla Brotherhood. Responsible for the death of the Earth courtesan Enyo Kayura. Killed in single combat by Sougon Sawar in the
Battle of Three Wolves.

**Urasima Montonobu:** an "untouchable" shepherd; the elder and spiritual leader of Kashima Village. Grandfather of Kocho.

**Urasima Kocho:** an "untouchable" young girl, sick of tuberculosis. Granddaughter of Kocho.

**Others:**

- **Anayama Sasori:** called Sasori of the Red Sand. "S rank" missing-nin from Suna. Member of Akatsuki. Chiyo's grandson.
- **Anayama Tokusai [*]:** famous woodcutter artist in the Earth Country during the Age of Chaos. His most famous work is "Watermill at Onden."
- **Arakida Moritake [*]:** called the Confessor. "S rank" missing-nin from Kumo. Founding member of the Silla Brotherhood. Once feared as the most infamous torturer in the world, became a zealous Kiyome convert and political radical dedicated to pacifism and nonviolent conflict resolution. Killed by Kasuga Darui in the Battle of Three Wolves.
- **Burgouine, Immanuel:** Ambassador Extraordinare to Earth from the United Republic of Genoa. Renowned diplomat and confidante of the Genoan President.
- **Butcho [*]:** called the Moonbandit. A legendary female Hoka thief from the Crescent Country and founding member of the Silla Brotherhood. Said to be able to pick the pocket of even the moon itself. Also known for her surpassing ugliness. Killed by Ryoken Mukade and Akasun Baki in the Battle of Three Wolves.
- **Chuzuru Deidara:** called Deidara Demonhand. "S rank" missing-nin from Iwa. Member of Akatsuki. Kazan's nephew; Geigin and Ukio's cousins.
- **Dancing Ninja [*]:** pseudonym; real identity unknown. Also called the Pirate of Silla. An infamous pirate of the postwar period and the leader of the Silla Brotherhood. Widely believed to have grown up in a traveling circus. Stole a large cache of forbidden jutsu from Kumo during the Third Ninja War. In the Iron Country, became famous for spectacular and flamboyant robberies of the rich, as well as redistribution of stolen money to the poor. After founding the Silla Brotherhood, masterminded the kidnapping of the Fire daimyo's daughter, among other notorious criminal operations. An "S rank" ninja and one of the strongest ninjas of the postwar period, the Dancing Ninja repeatedly defeated or escaped such personages as Mukai Hanzou, Wakanura Jiraiya, and Kasuga Darui. Killed in single combat by Sougon Sawar in the Battle of Three Wolves. To this day, one of the most beloved heroes of the peasantry; celebrated in many stories and songs, most notably "The Pirate and the Princess."
- **Desii Konan:** called the Paper Angel. "S rank" missing-nin from Ame. Member of Akatsuki.
- **Egbert, Thayan [*]:** called Sir Thayan Egbert of Izu; the Hedge Knight. Member of the Silla Brotherhood. Originally from Bayon in Ru Daunu to the South; immigrated to the North and took up residence in the city of Izu in the Swamp Country. By training a knight of Ru Daunu's elite military corps, became one of the most popular folk heroes in the North for his exotic exploits. Killed by Hatake Kakashi in the Battle of Three Wolves.
- **Gifuu Hidan:** called Hidan of Bloodthirst. "S rank" missing-nin from Chi. Member of Akatsuki.
- **Hoshigaki Kisame:** called the Monster of the Mist; the Tailed Beast Without a Tail. "S rank" missing-nin from Kiri. Member of Akatsuki. Former member of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist. Makera's uncle.
- **Hotaru Eshidae:** called the Seer. Legendary painter, sculptor, and architect at the height of the Birthright Empire during the Age of Glory; contemporary of Kishimo Jiraiya and Okki of Kyouko. His most famous work is the immense marble sculpture "Pillar of Nine Demons," now only partially intact.
- **Hyyuga Haru [*]:** called the White Hare. "S rank" missing-nin from Konoha and flamboyant homosexual, exiled from Konoha for sexual perversion. A founding member of the Silla Brotherhood and the Dancing Ninja's principal deputy. Killed by Sougon Charasu and Keel the Annihilator in the Battle of Three Wolves.

Kishimo Jiraiya [*]: called the Master. Legendary philosopher, writer, and poet at the height of the Birthright Empire during the Age of Glory; contemporary of Okki of Kyouko and Hotaru Eshidae. Author of the Discourses, the world's preeminent philosophical work.

Loom: Ambassador to Earth from the Iron Country. Known for his taciturn behavior, extreme even among samurai.

Makotogao Rika [*]: a Kiyome martyr from Ru Daunu in the South. Killed in the Scar while proselytizing the coming of the Sage of Six Paths; the Mino Shrine in Kesa Village is dedicated to him.

Mitarashi Masamune [*]: a legendary Earth swordsman, armor smith, and priest during the Age of Chaos. Said to have forged the finest swords ever created; only one, the dreamsteel katana also called the Masamune, is known to survive.

Misain Arusau [*]: missing-nin from Taki. Member of Akatsuki. Seve's son and grandson. Dayu's brother. Sebi and Rei's uncle and half-brother. Killed by Densuke Tosuken in the Battle of the Asylum.

Momochi Zabuza [*]: called Zabuza the Bonebreaker. missing-nin from Kiri. Former member of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist. Haku's sensei and Kamina's uncle. Killed by Hatake Kakashi while attempting to stop the completion of Tazuna Bridge on the outskirts of Kishimon.

Nomo Orochimaru: called the White Snake; Orochimaru of the Double Death; the Hidden Hokage. One of the sannin. "S rank" missing-nin from Konoha. Leader of Akatsuki. Wielder of the legendary sword Kusanagi.


Okki of Kyouko [*]: called the Bard. Legendary poet, storyteller, and beauty at the height of the Birthright Empire during the Age of the Glory; contemporary of Kishimo Jiraiya and Hotaru Eshidae. Her most famous poem is "The Old Woman."


Sawar III [*]: called Sawar the Great. One of the legendary emperors of the ancient Birthright Empire. His reign, which saw an unprecedented flourishing of culture, technology, and prosperity, is considered the most politically stable era in the history of the North. The city of Sawara is named after him. Notable personages who lived during the reign of Sawar III include Kishimo Jiraiya, Okki of Kyouko, and Hotaru Eshidae.

Senju Hagoromo [*]: also named Otsutsuki Hagoromo. Called the Sage of Six Paths; the First Ninja. Legendary founder of the religion Kiyome and bringer of chakra jutsu to the world. The Senju clan of Konoha claims to trace their ancestry directly from Hagoromo, though this is disputed. Worshiped throughout both the North and South as a god.

Tazawa [*]: called Tazawa the Great. A legendary king of the Age of Revelation, who ruled what is now the Wind Country under the theocratic banner of the Sage of Six Paths. Known only by Tazawa after casting away his birth name to follow the path of Kiyome.

Touin Haku [*]: a boy of fifteen, trained in ninjutsu by Momochi Zabuza. Killed by Uzumaki Naruto while attempting to protect Zabuza on the outskirts of Kishimon.


Uchiha Itachi [*]: the last Warlord of the ancient Blood Country, a powerful slave empire in the North during the Age of Blood. Killed by Senju Hagoromo in the Battle of Fire Fan Bay. Believed to be the direct ancestor of the Uchiha clan of Konoha, though this is disputed.

Uchiha Madara [*]: called the Bloodhawk. An "S rank" missing-nin from Konoha, he is widely
considered one of the strongest ninjas to have ever lived. Co-founder of Konoha and architect of the hidden village system. Killed by Senju Hashirama in the Battle of the Valley of the End.

**Uchiha Sasuke:** missing-nin from Konoha. Nomo Orochimaru's student. Former member of Team 7. Fugaku and Mikoto's son. Itachi's younger brother.

**Yakushi Kabuto:** missing-nin from Konoha. Member of Akatsuki and Orochimaru's personal assistant. Nanigashi's adopted son.

**Yoshitomo Nagato:** also known as Pain. "S rank" missing-nin from Ame. Member of Akatsuki. **Zetsu:** called the Flytrap. "S rank" ninja of unknown origin. Member of Akatsuki.

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### II. SHINOBI STRENGTH LEVELS:

On the basis of each shinobi's jutsu profile, performance record, and reputation, village intelligence will assign to shinobi rough "strength levels." This level represents a ninja's estimated probability of winning any given fight against another ninja, or group of other ninjas.

Strength levels are mapped along an exponential curve and then standardized. Each incremental change in level [i.e. from C+ rank to B- rank] represents a 66% (~x1.66) increase in strength over the last level. "D rank" ninjas (20% of all shinobi) are exceptionally weak. "C rank" ninjas (45%) are of average strength, while "B rank" ninjas (25%) are much stronger. "A rank" shinobi (10%) represent the ninja elite. In addition, the world's most powerful and dangerous ninjas (~0.01%) are informally designated as "S rank."

These strength levels are not determined by military rank. However, they are closely related. Academy students are typically "E rank," while genin are often "D rank", chuunin are "C rank," special jounin are usually "B rank," and jounin and ANBU are almost always "A rank."

To predict the outcome of a fight using strength rankings, note that a 1% increase in strength equals a 1% increased probability of victory compared to the neutral baseline (50%). For example, a C+ rank shinobi is 166% as strong as a C= rank shinobi, with a 83% chance of winning. A B- rank ninja is nearly three times as strong as a C= rank ninja, with a 139% chance of winning. This result can also be interpreted as a 100% chance of victory against 1.39 C= rank ninjas. Thus, one A- rank ninja (1286% as strong as a C= rank ninja) has a 100% chance to defeat 6.4 C= ninjas simultaneously, and a 0% chance to defeat 25.7 C= ninjas. One A+ ninja (27564% as strong as a D- ninja) has a 50% chance to win against 276 D- ninja.

"S rank" fights cannot be calculated using this method, due to the incredibly powerful jutsu involved. Generally speaking, one "S rank" ninja can defeat an unlimited number of low ranking ninjas.

As of Chapter 31, representative characters in WILL OF STONE are ranked as follows:

S+: [Tsunade] Sawar, Hanzou
S: [Kakashi] Kikuko, Shirasu, Hiashi, Darui, Chiyo, Doi, Keel
S-: [Gaara] Gai, Tosuken, Sosano, Mukade, Zeami, Michio, Dayu
A+: [Asuma] Muro, Eneki, the Captain, Inishu, Baki, Hiashi
A=: [KCE Gaara] Makera, Rhino, Jidaei, Raiki, Ikoma, Otokaze
A-: [KCE Sasuke] Anagen, Geigin, Saint, Neji, Aumono, Sebi, Yukari, Ink, Ranka, Beater
B+: [KCE Naruto] Narumi, Youko, Sakura, Temari, Osamu
B=: [KCE Lee] Kawai, Lee, Jibachi, Genma, Shikamaru, Ibiki, Kankuro, Erima
B-: [KCE Kiba] Anake, Chusei, Shinren, Nonou
C+: [KCE Tenten] Utatane, Rei, Tenent
C=: [KCE Zaku] Ryua, Numazu
C-: [KCE Kiba] Ino, Okazaki
III. NAMED CHUUNIN EXAM TEAMS:

Confederacy:
**Stone [Iwa]**: Team Sawar (S-), Team Jidaei (B+), Team Chegga (B-), Team Zen (C+), Team Shonagon (D)
**Mist [Kiri]**: Team Keel (A), Team Kikuko (A-)
**Swamp [Numa]**: Team Yorai (B+)
**Waterfall [Taki]**: Team Dayu (A-), Team Osamu (B-)

United Countries:
**Leaf [Konoha]**: Team Tsunade (A), Team Gai (A-), Team Ranka (B), Team Asuma (B-), Team Genma (C)
**Sand [Suna]**: Team Tsunade (A), Team Basho (B), Team Wekku (D+)
**Rain [Ame]**: Team Tosuken (A-), Team Pou (C)

Unaffiliated:
**Cloud [Kumo]**: Team Darui (A), Team Anagen (B-), Team Kaiza (C)
**Blood [Chi]**: Team Muro (B+)
**Grass [Kusa]**: Team Bae (B+)
**Dust [Dasuto]**: Team Ikoma (C+)
**River [Kawa]**: Team Eneki (B-)
**Steam [Jouki]**: Team Dakun (D+)
**Wave [Nami]**: Team Narumi (C+)
**Glacier [Hyoga]**: Team Youko (A+)

"S rank":
**Team Sawar (Stone)**: Sougon Sosano (S-), Haghira Geigin (A-), Bakura Orajuchi (B)

"A Rank":
**Team Darui (Cloud)**: Kirazu Raiki (A), Fukunaga Kazuno (B+), Imidori Jouda (B+)
**Team Keel (Mist)**: Hoshigaki Makera (A), Houzuki Suigetsu (B), Hiroshi Fue (B-)
**Team Tsunade (Leaf/Sand)**: Haruno Sakura* (B+), Sabaku Temari (B+), Sabaku Kankuro (B)
**Team Dayu (Waterfall)**: Misain Sebi (A-), Onira Kawai (B+), Misain Rei (C+)
**Team Tosuken (Rain)**: Mukai Aumono (A-), Kyoroku Erima (B), Junichiro Tenshe (B-)
**Team Gai (Leaf)**: Hyuuga Neji (A-), Rock Lee (B), Imagawa Tenten (C+)
**Team Kikuko (Mist)**: Touin Yukari (A-), Unchiku Onome (B-), Tsunaga Kuina (C+)

"B rank":
**Team Yorai (Swamp)**: Fukki Numazu (B+), Yoshimi Saori (B), Misono Cho (B-)
**Team Jidaei (Stone)**: Chuzuru Jibachi (B+), Noatai Chusei (B-), Chuzuru Ukio (B-)
**Team Muro (Blood)**: Makoto Mazu (B+), Totomi Bunta (B-), Gifuu Ashan (C+)
**Team Bae (Grass)**: Yasunari Tontero (B+), Ikenobo Muma (C+), Yahiro Izen (C-)
**Team Ranka (Leaf)**: Sarutobi Hiraru (B), Sarutobi Kanetsu (B), Aburame Auni (D-)
Team Basho (Sand): Ryokan Satetsu (B), Hattori Bakan (B-), Anayama Tokusai (C)
Team Eneki (River): Higeru Shinren (B-), Yuntoku Yuu (B-), Tadao Minbu (C+)
Team Osamu (Waterfall): Rokusho Fuu (B-), Hagane Yukio (C+), Kinen Masoka (D)
Team Anagen (Cloud): Hosokawa Amay (B-), Tegaki Gin (C), Akiko Yosano (C)
Team Chegga (Stone): Iwanu Gende (B), Hamaguchi Zeze (C), Zukaka Wamiko (D+)
Team Asuma (Leaf): Shimura Anake (B-) Yamanaka Ino (C-), Akimichi Chouji (D)
Other Ranks:
Team Youko (Glacier): Kozumi Saotome (C+), Konoe Naraku (C+), Uraouji Memei (C)
Team Narumi (Wave): Unchiku Nonou (C+), Unchiku Ouji (C), Yasui Kabure (C-)
Team Zen (Stone): Tosetsu Domon (C+), Kamizuki Manyou (C), Chuzuru Pimi (D-)
Team Ikoma (Dust): Ashuju Ryua (C), Hirane Chiri (C), Yumiko Yokota (D-)
Team Kaiza (Cloud): Komatsu Kanke (C), Saburai Ise (C), Juukan Dee (D)
Team Pou (Rain): Kazuraki Matsudake (C), Ajiro Yanagi (C), Sakone Nasu (D+)
Team Genma (Leaf): Hatsutori Yashi (C), Hyuuga Nyuka (C), Umeta Leiko (D-)
Team Wekku (Sand): Sajuko Bokuin (D+), Fuwa Uzume (D+), Murakami Jutei (D)
Team Dakun (Steam): Naemura Jun (D+), Yeha Taree (D), Eguchi Shishio (D)
Team Shonagon (Stone): Kasukutsei Gyusen (D), Tenka Himoro (D), Azuraki Naishu (D-)

*Sakura is listed as A= rank in the Konoha Databook. This listing may not, however, be strictly accurate.*
Glossary C: Jutsu

Chapter Notes

This is a special glossary. To continue to the actual story, skip to Chapter 31.

Table of Contents:

I. Bloodlines
II. Clan Jutsu
III. Equipment
IV. Summons
V. General Jutsu

Note: Jutsu, equipment, and summons are ranked according to the same scale as that for Shinobi Strength Levels. Generally speaking, an "E rank" jutsu is one that an "E rank" academy student would be able to perform, while an "S rank" jutsu is exclusive to "S rank" ninja, with corresponding differences in power.

I. BLOODLINES:

Byakugan: eng. White Eye. Bloodline of the Hyuuga clan of Konoha. One of the Eyes of the Three Secrets. The Byakugan is typically manifested as a featureless white eye with no visible pupils. When activated, the pupil becomes more distinct and the veins that feed blood to the eye bulge. An activated Byakugan allows the user to see in 360 degree version in a large radius; to see through solid objects; and to see chakra itself. It is considered one of the most powerful bloodlines in the world.

⇨ Gentle Fist Fighting Style [B-taijutsu] [Byakugan]: a doujutsu fighting style unique to the Hyuuga clan. It is designed to inflict damage on the target's chakra circulatory system, as well as disable their tenketsu and ability to use chakra jutsu. Targets can be instantly killed if a vital area is hit by Gentle Fist. At higher levels of proficiency, Gentle Fist is effectively an Instant Death jutsu.

⇨ Kaiten [B-ninjutsu] [Byakugan]: eng. Eight Trigrams Rotation. A defensive jutsu famed as the "Absolute Defense," even able to block direct attacks from the Enshogan. The user releases a huge burst of chakra from all his tenketsu and spins rapidly, creating a rotating shield of chakra around himself. Enhanced in range and power with the addition of chakra flow.

⇨ Vacuum Palm [B-ninjutsu] [Byakugan]: an offensive jutsu that extends the range of Gentle Fist. The user shoots out a concentrated beam of chakra from his palm, attacking the target's chakra circulatory system.

⇨ Guardian Lattice [A-ninjutsu] [Byakugan]: a versatile offensive and defensive jutsu. The user emits a constant stream of chakra from his palms, which are formed into extremely thin, sharp blades around the user, like an intricate net. This lattice is capable of rapid coordinated movement, hitting targets and protecting from attacks with extreme precision.

Rotation. An upgrade of Kaiten. Correcting the stationary vulnerability of the original jutsu, the user of Clawing Kaiten moves as he spins, allowing him to attack as well as defend. So named for how the moving Kaiten looks like a shield of whirling claws.

ENSHOGAN: eng. Heat Seeing Eye. Bloodline of the Sougon clan of Iwa. One of the Eyes of the Three Secrets. The Enshogan is typically manifested as a normal eye. When activated, the entire eye except for the pupil glows golden and the blood vessels around the pupil become inflamed. An activated Enshogan allows the user to see as well as control all sources of heat within the range of his vision. It is considered one of the most powerful bloodlines in the world.

⇒ Bakudan [B-ninjutsu] [Enshogan]: eng. Bomb. An offensive jutsu famed as the "Absolute Attack," able to bypass any defense except Kaiten and Hyotonin. The user uses his eyes to superheat the body of the target, creating an extremely rapid explosion. Instant Death jutsu.

⇒ Kinetic Transfer [B-ninjutsu] [Enshogan]: a defensive and support jutsu. The user absorbs the kinetic energy of a given object, slowing or even stopping its motion. Often used to block attacks before they can hit the user.

⇒ Blast Wave [A-ninjutsu] [Enshogan]: a powerful offensive jutsu. The user creates an explosive wave of heat from his location that radiates outward in a sphere. Mass Devastation jutsu.

⇒ Fire and Ice [A-ninjutsu] [Enshogan]: a doujutsu fighting style unique to the Sougon clan of Iwa. The user attacks with both ranges of the Enshogan simultaneously, pummeling the target with heat from one side and cold from the other. It is considered the perfect balance of attack and defense. Fire and Ice is usually used in combination with a Dreamsteel Katana.

⇒ Absolute Zero [S-ninjutsu] [Enshogan] (user: Sougon Shirasu): an upgrade of Kinetic Transfer. The user creates a wall of zero kinetic energy in a given location. Anything which enters the dead zone is instantly frozen, even light.

⇒ Infinite Radiance [S-ninjutsu] [Enshogan] (user: Sougon Sawar): a support jutsu. The user grows into a one hundred meter tall giant, greatly magnifying the size and thus power of his Enshogan eyes. Requires an immense amount of chakra to sustain.

⇒ Distant Starlight [S-jikuukan jutsu] [Enshogan] (user: Sougon Seurin): an offensive and defensive jutsu. The user summons all the light around him into his own body, becoming a glowing battery of heat. A large bubble is created inside of which all energy is controlled by the user himself. Targets perceive this process as the disappearance of all other power sources, including the stars and even the sun itself. Requires an immense amount of concentration to sustain. Most effective at night. Considered the most powerful space-time ninjutsu in existence.

GURATON: eng. Glass Release. Bloodline of the Hattori clan of Suna. Guraton users can turn anything they touch into glass using a unique type of elemental jutsu. Targets includes inanimate objects, the natural environment, and even other human beings. Guraton can be extended to a considerable range via chakra threads or chakra-cast weapons. However, Guraton is not instantaneous; the speed by which the target is turned to glass varies considerably with the skill of the user. Skilled Guraton users can also reverse a target back to its original state.

⇒ Glass Touch [C-ninjutsu] [Guraton]: an offensive jutsu. The user touches an object with their hand and turns it gradually to glass. Often used in combination with a Chakra-Cast Whip in order to extend the effective range of the Glass Touch.

⇒ Glass Touch: Trap [B-fuinjutsu] [Guraton]: a sealing trap jutsu drawn on the ground or in a scroll. The user creates the seal with Guraton-infused chakra. When the target activates the seal, the target will be quickly turned to glass.

⇒ Glass Clone [B-ninjutsu] [Guraton]: an upgrade of Clone. The user creates a tangible clone from glass. Upon destruction, the Glass Clone will release Guraton chakra and turn anything nearby into glass as well.

HITODENCHI: eng. Human Battery. Bloodline of the Kirazu Clan of Kumo. Hitodenchi users
display a radically altered appearance. Albinos, with deep red eyes, deep red hair, and very pale skin, their bodies also light up every few seconds with internal flashes of electricity, showing their bones as if in a X-ray. Users of Hitodenchi can generate and channel large amounts of electromagnetism. It is considered one of the most powerful bloodlines in the world.

⇒ **Living Battery** [C-ninjutsu] [Hitodenchi]: a support jutsu. The user generates large amounts of lightning chakra from within his body and charges another person, object, or jutsu with it. Often used to enhance the fighting capacity of other ninja. Living Battery can also be used to draw energy from nearby electromagnetic sources, such as physical batteries or electrical wires.

⇒ **Magnetic Charge** [B-ninjutsu] [Hitodenchi]: an offensive and support jutsu. The user magnetizes the target at close range, making the target strongly attracted to oppositely magnetized objects, including metallic weapons. Often used in combination with Copper Wire Shuriken to extend the effective range of the Magnetic Charge.

⇒ **Magnetic Disruption** [B-ninjutsu] [Hitodenchi]: an offensive and support jutsu. The user generates a concentrated pulse of energy that disrupts the target's electrochemical bonds. Can be used to destroy chemicals or poisons, as well as to attack the molecular cohesion of living creatures.

⇒ **Living Death** [A-ninjutsu] [Hitodenchi]: an upgrade of Living Battery. An offensive jutsu that drains the target of all electrical energy in his body. Instant Death jutsu.

**HYOTON:** eng. *Ice Release.* Bloodline of the Touin clan of Kiri. Hyoton users have the ability to combine water and wind chakra in order to create ice. Their unique ice jutsu are widely famed for their elegant, almost beautiful power. However, the Touin clan was nearly destroyed in series of bloody purges under Ningeni Yagura the Fourth Mizukage. Only a very few members survive.

⇒ **Ice Needles** [C-ninjutsu] [Hyoton]: an offensive jutsu. The user creates sharp ice needles from the water vapor in the air and then shoots them at high speed at the target. Can also be shot from the user's fingers in combination with water jutsu.

⇒ **Ice Prison** [B-ninjutsu] [Hyoton]: a defensive and support jutsu. The user creates a thick dome of ice around a given location, protecting it from most physical attacks. Ice Prison can also be used offensively to trap or even freeze enemy movement.

⇒ **Crystal Ice Mirrors** [B-ninjutsu] [Hyoton]: an offensive and support jutsu. The user creates a ice mirror or set of ice mirrors in a nearby location, from which he can enter and exit at will. Effectively a means of short-range teleportation, the Crystal Ice Mirrors also allow the user to attack from within the mirrors. At higher levels of proficiency, Crystals Ice Mirrors can be created from great distances, even high in the air.

⇒ **Demonic Ice Mirrors** [A-ninjutsu] [Hyoton]: an upgrade of Crystal Ice Mirrors. The user creates a sphere of twenty one different ice mirrors, trapping the target inside it. Each mirror shows the reflection of the user and it is extremely difficult for the target to know which mirror contains the real user, as well as to defend against the user's attacks.

**JUHIJIN:** eng. *Bark Demon.* Bloodline of the Akatsuki operative Zetsu. A new bloodline of unknown origin, Juhijin users display a radically altered appearance. Partially composed of plant material, their skin is as rough as bark and covered with thorns; a flytrap-like shell grows out from their backs. Juhijin users are highly resistant to physical attacks, immune to poison, and can manipulate their bodies in a manner akin to plants.

⇒ **Thorn Release** [C-ninjutsu] [Juhijin]: an offensive jutsu. The user grows various objects made of thorns, such as swords and shields, from his body. These thorns are often dripping with plant venom.

⇒ **Compost** [B-ninjutsu] [Juhijin]: an offensive and support jutsu. The user consumes organic material and turns it into compost, replenishing the user's own strength. Can be used on human targets to gruesome effect.

⇒ **Black Thorn Maze** [A-ninjutsu] [Juhijin]: an offensive jutsu. The user grows a colossal maze of poisoned thorns from his own body as well from as the land around him. Mass Devastation jutsu.

⇒ **Black Spores** [A-ninjutsu] [Juhijin] (user: Yasunari Zetsu): an offensive and support jutsu. The
user grows microscopic neuro-spores from his body which then infiltrate the target's brain, allowing the user to secretly mind control the target.

KIBAKU NENDO: eng. *Explosive Clay*. Bloodline of the Chuzuru clan of Iwa. Otherwise normal in appearance, Kibaku Nendo users have two additional mouths in the palms of their hands, complete with teeth and tongues. These mouths are used in order to mold an unique red substance called explosive clay. Kibaku Nendo users can shape the explosive clay into any form they want and detonate it on command, creating an intense explosion. Kibaku Nendo is considered one of the most powerful bloodlines in the world.

⇨ **Deathgiving Hands** [B-ninjutsu] [Kibaku Nendo]: an offensive jutsu. The user molds explosive clay into animal-like dolls that have independent freedom of motion. Often used as swarming projectile bombs against multiple targets.

⇨ **Dragon of Brief Transience** [B-ninjutsu] [Kibaku Nendo] an offensive and support jutsu. The user puts both of his hands together to create a large flying dragon made of explosive clay. This dragon has the power to spit out smaller clay figurines that attack the target like guided missiles.

⇨ **Self Portrait of the Artist's Immortal Smile** [A-ninjutsu] [Kibaku Nendo]: an offensive jutsu. The user molds explosive clay into an powerful figurine-like bomb, often taking on the appearance of the user himself. Mass Devastation jutsu.

KOUMORI: eng. *Bat Transformation*. Bloodline of the Bakura clan of Iwa. Koumori users have elongated bat-like ears, a wide mouth with sharp teeth, and an extremely light, thin frame. These features give them greatly enhanced hearing as well as great agility and leaping ability. As they gain experience, Koumori users gradually take on more and more bat-like characteristics, including fur and ultimately even wings. It is said that the eldest members of the Bakura clan live underground in caves with other bats, their humanity entirely lost.

⇨ **Echolocation** [C-ninjutsu] [Koumori]: a support jutsu. The user emits an ultrasound pulse from his mouth like a bat uses echolocation, enabling him to see clearly even in utter darkness.

⇨ **Echo Attack** [B-ninjutsu] [Koumori]: an offensive jutsu. The uses focuses his ultrasound pulses on the target, using a beam of concentrated sound waves to disrupt the target's senses and even to rip away the target's flesh.

⇨ **Bat Dominance** [B-ninjutsu] [Koumori]: a support jutsu. The user is able to communicate with nearby bats and control their behavior, asking them to scout ahead or even directing them to attack targets.

MIZUHO: eng. *Waterfire Release*. Bloodline of the Misain clan of Taki. Mizuho users have red hair streaked with blue and deep blue eyes. They have the ability to burn water itself, lighting any source of water on fire with a single thought. The resulting waterfire is unquenchable and has great synergy with water elemental jutsu. Purified by centuries of incest within the Misain clan, Mizuho is considered one of the most powerful bloodlines in the world.

⇨ **Burning Skin** [C-ninjutsu] [Mizuho]: a defensive jutsu. The user covers his body with an thin layer of water and then lights the water on fire, creating a protective waterfire armor around himself.

⇨ **Burning Blood** [A-ninjutsu] [Mizuho] [Misain Dayu] [Misain Sebi]: an offensive jutsu. The user lights the blood inside the target's body on fire, boiling them alive from the inside out. Instant Death jutsu.

⇨ **Death Rain** [A-ninjutsu] [Mizuho]: an offensive jutsu. The user creates rain from the water vapor in the sky and then lights it on fire, causing a burning rain to fall indiscriminately on nearby targets. Mass Devastation jutsu.

MOKUTON: eng. *Wood Release*. Bloodline of the Senju clan of Konoha. Mokuton users have the ability to combine earth and water chakra in order to create wood. Their unique wood jutsu are extremely versatile and can be used to create almost any kind of wood or plant-based object. Mokuton is considered one of the most powerful bloodlines in the world, though in recent years,
Mokuton has been diluted by intermarriage with other clans and no longer manifests itself as it used to.

- **Wood Clone** [B-ninjutsu] [Mokuton]: a support jutsu. The user creates a tangible clone from wood which can explode at will into a wood prison around the target.

- **Fortifying Seed** [B-medical jutsu] [Mokuton]: a healing jutsu. The user implants a white seed in the patient's body, drawing upon the life force of wood to stabilize the patient's injuries and deliver critical resources like blood and oxygen.

- **Smothering Binding** [A-ninjutsu] [Mokuton]: an offensive and support jutsu. The user creates thick wooden tendrils that burst out of the ground to restrain the target's movements.

- **White Creation Rebirth** [A-ninjutsu] [Mokuton]: an offensive and defensive jutsu. The user creates a giant banyan tree around himself. This tree is hard as bone and can grow rapidly in any direction at the user's command.

**RINNEGAN**: eng. *Samsara Eye*. The legendary bloodline of the Sage of Six Paths. A doujutsu of immense power shrouded in myth. Said to be the progenitor of the Eyes of the Three Secrets, and also to control life and death itself. Many believe that the Rinnegan has never truly existed. Recently, however, the Akatsuki missing-nin Yoshitomo Nagato has surfaced in the Rain Country with a doujutsu that resembles the mythical Rinnegan. Nagato's eyes are characterized by a ripple-like pattern that spreads over a light purple eyeball.

- **Ghost Absorption** [S-ninjutsu] [Rinnegan]: a defensive jutsu. The user harmlessly absorbs any chakra into his own body; is capable of absorbing all known ninjutsu.

- **Immortal Summoning** [S-jikuukan ninjutsu] [Rinnegan]: a support jutsu. The user summons various chimeras from the supernatural world, including a giant multi-headed dog, a giant snake-tailed chameleon, and a giant centipede. Effectively immortal, these summons can only be destroyed by defeating the original user.

- **Planetary Devastation** [S-jikuukan ninjutsu] [Rinnegan]: an offensive jutsu. The user releases a black sphere into the area which attracts everything from its surroundings to create a large comet around it. The user can then drop the comet on targets below. Mass Devastation jutsu.

- **Shinra Tensei** [S-jikuukan ninjutsu] [Rinnegan]: eng. *Heavenly Subjugation*. A versatile offensive and defensive jutsu. The user manipulates attractive forces to push or pull matter away from his body at will. Can be used to destroy any obstacle as well as to deflect all attacks. At higher levels of force, Shinra Tensei becomes a Mass Devastation jutsu.

- **Six Paths of Pain** [S-ninjutsu] [Rinnegan]: an extremely versatile support jutsu. The user divides his Rinnegan power into six bodies, each with the Rinnegan eye and a shared field of vision. Each of the bodies can use a specific type of unique jutsu.

**SAMEKAIJIN**: eng. *Shark Monster*. Bloodline of the Hoshigaki clan of Kiri. Samekaijin users have many shark-like characteristics, including gray sandpaper skin, rows of sharp teeth, lidless black eyes, and greatly enhanced senses. They are extremely strong, tough, and have almost inexhaustible reserves of stamina. Often considered more animal than human, Samekaijin users are feared even by their comrades for their merciless brutality.

- **Shark Teeth Attack** [B-ninjutsu] [Samekaijin]: an offensive jutsu. The user screams, shooting hundreds of sharp teeth out of his mouth in a wide cone in front of him.

- **Feeding Sharks** [B-ninjutsu] [Samekaijin]: an offensive jutsu. The user uses his chakra in a body of water to create regenerating sharks, which circle the target with high speed and use their sharp teeth to tear into the enemy with each consecutive attack.

- **Bloodscent** [A-ninjutsu] [Samekaijin]: an offensive jutsu. The user enters a state of frenzied bloodlust upon entering the final stage of a hunt, greatly multiplying his speed and strength, but at the cost of any rational thought. A Bloodscent user will pursue the target onto death.

**SHARINGAN**: eng. *Copy Wheel Eye*. Bloodline of the Uchiha clan of Konoha. One of the Eyes of
the Three Secrets. The Sharingan is typically manifested as a normal eye. When activated, the pupil turns red and displays from one to three tomoe swirls, based on how developed it is. An activated Sharingan grants the user the power to track any movement, no matter how subtle; predictive powers; and the ability to copy any jutsu that the user sees. The Sharingan also has a legendary upgraded form, the Mangekyo Sharingan or Kaleidoscope Copy Wheel Eye. It is considered one of the most powerful bloodlines in the world.

peror Sharingan Genjutsu [C-genjutsu] [Sharingan]: an offensive jutsu using the Sharingan to project a powerful illusion into the target's mind, disabling him.
peror Amaterasu [S-ninjutsu] [Mangekyo Sharingan]: eng. Heavenly Illumination. Signature jutsu of Uchiha Itachi. The user uses his Mangekyo Sharingan to cast a unquenchable black flame that burns anything in its path.
peror Tsukuyomi [S-genjutsu] [Mangekyo Sharingan]: eng. Moon Reader. Signature jutsu of Uchiha Itachi. The uses his Mangekyo Sharingan to cast an unbreakable genjutsu on any target who makes eye contact, trapping the target in a world where even the passage of time is controlled by the user.

SHINSEI:eng. Ultimate Rebirth. Bloodline of the Hiroshi clan of Kiri. Shinsei users have extremely fast regeneration, able to regrow their entire bodies in minutes and easily survive otherwise fatal wounds. However, this regeneration is not unlimited and must be sustained by the user's chakra. Shinsei users do not feel pain as others do, and are well known for their reckless and dangerous fighting style.
peror Sheathing the Sword [C-ninjutsu] [Shinsei]: an offensive jutsu. The user attacks the target without regard for his own body, freely accepting the target's attack in order to counterattack more effectively.
peror Fatality [B-taijutsu] [Shinsei]: an offensive jutsu. The user turns his own body into a living weapon, using explosive tags and other weapons hidden inside various parts of his body to surprise the unsuspecting target.

SHOKUSHU:eng. Black Thread. Bloodline of the Onira clan of Taki. The only known man-made bloodline, Shokushu is a product of genetic experimentation and modification by the founders of the Onira clan. Shokushu users have a unique body structure composed of hundreds of thick black threads woven throughout their flesh, which hold their body together like the stitches of a rag-doll. These threads allow Shokushu users to detach body parts at will, attack enemies, and perform unique medical jutsu. They are also highly resistant to physical attacks.
peror Black Spines [C-ninjutsu] [Shinsei]: an offensive jutsu. The user sends Shokushu threads from his spinal cord underground to attack targets from below in a wide radius. Mass Devastation jutsu.
peror Black Stitch [B-medical jutsu] [Shinsei]: an upgrade of Mystical Stitching. The user stitches together the patient's wounds with Shokushu threads, easily repairing what would otherwise be fatal injuries.
peror Death and Decay [B-medical jutsu]: an offensive medical jutsu. The user sends out a Shokushu thread to infect the target with his own blood, which is poisonous to non-Shokushu users. Beginning from the infected area, this poison first causes the target's blood to change into an oil-like soup, and then in its later stages causes all the cells in the target's body to rapidly age and then die. Death and Decay is known as a sadist's jutsu because it kills so slowly and so painfully; there is no known antidote.

SUIKA: eng. Hydration Transformation. Bloodline of the Houzuki clan of Kiri. Suika users have the power to transform their bodies into a liquid water form at will, making them invulnerable to ordinary physical attacks and allowing them to change shape and form. Suika users are vulnerable to lightning-based jutsu and require constant rehydration to sustain their liquid form.
peror Water Wrap Armor [C-ninjutsu] [Suika]: a defensive and support jutsu. The user forms into an armor of water around an ally, simultaneously protecting the ally's body as well as supporting the ally's attacks.
Water Gun [C-ninjutsu] [Suika]: an offensive jutsu. The user compresses a drop of water in his index finger and then fires at the target with great speed and force.

Water Explosion [B-ninjutsu] [Suika]: an offensive jutsu. The user explodes his body in a violent burst of steam, which then slowly reforms from the water vapor. Mass Devastation jutsu.

II. CLAN JUTSU:

Akimichi Clan:
Human Bullet Tank [C-ninjutsu] [Clan Jutsu]: secret clan jutsu of the Akimichi clan of Konoha. The user becomes a human-sized ball and uses chakra to propel himself into a powerful and very fast spinning roll.

Ashuju Clan:
Defiled Scent [C-ninjutsu] [Clan Jutsu]: secret clan jutsu of the Ashuju Clan of Dasuto. The user emits a noxious smell from his body that is so revolting it will disable or even kill any target that comes close. Defiled Scent users purposely cut off their own noses in order to protect themselves from the stench.

Haghira Clan:
Gravity Wave [B-jikuukan ninjutsu] (Clan Jutsu): secret clan jutsu of the Haghira clan of Iwa. The user creates a space-time barrier to manipulate the strength of gravity within a given area. Gravity Wave can be used to both greatly increase and decrease gravity.

Higeru Clan:
Secret Truth Reflection [B-ninjutsu] (Clan Jutsu) [equipment: Reflection Mirror]: secret clan jutsu of the Higeru clan of Kawa. The user uses a special chakra-cast Reflection Mirror to deflect or even reflect any ninjutsu cast at him.

Makoto Clan:
Impure Blood [B-ninjutsu] (Clan Jutsu): secret clan jutsu of the Makoto clan of Chi. The user absorbs others' blood into his own, temporarily increasing his strength and even allowing him to use the jutsu of the person whose blood was absorbed.

Nara Clan:
Shadow Imitation [C-ninjutsu] (Clan Jutsu): secret clan jutsu of the Nara clan of Konoha. The user manipulates his own shadow, extending it as he chooses. When his own shadow touches the target's shadow, the target becomes unable to move on his own and is forced to imitate the user's movements.

Yamanaka Clan:
Mind Body Switch [C-ninjutsu] (Clan Jutsu): secret clan jutsu of the Yamanaka clan of Konoha. The user sends his mind as spiritual energy into the target's body, giving him complete body of the target's body for a short period of time. The user's original body is left defenseless while the Mind Body Switch is active, leaving it susceptible to attack.

III. EQUIPMENT:

Weapons:
Kunai [E-weapon]: a spade-like dagger, designed for thrusting and stabbing. Basic shinobi weapon.
Senbon [E-weapon]: a long metal needle with points at both ends. Widely used by rain-nins and swamp-nins.
**Shuriken** [E-weapon]: a small four-pronged throwing star. Basic shinobi weapon.

**Blow Dart** [D-weapon]: small metal needles, usually coated in poison and blown at the target through a long tube. Widely used by rain-nin and swamp-nin.

**Chakram** [D-weapon]: a circular throwing weapon with a sharpened outer edge. Often used by lightning-nins.

**Katana** [D-weapon]: a long curving sword. Commonly used by ANBU as well as the Sougon clan of Iwa.

**Longbow** [D-weapon]: a tall curved bow used to shoot long-range arrows. Often used by lightning-nins.

**Staff** [D-weapon]: a long blunt stick, usually made of wood or bamboo. Often used by mist-nins and rain-nins.

**War Fan** [D-weapon]: a metal fan designed for close combat. Often used by fire-nins and sand-nins.

**Whip** [D-weapon]: a long flexible lash with a at the tip. Often used by sand-nins.

**Copper Arrow** [C-weapon] (user: Fukunaga Kazuno): a special arrow made of magnetized copper.

**Copper Chakram** [C-weapon] (user: Kirazu Raiki): a special chakram made of magnetized copper.

**Copper Shuriken** [C-weapon]: a special shuriken made of magnetized copper.

**Chakra-Cast Kunai** [B-weapon] (user: Haruno Sakura): a special kunai made from glowing white chakra. Much sharper and faster than an ordinary kunai; often used in combination with chakra ninjutsu.

**Chakra-Cast Whip** [B-weapon] (user: Hattori Bakan): a special whip made from glowing white chakra. Much sharper and faster than an ordinary whip; often used in combination with Guraton.

**Dynamo Bow** [B-weapon] (user: Fukunaga Kazuno): a special metal longbow imbued with lightning chakra. Any arrow fired by the Dynamo Bow takes on its chakra nature, greatly enhancing the arrow's speed and piercing ability.

**Giant War Fan** [B-weapon] (user: Sabaku Temari): a special war fan with three purple circles along its metal body. Many times the size of an ordinary war fan; often used in combination with wind jutsu.

**Shadow Knife** [B-weapon] (user: Kyoroku Erima): a special kunai with a long edge on one side; its surface is always black, as if drinking any light or color that falls on it. Used in combination with the Shadow Slash jutsu.

**Blast Sword** [A-weapon] (user: Keel the Annihilator): one of the legendary swords of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist. So named for the system of explosive tags which coat one side of its double-edged surface, allowing the sword to blast apart anything which comes in contact with it.

**Dreamsteel Katana** [A-weapon]: a katana forged from dreamsteel. Far sharper and lighter than ordinary steel. There are only fifty known dreamsteel blades in existence, each worth a thousand times its weight in gold.

**Thunderfangs** [A-weapon] (user: Hachiko the Hound): one of the legendary swords of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist. A pair of slender double-edged katanas imbued with lightning chakra, the Thunderfangs are said to be the sharpest swords in the world.

**Kusanagi** [S-weapon] (user: Nomo Orochimaru): a legendary sword from the Age of Myth, its origins shrouded in rumor and legend. Some consider the Kusanagi the strongest weapon that has ever existed.

**Masamune** [S-weapon] (user: Sougon Shirasu, Sougon Seurin): a legendary dreamsteel katana, said to be the most exquisitely crafted sword of its kind in the world, with the ability to discriminate between good and evil. Glittering white even in the dead of night, the Masamune is said to reflect the purity of the world beyond. The only surviving blade of the legendary Earth swordsmith Mitarashi Masamune.

**Red Needle** [S-weapon] (user: Nobunaga Kikuko): one of the legendary swords of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist. So named for its shape like a sewing needle and the red blood stains which coat its surface.
Armor:
Steam Armor [C-armor] (users: steam-nins): a mechanical armored suit powered by a steam engine built into the back. Steam Armor multiplies the user's strength and speed as well as enabling the user to perform unique mechanical jutsu. While thick brass plates protect both the suit and user from damage, the suit is highly vulnerable to an attack on its power source.

Reflection Mirror [B-armor] (users: Higeru clan): a special translucent mirror made from jade and chakra; used in combination with Secret Truth Reflection.

Dreamsteel Armor [A-armor]: body armor forged from dreamsteel. Far stronger, lighter, and more durable than ordinary steel. While scattered pieces of dreamsteel armor are fairly common in the ninja world, only a few complete suits are known to survive.

Armor of Uzaemo [S-armor]: a famous suit of dreamsteel armor forged by Mitarashi Masamune and previously worn by Sougon Uzaemo of the Furnace.

Other Equipment:
Explosive Tag [C-scroll]: a sealing scroll that can detonated after a set amount of time or on command. Often used in traps, or wrapped around thrown weapons to increase its range; widely used by all shinobi.

Sealing Scroll [C-scroll]: a scroll in which physical objects, energy, or even jutsu are sealed using fuinjutsu; the sealed object can then be summoned at will using the reverse process. Widely used by all shinobi.

Glacier Pack [C-miscellaneous]: a pack of crushed Dreamstone Glacier ice carried on the user's back; used in combination with glacier jutsu. Often used by glacier-nins.

Soldier Pills [C-miscellaneous]: special pills made of powerful stimulants and nutrients that replenish the user's chakra and allow them to keep on fighting.

Puppet [C-puppet]: a versatile mechanical jointed object animated by the user through chakra strings and used for reconnaissance, support, or combat purposes. Usually made in the shape of a such as an animal such as a dragonfly or a scorpion. Often used by sand-nins.


⇨ Sanshouo [B-puppet] (user: Sabaku Kankuro): eng. Salamander. A special puppet shaped like a salamander with a defensive iron frill and a flamethrower in its mouth.

⇨ Puppet Implants [A-puppet] (user: Akasun Baki): puppet parts surgically implanted into the user's body, allowing the user to use unique puppet jutsu, including Chakra Shield and Red Rock Barrage.

⇨ Chakra Shield [A-puppet jutsu]: the user creates a spinning shield of solid chakra out of his puppet arm. The Chakra Shield is equivalent to a powerful Advanced Chakra Field, strong enough to directly block many taijutsu and ninjutsu attacks.

⇨ Red Rock Barrage [A-puppet jutsu]: the user blasts out a barrage of special, concentrated shrapnel from the palm and sides of his puppet arm. The shrapnel is made of bits of sandstone from Red Rock Cliff, infused with wind chakra-flow and sharpened into a deadly cutting salvo.


Kokaeo Tree Neurotoxin [B-poison]: a neurotoxin distilled from the Kokaeo tree of Rain. Attacks the target's muscles, including the heart.

Sand Gourd [B-miscellaneous] (user: Sabaku Gaara): a giant calabash-shaped gourd carried on the user's back and filled with sand; used in combination with sand jutsu.

Cyanide [A-poison]: a poison gas that prevents the target's cells from using oxygen, causing death within minutes.
**Hypnotic Scroll** [A-scroll] (user: Kozumi Saotome): a unique sealing scroll tattooed into the user's body itself and created with his own chakra. Hypnotic Scrolls can be used to manipulate the environment around the user in extraordinary ways, altering the fabric of space and time, though at the cost of a scroll each time one is used. The user must enter a Hypnotic State in order to access the power of his Hypnotic Scrolls.

### IV. SUMMONS:

**Bats**: summoned by the Bakura clan of Iwa. One of the Six Sacred Animals of the Scar; primarily located in the Weeping Caverns. Used in combination with Koumori jutsu like Bat Dominance.

**Cranes**: summoned by the Hyuuga clan of Konoha. Used primarily for reconnaissance.

**Crocodiles**: summoned by the Fukki clan of Numa. Used for reconnaissance as well as in combat; often combined with Reed Transformation.

**Cuckoos**: summoned by the Sougon clan of Iwa.

- **Momo** [E-summon]: pet cuckoo and personal summon of Sougon Seurin.

**Deer**: summoned by the Sougon clan of Iwa. One of the Six Sacred Animals of the Scar; primarily located in the Valley of Spears.

- **Teru** [C-summon]: pet deer and personal summon of Sougon Sosano.

- **Big Brother** [A-summon]: a gigantic deer with a crown of magnificent antlers.

- **Tajima** [S-summon] (boss summon): called the Shadow’s Shadow. Matriarch of the white-tailed deer of the Valley of Spears.

**Elephants**: summoned by the Shimura clan of Konoha.

- **Pinkie** [B-summon]: a pink dwarf elephant.

**Lions**: summoned by the Noatari clan of Iwa. One of the Six Sacred Animals of the Scar; primarily located in the Musashi Plains.

**Monkeys**: summoned by the Sarutobi clan of Konoha.

- **Ranma** [A-summon]: a red-assed gorilla.

- **Enma** [S-summon] (boss summon): called the King of Monkeys. Can transform into an adamantine staff.

**Pufferfish**: summoned by Nobunaga Kikuko.

**Salamanders**: summoned by the Mukai clan of Ame. Often used for reconnaissance as well for their poisonous properties.

- **Ibuse** [A-summon]: a large, fat gray salamander. Able to exude a deadly poison mist from its mouth.

**Sharks**: summoned by the Hoshigaki clan of Kiri.

**Slugs**: summoned by Senju Tsunade and Haruno Sakura. One of the Six Sacred Animals of the Scar; primarily located in Shikkotsu Forest. Known for their immense durability as well as their deadly poisons.

- **Katsuyu** [S-summon] (boss summon): called the Queen of the Scar. Leader of the mountain slugs of Shikkotsu Forest.

**Snakes**: summoned by Nomo Orochimaru.

**Snow Rabbits**: summoned by the Uraouji clan of Hyoga.

**Spiders**: summoned by the Haghira clan of Iwa. One of the Six Sacred Animals of the Scar; primarily located in Kannon Chasm.

**Toads**: summoned by Wakanura Jiraiya.

**Turtles**: summoned by Maito Gai and Hyuuga Neji.

- **Ningame** [B-summon]: a large red tortoise; has potent fire attacks.

**Wasps**: summoned by the Chuzuru clan of Iwa. One of the Six Sacred Animals of the Scar;
primarily located in Fuwa Valley.

Weasels: summoned by Sabaku Temari.

⇒ Kamatari [B-summon]: a giant white weasel that carries a sickle blade.

V. GENERAL JUTSU:

Fuinjutsu:

Soul Eye [**-Fuinjutsu]: also called Reigan. A mysterious, singular doujutsu, rumored to be in the possession of Konoha's ANBU ROOT. Artificially created by experimentation with the Sharingan and the Byakugan, the Soul Eye is supposedly able to steal souls with a single look, sucking the souls of its victims into its own fathomless depths. Perhaps incongruously, the Soul Eye is also linked with immortality. No true details are known about the Soul Eye, if it even exists.

Sealing Release [E-fuinjutsu]: a basic support jutsu. The user uses a small amount of chakra to activate a given seal, such as a sealing scroll, thus releasing the objects or energy stored inside the seal.

Chakra Trap [D-fuinjutsu]: a trap jutsu drawn on the ground. When the target steps inside the seal, it will activate and drain a large amount of the target's chakra.

Siren Trap [D-fuinjutsu]: a trap jutsu drawn on the ground. When the target steps inside the seal, it will activate and emit a loud warning sound, exposing the target's location.

Barrier Trap [C-fuinjutsu]: a trap jutsu drawn on the ground. When the target steps inside the seal, it will activate and become a chakra barrier, preventing the target from leaving its borders.

Hypnotic Scroll: Seal Light [C-jikuukan fuinjutsu] [equipment: Hypnotic Scroll] (user: Koizumi Saotome): a support jutsu. The user uses a Hypnotic Scroll to seal the visible light in a given location, creating a pocket of complete darkness.

Hypnotic Scroll: Seal Air [B-jikuukan fuinjutsu] [equipment: Hypnotic Scroll] (user: Koizumi Saotome): an offensive jutsu. The user uses a Hypnotic Scroll to seal the air in a given location, creating an instantaneous vacuum.

Hypnotic Scroll: Seal Ground [B-jikuukan fuinjutsu] [equipment: Hypnotic Scroll] (user: Koizumi Saotome): an offensive and trap jutsu. The user uses a Hypnotic Scroll to seal the ground in a given location, causing the target to fall right through it.

Hypnotic Scroll: Seal Body [A-jikuukan fuinjutsu] [equipment: Hypnotic Scroll] (user: Koizumi Saotome): an offensive jutsu. The user uses a Hypnotic Scroll to seal a part of the target's body, such as the limbs, the lungs, or even the heart.

Death Demon Seal [S-fuinjutsu] (kinjutsu) (users: Densuke Tosuken, Mukai Hanzou, Senju Tsunade): a spiritual attack on the target's soul, causing his soul to be sealed away forever in hell. Requires the sacrifice of the user's soul or another soul proxy to the Shinigami. Instant Death jutsu; considered the most powerful fuinjutsu in existence. The opposite of Death Soul Salvation.

Shadow Power Theft [S-fuinjutsu] (user: Haghira Doi): a trap jutsu. At the moment the target performs a jutsu, the user seals the target's jutsu away in a scroll or other object, stealing it and preventing the target from ever using that jutsu again. Shadow Power Theft does not work on bloodline jutsu.

Yin Seal [S-fuinjutsu] (user: Senju Tsunade): a support jutsu. The user stores vast amounts of chakra over an extended period of time into a diamond-like seal on his forehead. When the Yin Seal is released, the stored chakra is released into the user's body, greatly amplifying the power of all his jutsu. The Yin Seal has sometimes been likened to a "ninth" Chakra Gate as a consequence of this effect.

Genjutsu:

Sleep [C-genjutsu]: a disabling attack on the target's consciousness trigger. Falsely signals the trigger that oxygen levels in the brain are low, automatically causing the target to fall unconscious.
Blackout [C-genjutsu]: a sensory attack on the target's optical nerve. Disrupts transmissions along the nerve, causing a sudden loss of vision.

Mirage [C-genjutsu]: a sensory attack on the target's optical nerve. Inserts a false afterimage so that objects in motion appear to lag several seconds from their true position.

Vertigo [C-rank genjutsu]: a sensory attack on the target's inner ear canal. Disrupts the target's sense of balance and ability to move effectively.

Amnesia [B-genjutsu] (user: Senju Tsunade): a mental attack on the target's hippocampus. Disrupts the target's long-term and short-term memory for the duration of the jutsu, causing total amnesia.

Binding [B-genjutsu]: a disabling attack on the target's nervous system. Disrupts transmission between the spinal cord and the muscles, paralyzing the target in place.

Nirvana [B-genjutsu] (user: Koizumi Saotome): a mental attack on the target's pleasure centers. Causes intense sexual orgasms which distract the target from other kinds of attacks.

Whiteout [B-genjutsu]: a sensory attack on all the main sensory nerves in the target's head. Causes a sudden loss of vision, hearing, taste, smell, and balance.


Combined Genjutsu [A-genjutsu]: a combination attack of two or more genjutsu at once. The more genjutsu used in the combination attack, the more difficult it is to counter.

Hypnotic State [A-genjutsu] (user: Kozumi Saotome): a self-genjutsu cast by the user on himself. Allows the user to enter an altered state of consciousness and perceive the world around him differently; used in combination in Hypnotic Scrolls.

Fear [A-genjutsu]: also called Killing Intent. A mental attack on the target's amygdala. Causes the target to be overwhelmed by an uncontrollable sense of fear.

Oversurge [A-genjutsu]: a disabling attack on the target's chakra sensing nodes. Overwhelms the target with foreign chakra which causes him to fall unconscious. Typically used by chakra sensors against each other.

Spacetime Distortion [S-genjutsu] (user: Senju Tsunade): a sensory attack on the target's cerebral cortex. Alters the target's perception of space and time, causing the target to experience an entire day in a single moment.

Torment [S-genjutsu] (kinjutsu) (user: Senju Tsunade): a spiritual attack on the target's soul, causing him to become utterly insane. Requires the sacrifice of a piece of the user's own soul to the Shinigami. Instant Death jutsu; considered the most powerful genjutsu in existence. The opposite of Sanity.

Medical Jutsu:

Chakra Scalpel [C-medial jutsu]: a basic healing jutsu used to perform surgery. The user forms their chakra into a sharp blade that can pass through flesh without creating an open wound.

Mystical Palm [C-medical jutsu]: a basic healing jutsu used to repair wounds. The user sends chakra from their hands into the patient's affected areas, regenerating tissue and strengthening the chakra circulatory system.

Poison Extraction [B-medical jutsu]: a jutsu used to extract poison and other pathogens from the patient's body. The user interfaces with the patient's chakra circulatory system to strain the poison from the infected tissue.

Healing Seed [B-medical jutsu]: a preventative jutsu used to fortify the body prior to battle. The user implants a small chakra seed in the patient's body, which then automatically feeds the patient chakra to regenerate injuries as they occur.

Mystical Stitching [B-medical jutsu]: a battlefield jutsu used to rapidly stabilize injuries. The user stitches together the patient's wounds with chakra strings, allowing the patient to keep on fighting through the damage.

Advanced Mystical Palm [A-medical jutsu]: an upgrade of Mystical Palm, created by adding
chakra flow and chakra sensing to the original jutsu. Can be used remotely from a distance or through an intermediary.

**Healing Regeneration** [A-medical jutsu]: eng. a multi-stage jutsu that regenerates a patient's limbs or other missing body parts using cell grafts. Requires prepared seals and a team of medic-nin.

**Creation Procedure** [A-medical jutsu]: a multi-stage jutsu that regenerates all the cells in the patient's body from a cryogenic frozen state. Requires a cryogenic chamber and a team of medic-nin. A powerful medical jutsu; only used on the critically wounded patients.

**Creation Rebirth** [S-medical jutsu] (kinjutsu) (user: Senju Tsunade): a healing jutsu in which the user regenerates his entire body from a huge well of stored chakra. Similar to the Creation Procedure but does not require the use of a cryogenic chamber. Shortens the user's lifespan whenever it is used. Considered one of the most powerful medical jutsu in existence.

**Sanity** [S-medical jutsu] (kinjutsu) (user: Senju Tsunade): a spiritual jutsu to heal depression, insanity, and other mental disorders. Requires the sacrifice of a piece of the user's own soul to the Shinigami. The only such mental health jutsu in existence. The opposite of Torment.

**Ninjutsu [Chakra]:**

**Chakra Manipulation** [D-ninjutsu]: a basic chakra jutsu fundamental to all ninjutsu. The user controls, shapes, and alters the elemental nature of chakra through the tenketsu in his chakra circulatory system. Chakra manipulation is the defining ability of a shinobi.

**Chakra Field** [C-ninjutsu]: a control jutsu used to alter the terrain of the battlefield. The user pushes out a rotating burst of chakra from his tenketsu, creating a barrier of chakra around a specific area.

**Chakra Drain** [B-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu used to steal chakra from the target. The user creates a looped chakra flow field to draw chakra away from the target and into his own chakra circulatory system. Can be used remotely from a close distance.

**Chakra Flow** [B-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu used to increase the power of other jutsu. The user flows a looped current of chakra within an object or another chakra jutsu, granting it additional properties. Chakra flow is often used in combination with nature manipulation to enhance the physical power of a weapon.

**Chakra Gates** [B-ninjutsu] (kinjutsu): a support jutsu which greatly increases the amount of chakra available to the user. The user opens up to eight of the Chakra Gates inside his chakra circulatory system, temporarily multiplying the power of all his jutsu. Opening the Chakra Gates irreversibly damages the user's body at the cellular level; if all eight Chakra Gates are opened, the user will die.

**Chakra Strings** [B-ninjutsu]: a control jutsu used to move, shape, and reinforce objects. The user ejects a stream of tightly coiled chakra from his hand, which then functions like a rope or a net. Chakra strings are used by puppeteers to control their puppets.

**Chakra Enhanced Strength** [A-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu used to multiply the user's physical strength. The user applies chakra flow to his own body to augment his muscles and to release bursts of charged chakra from specific parts of his body.

**Advanced Chakra Field** [A-ninjutsu]: an upgrade of Chakra Field, created by adding chakra flow and chakra strings. Advanced Chakra Fields are strong enough to directly block many taijutsu and ninjutsu attacks.

**Chakra Sensing** [A-ninjutsu]: a support and reconnaissance jutsu used to detect chakra fields near the user. Distinct from passive chakra awareness. The user creates a huge, low-density chakra field around himself; then, by tying fluctuations in this chakra field into his own brain, the user is able to perceive chakra directly through his various senses. Considered the pinnacle of chakra mastery.

**Chakra Sensing Disruption** [A-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu used to interfere with the target's chakra sensing. The user manipulates the chakra fields in the air of a given area, preventing signals from traveling out of the area.

**Chakra Sensing Transfer** [A-ninjutsu] (user: Akasun Baki): a support jutsu used to temporarily grant chakra sensing to a non-sensor. The user sends his own chakra into the brain of another ninja, "charging" the other person with a limited form of chakra sensing as long as the original chakra lasts.
Chakra Armor [A-ninjutsu]: a defensive jutsu used to protect the user's body. The user creates a highly concentrated Advanced Chakra Field around his body, deflecting or mitigating all attacks. The properties of chakra armors vary depending on the specific nature manipulation applied to them. Requires a large amount of chakra to sustain.

Chakra Wall [S-ninjutsu] (user: Senju Tsunade): an upgrade of Advanced Chakra Field, created by applying yin-yang manipulation to increase the field density. Chakra Walls are strong enough to directly block even the most potent attacks. Requires an extreme amount of chakra to sustain.

Ninjutsu [Combat]:
- **Bamboo Hurricane** [C-ninjutsu] [equipment: Staff] (user: Densuke Tosuken): a support jutsu. The user manipulates the size and shape of his bamboo staff, such as extending its length.
- **Black Hole** [S-jikuukan ninjutsu] (user: Senju Tsunade): an offensive jutsu. The user creates a singularity in the fabric of space and time, sucking in everything around it.
- **Blink Dart** [B-ninjutsu] [equipment: Blow Dart]: an offensive jutsu. The user spits a small dart at the target from his mouth, using his body chakra to accelerate it to extremely high speeds.
- **Body Flicker** [D-ninjutsu]: a offensive and defensive jutsu. The user moves at high speed over a short distance, often disguising his movements with a puff of smoke or other material.
- **Body Flash** [A-jikuukan ninjutsu] (user: Seurin Shadowstar, Sougon Sawar, Sougon Charasu, Senju Tsunade): an upgrade of Body Flicker. The user enhances the speed of Body Flicker by bending space and time itself. A flash of light often accompanies the Body Flash.
- **Body Replacement** [E-ninjutsu]: a basic support jutsu used to confuse the target. The user replaces their own body with another object in the vicinity, creating an optical illusion at the precise moment when the target is attacking.
- **Clone** [E-ninjutsu]: a basic support jutsu. The user creates an intangible copy of one's own body, without any substance or ability to attack. Disappears upon destruction.
  - δ **Earth Clone** [C-ninjutsu]: also called Mud Clone. An upgrade of Clone. The user creates a tangible clone from mud.
  - δ **Fire Clone** [C-ninjutsu]: an upgrade of Clone. The user creates a tangible clone from fire.
  - δ **Lightning Clone** [C-ninjutsu]: an upgrade of Clone. The user creates a tangible clone from electricity.
  - δ **Water Clone** [C-ninjutsu]: an upgrade of Clone. The user creates a tangible clone from water.
  - δ **Wind Clone** [C-ninjutsu]: an upgrade of Clone. The user creates a tangible clone from wind.
  - δ **Paper Clone** [B-ninjutsu]: an upgrade of Clone. The user creates a tangible clone from paper.
  - δ **Puppet Clone** [B-ninjutsu] [equipment: Puppets]: an upgrade of Clone. The user creates a tangible clone of a puppet under his control.
  - δ **Shadow Clone** [B-ninjutsu]: a powerful version of Clone. The user creates a tangible clone from pure chakra.
  - δ **Earth Shadow Clone** [B-ninjutsu]: an upgrade of Shadow Clone, created by adding earth chakra flow. This clone is capable of reforming itself after destruction, as well as trapping a nearby target in hardened mud.
  - δ **Lightning Shadow Clone** [B-ninjutsu]: an upgrade of Shadow Clone, created by adding lightning chakra flow. Upon destruction, this clone will electrocute whatever is in its proximity.
  - δ **Mirrored Clone** [A-ninjutsu]: a powerful upgrade of Earth Clone. The user uses a combination of chakra flow and genjutsu to directly control the movements of his mud clones, enhancing the user's field of sensation and greatly increasing coordination of movement. Vulnerable to attacks which disrupt the chakra link between the user and the clone.

**Death Soul Salvation** [S-ninjutsu] (kinjutsu) (user: Mukai Hanzou): a spiritual defensive jutsu that saves the target's soul, up to and including resurrection from death. Requires the sacrifice of the user's soul or another soul proxy to the Shinigami. Considered the most powerful support ninjutsu in existence. The opposite of Death Demon Seal.
Dust Cloud [C-ninjutsu]: a support and defensive jutsu. The user throws up dust from chakra-laced pouches, creating a cloud of impenetrable dust in a given area.

Dust Transformation [B-ninjutsu]: a defensive jutsu. The user turns his body to dust and floats on the air, largely impervious to ordinary physical attacks, though also unable to attack physically in turn.

Earth Release: Sinister Spikes [C-ninjutsu]: a piercing offensive jutsu. The user creates large spikes which shoot from the ground in a line.

Earth Release: Earth Wall [C-ninjutsu]: a defensive jutsu used to block physical attacks. The user creates a wall of earth in front of himself.

Earth Release: Quicksand [C-ninjutsu]: an offensive and defensive jutsu. The user turns the ground in a given area into mud, impairing movement.

Earth Release: Bedrock Coffin [B-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu used to trap multiple targets. The user creates a sinkhole in the earth which is then covered up by its collapsing walls.

Earth Release: Earthquake [B-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu used to control the field of battle. The user shakes the earth in a wide radius around himself, causing a minor earthquake and impairing movement.

Earth Release: Stone Form [B-ninjutsu]: a defensive jutsu used to protect the user's body. The user turns his body into stone, making him impervious to ordinary attacks but also much heavier and slower.

Earth Release: Fangs of Wrath [B-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu. The user creates hundreds of spears which erupt from the earth around a given area. Mass Devastation jutsu.

Earth Release: Diamond Wall [A-ninjutsu]: a defensive jutsu used to block physical attacks. The user creates a wall of diamond-hard earth in front of himself. Diamond Walls are strong enough to repel most taijutsu and ninjutsu attacks.

Earth Release: Living Clay [A-ninjutsu]: an offensive and defensive jutsu. The user creates a shifting sphere of soft yet dense clay around himself which he can then control with precision accuracy. In its offensive form, Living Clay can be extended outward to annihilate opposing armies. Mass Devastation jutsu.

Earth Release: Swamp of the Underworld [A-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu used to annihilate opposing armies. The user creates a colossal swamp in the targeted area, sucking everything into it with no escape. Mass Devastation jutsu.

Elephant Skin [B-ninjutsu] (user: Shimura Anake): a defensive jutsu. The user makes his skin as tough and resistant as an elephant's.

Exploding Needle Shower [C-ninjutsu] [equipment: Senbon]: an offensive jutsu. The user throws a cluster of senbon needles into the air, which then explode outward in a bomb.

Exploding Poison Shower [B-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu. The user throws bottles of poison in the air, which then explode outward in a bomb.

Fan of Grass [C-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu. The user throws blades of of razor-sharp grass outward in a circle.

Fire Release: Fireball [C-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu. The user blows a fireball from his mouth, burning all targets in its path.

Fire Release: Great Fireball [B-ninjutsu]: an upgrade of Fire Release: Fireball. The user blows a very large fireball from his mouth.

Fire Release: Dragon Fire [B-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu. The user throws arcs of fire from his hands, which then explode on impact and spread flames in all directions. Mass Devastation jutsu.

Fire Release: Phoenix Flowers [B-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu. The user sends multiple balls of flames at the target, each of which can be controlled by the user and directed to fly in a specific pattern. Shuriken can also be concealed within the flames, creating an unexpected secondary surprise attack.

Fire Release: Endless Flames [A-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu. The user uses special clay pots to
prepare a potent liquid fire which can burn through almost any substance, including metal and rock. This fire can be aimed out of the pots like a cannon.

**Fire Release: Tidal Inferno** [S-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu used to annihilate opposing armies. The user creates a five-story high tidal wave of fire in a given direction, destroying all in its path.

**Hidden Chameleon** [A-jikuukan ninjutsu] (user: Densuke Tosuken): a support and offensive jutsu. By bending the electromagnetic spectrum, the user turns himself invisible and undetectable to ordinary senses.

**Lightning Release: Lightning Whip** [C-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu used to strike enemies from close range. The user creates a flexible whip of lightning in his hands, numbing the target's movement on impact.

**Lightning Release: Radio Radiation** [C-ninjutsu]: a support jutsu. The user creates controlled radio waves with an electromagnetic field, making it function like a giant radio transmitter and receiver.

**Lightning Release: Air Static Charge** [B-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu used to control the field of battle. The user creates a deadly electric field in a specific area, disabling living flesh inside the field for the duration of the jutsu.


**Lightning Release: Nerve Disruption** [A-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu used from close range. The user shoots a targeted burst of electricity into the target, rewiring the target's nervous system and effectively disabling the target's combat capability.


**Lightning Release: Rail Gun** [A-ninjutsu]: a piercing offensive jutsu. The user shoots a beam of concentrated lightning out of his palm, annihilating everything in the path of the beam for hundreds of meters.

**Poison Mist** [B-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu. The user mixes chakra and chemicals to breathe out a cloud of green poison, in turn disabling or even killing targets who breathe it in.

**Poison Shards** [A-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu. The user throws poisoned shards so small they are barely visible. If they pierce into the target's body, the shards will cause extreme pain but not death.

**Reed Transformation** [B-ninjutsu]: a support and offensive jutsu. The user turns parts of his body into sharp and flexible reeds, enabling a range of movement that is ordinarily impossible.

**Reap** [A-ninjutsu] (user: Mukai Aumono, Mukai Hanzou): an offensive jutsu. The user emits a short-range cutting attack from his fingertips, powerful enough to slice through solid steel.

**Salamander Sight** [B-ninjutsu] (user: Mukai Aumono, Mukai Hanzou): a support jutsu. The user's eyes become chromatic and attuned to the salamander's visual spectrum, including ultraviolet light. This enhanced vision allows the user to see in the dark and detect motion much more quickly.

**Shaggy Hair Armor** [B-ninjutsu] (user: Sarutobi Kanetsu, Sarutobi Hiraru): an offensive and defensive jutsu. The user grows thick ape hair all over his body which turn into sharp spikes.

**Seeker Light** [B-ninjutsu]: a support jutsu. The user creates circles of moving light, which seek out and isolate detectable chakra signatures, exposing a hidden target.

**Summoning Technique** [C-jikuukan ninjutsu] [equipment: Summoning Contract]: a support jutsu. The user uses his own blood to summon an animal instantaneously to the battlefield. Most ninja perform the Summoning Technique by touching an open cut on their hand to the ground, though this is not required.

**Transformation Technique** [E-ninjutsu]: a support jutsu. The user transforms his body into another person, animal, plant, or inanimate object. While the transformation is easily dispelled with an attack, it is highly useful for spying and infiltration purposes.

**Advanced Transformation Technique** [A-ninjutsu] (user: Senju Tsunade): an upgrade of the Transformation Technique, created by adding chakra flow and chakra strings to the transformation.
Makes both transformations as well as clones far more durable; can be used for combat, medical, or cosmetic purposes.

**Water Release: Hiding in Mist** [D-ninjutsu]: a support and defensive jutsu. The user creates a cloud of fine mist around himself, hiding his movements from view.

**Water Release: Drowning Death** [C-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu used to torture or humiliate a target. The user creates a bubble of water around the target's head, slowly suffocating him to death.

**Water Release: Tidal Shield** [C-ninjutsu]: a defensive jutsu used to block physical attacks. The user makes a wall of dense water in front of himself.

**Water Release: Water Shark Missile** [C-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu. The user creates a spear of water shaped like a shark.

**Water Release: Prison of Calm** [B-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu used to trap a single target. The user creates a bubble of suffocating water around the target, disabling the target's movement and preventing any physical attempts to escape.

**Water Release: Rising Water Slicer** [B-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu. The user throws hundreds of blades of water sharp as knives, slicing through anything they encounter.

**Water Release: Water Dragon Bullet** [B-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu. The user creates a large wave of water shaped like a dragon. Mass Devastation jutsu.

**Water Release: Unnatural Rain** [B-ninjutsu]: a support jutsu used to increase the water supply in a given area. The user throws seeds of water into the sky, creating clouds and causing heavy rain for the duration of the jutsu.

**Water Release: Great Waterfall** [A-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu. The user creates a river of water which crashes down on the target from above like a gigantic waterfall. Mass Devastation jutsu.

**Water Release: Exploding Darkness Wave** [A-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu used to annihilate enemy armies. The user pours a giant blast of black water out of his mouth, sweeping away all in its path. Mass Devastation jutsu.

**Water Release: Ultimate Water Shark Missile** [A-ninjutsu] (user: Hoshigaki Makera): an upgrade of Water Shark Missile. The user creates a much larger spear of water that is also able to absorb chakra from anything in its path, growing stronger in proportion to the energy it absorbs. Mass Devastation jutsu.

**Water Release: Weeping Golem** [A-ninjutsu] (kinjutsu): an offensive jutsu used to annihilate enemy armies. The user creates a powerful living statue of water, which then attacks everything in its path with fists of crashing waves. Mass Devastation jutsu. The Weeping Golem does not distinguish friend from foe, and will even attack the user himself.

**Wind Release: Vacuum Wave** [C-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu. The user creates a burst of highly pressurized wind, tearing through the flesh of targets in its path.

**Wind Release: Wind Cutter** [C-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu. The user creates a single knife of sharply edged wind which is capable of slicing through metal and flesh.

**Wind Release: False Echo** [B-ninjutsu] (user: Ryokan Satetsu): a support jutsu used to confuse enemy senses. The user uses a chakra field to alter how sound vibrates in the air, causing targets to perceive sounds as coming from somewhere else than where they really are. Highly effective at night.

**Wind Release: Beast Wave Palm** [B-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu. The user shoots a storm of wind from his palms in a branching pattern.

**Wind Release: Storm Shield** [B-ninjutsu] [equipment: Giant War Fan] (user: Sabaku Temari): a defensive jutsu used to block physical attacks. The user creates a funnel of unseen yet impenetrable wind around his Giant War Fan.

**Wind Release: Shatter** [B-ninjutsu] (user: Ryokan Satetsu): an offensive jutsu. The user creates a supersonic vibration in the air that shatters brittle objects in its area of effect, including glass, electronic equipment, and eardrums.

**Wind Release: Sonic Pulse** [B-ninjutsu]: an offensive jutsu. The user blasts a shockwave of highly
concentrated wind from his hands, powerful enough to destroy stone.


**Wind Release: Blade of Wind** [A-ninjutsu] (user: Akasun Baki): an offensive jutsu. The user forms a chakra-flow sword in his hand which can then throw slashes of wind at his targets.

**Wind Release: Vortex** [A-ninjutsu] (users: Akasun Baki): a versatile offensive, defensive, and support jutsu. Using precise wind manipulation, the user creates mobile vortexes of spinning air, which he can then use to block attacks, attack opponents, and control space.

**Taijutsu:**

**One Thousand Years of Death** [D-taijutsu]: a humiliation jutsu. The user thrusts two fingers up into the target's butt, pushing them flying into the air.

**Shadow Slash** [B-taijutsu] [equipment: Shadow Knife] (user: Kyoroku Erima): a medium-range slashing attack. The user swings his Shadow Knife, simultaneously creating an identical slash at another point in the distance. The mechanism by which this works is not known.

**Anguish Strike** [A-taijutsu] (user: Densuke Tosuken): a concentrated punch or kick which draws its power from the user's own emotions. The greater the anger and anguish, the more powerful the attack.

**Steam Frenzy Fighting Style** [C-taijutsu] [equipment: Steam Armor]: a fighting style based on the mechanical technology of Steam Armor power suits. Highly aggressive and based on the use of raw power to overwhelm the target.

- **Steam Punch**: a powerful punch of superheated steam.
- **Steam Rocket**: an aerial attack where the user flies into the air using a rocket pack and then slams down on the target.
- **Steam Fireworks**: a medium-range attack where the user releases a stream of exploding rockets from his Steam Armor.

**Beat Dog Fighting Style** [B-taijutsu] (Sir Thayan Egbert of Izu): a violent fighting style based on the combat techniques of vagabonds and other ruffians. Often used in combination with a walking stick and a beggar's bowl. So named for the stereotype of beggars beating dogs with walking sticks.

**Gentle Fist Fighting Style** [B-taijutsu]: a doujutsu fighting style unique to the Hyuuga clan of Konoha. See Part 1 of Glossary C above.


- **Dynamic Entry** [D-taijutsu]: a jump kick in the target's face.
- **Leaf Roundhouse Kick** [C-taijutsu]: a powerful spinning back kick.
- **Front Lotus** [B-taijutsu]: an aerial attack where the user restrains the target and pile-drives the target into the ground headfirst.
- **Leaf Whirlwind** [B-taijutsu]: a combination attack based on a series of high and low kicks.
- **Super Dynamic Entry** [A-taijutsu]: an upgrade of Dynamic Entry, created by adding Chakra Enhanced Strength to the original jutsu.
- **Morning Peacock** [S-taijutsu]: a powerful series of combination punches. These punches are so fast that the air is set ablaze with sheer speed and friction, creating a peacock-like fan of flames around the target. Enabled by opening six Chakra Gates.

**Silent Slash Fighting Style** [A-taijutsu] (user: Honjo Micho): a fighting style based on extremely subtle cutting attacks. The user moves as little as possible, then strikes before the target is even aware
of what is happening. So named for how the user's attacks make no sound.

**Fire and Ice Fighting Style** [S-nintaijutsu]: a doujutsu fighting style unique to the Sougon clan of Iwa. See Part 1 of Glossary C above.

**Gentaijutsu Fighting Style** [S-gentaijutsu] (user: Senju Tsunade): a fighting style that combines taijutsu and genjutsu. The user attacks simultaneously with Chakra Enhanced Strength and Combined Genjutsu.
The Village Hidden in the Stones

The bridge was still and silent as a dead man. *The stone-nins are behind the walls,* Sakura thought, but even when they crossed over the river to the other side, she saw no one. There weren't even guards at the open gate leading into the village. *Where are they?* There should have been a greeting party, or at least some protestors. *Someone, anyone.*

Instead the United Countries Embassy walked alone through the streets of Iwa.

"Where's everybody?" Kankuro asked. He shouted to the empty air. "Hey! I said where you are little stone shits? Scared of us, is that it?"

Baki seemed to come out of nowhere. "Be quiet," he said, and knocked his student upside the head.

"Ow!" Kankuro laughed as he rubbed his temple. "Just havin' some fun, Baki-sensei. I know they ain't scared. Scared people don't leave their gates wide open for the enemy to walk through, do they?"

"No," Baki said. "They are not scared, just confused. The stone-nins cannot decide whether we are guests or enemies. Some consider the treatment of the Embassy in Hiroshiki and elsewhere to be… unfortunate. They wished to welcome us to Iwa in an honorable way. Others did not even want us to enter the village. The two sides agreed on a compromise: we would simply be left alone. While the Embassy enters Iwa, no one is to come out on the streets under penalty of law."

*So it's true, then.* It was just like Tsunade-sensei had were factions here, clashing powers. *Puppets in a shadow war.* "And is the Tsuchikage happy about that?" Sakura asked.

"As far as I know, Sougon Sawar is never happy about anything."

The silence of Iwa became the silence of the ninja who walked it. A ghost town, it was, dumb and deaf, swallowing up their words. Soon there was only the sound of footsteps, the creak of wagon wheels, echoing against barren roads. They passed sloping towers of carved rock, and wooden storefronts with tiled roofs of red brick, and houses of steel and glass. In the distance, over it all, loomed a huge hill of white stone. *The Overlook,* Sakura knew. The place where the Dreamstone River split in two, the bulwark that held back the rushing water from flooding the village. Iwa had been founded in that place. It seemed as cold and strange as all the rest. *The heart of Iwa,* she thought, *a heart of stone.*

Just then Kankuro pointed in front of him. "Hey, look! I see someone." He grinned. "Well, well. This must be a pleasant surprise for you, sweet sister. It's your favorite friend."

A figure was standing in the street, waiting for them. His posture was awful, his hands were stuffed in his pockets, and his face was screwed up in a bored sigh. But when Sakura saw him she smiled at once.

"Shikamaru!" Ino yelled.

"Yo," he said, waving. "I see you."

Ino ran over to hug her former teammate, while Chouji punched him in the shoulder. Shikamaru's other friends gathered around to exchange greetings. He smiled at Sakura, nodded at Kankuro, and blushed slightly when he saw Temari. Temari rolled her eyes.
"Where the hell is everyone?" Chouji cried. "It's seriously creepy. Like, sometimes I see faces staring at me out of windows and stuff, but they never come out. How can you live here, Shika? Why'd the chuunin exam have to be here?"

Shikamaru laughed. He wore a chuunin examiner jacket, overlarge for his slight, wiry frame, which made him look years older than he was. "Ah, you get used to it."

"And are you our guide, Examiner Nara?" a voice asked behind them, soft as a trickle of ice water. It was the Hokage. She sat astride her white stallion, her pale skin shadowed by the late afternoon sun.

Shikamaru snapped to attention and kneeled. "Yes, Hokage-sama. Director Doi sent me to show the way. He wants all the foreign genin placed together in a prepared compound."

"Very well, then. Lead on."

Shikamaru led them south, down neat avenues flanked on either side by old stone houses. "This is the Aoyama district," he explained. "You guys are gonna be staying in the Zoo. Well, it used to be a zoo, before the war, so that's what they still call it. Name aside, it's actually pretty comfortable. Usually the stone-nins stuff the foreign genin in hotels, but this time there were so many, they redecorated the place just for you."

"What about the rest of the delegations?" Sakura asked. "There must be tens of thousands of people in Iwa for the exam."

"Every village's doing their own thing. Hokage-sama rented a bunch of villas near Tsukai Gardens… that's in the Shitamachi district, north and west of here. Ah. Here we are. Welcome to the Zoo."

He pointed to a large, gated compound before them. Above the high stone walls, Sakura could see the twisting branches of banyan trees. To her surprise, she could also see Iwa ANBU. There were at least a dozen of them, patrolling along the walls. She wasn't sure whether this place was supposed to be a safe haven or a prison, but either way it would be hard to trespass.

At the entrance to the Zoo was a set of heavy brass metal doors. The brass was polished to a sheen, and Sakura could see her reflection in it. She looked different than she had remembered; only that morning had she switched back into her old uniform. A tight-fitting, spandex black and green suit covered her body from upper arm to thigh. Over the suit she wore brown leather chest armor, a leather belt with hanging ninja gear, and brown knuckle gloves and open-toed sandals. Like the rest of the UC genin, she also wore an open vest of white cloth with the symbol of the United Countries stitched on the back. And like the rest of the genin, she had a metal forehead protector. I look like a ninja again. I am a ninja. This is who I am.

"It has not changed, not in twenty two years," the Hokage said. Beneath the shadow of the high walls, her eyes were dark gloomy pools, her gold hair muted to an overcast gray. She bowed her head, and for a moment seemed half a shadow herself. "I presume only the genin are allowed inside, is that right?"

"Yes, Hokage-sama," said Shikamaru. "Director Doi is waiting for them. Just go through the doors."

Senju Tsunade fixed her shadowed gaze on Sakura. "You first, girl."

Me first. Her sensei's words from the night before echoed in her mind. You are my representative in the chuunin exam… you will be the leader of the United Countries. Leader. The word was strange to her. She had never been a leader in her whole life. But now she was.

For some reason Sakura turned to look behind her. The whole Embassy was there, and every genin,
hundreds of them, leaf and rain and sand alike. Ino and Chouji and Anake. Aumono and Erima and Tenshe. Neji and Tenten and Lee. Kankuro with his smirking painted face, Temari and her hard eyes and tight pressed lips. They were all watching her. Waiting.

She turned back, to the reflection of her face in the brass doors, and with both hands she pushed them open.

A blast of light hit her, the afternoon sun blazing in the crack between the doors. With a clang they swung open the rest of the way, and then she was walking into the Zoo, into a large courtyard shaded by banyan trees. There were teenage ninjas everywhere. Sakura had a flashback to the last chuunin exam she had taken, in Konoha. But this place was so much bigger. There were so many more people.

In a glance she counted the forehead protectors of a dozen different villages. The ninjas stared at her as if dissecting an insect, cold and clinical. Sakura met their eyes. She saw a boy with a face like a shark and rows of teeth like daggers. She saw a scrawny girl with skin white as ice, and a small boy with tangled hair the color of blood. She saw a beautiful albino boy in wispy silk robes, pale lips glittering with electric current. She saw a young man with a gaping black hole where his nose was supposed to be. She saw a matronly woman with jade rings in his hair, and a stocky man who sat atop a crocodile, and a boy whose arms were scrawled with glowing black seals. She saw a brash girl with frazzled red hair and a deeply freckled face. She saw a tall, chiseled warrior with a longbow strung over his back. She saw an ugly fat boy all in smoking armor plate, and a nightmarish child with a face like a corpse covered with stitches. The most famous, the most brilliant, the strongest genin in the world. And her.

"The United Countries Embassy," Shikamaru announced.

A tall stone-nin stood up at the far end of the courtyard, behind a long table of carved wood. "I see you. I am Haghira Doi, the director of the 54th Iwa Chuunin Exam. You have come a long way to take part in this exam. Nevertheless, you must be warned. This is the most competitive chuunin exam in history. Most of you will not pass. Indeed, many will be killed. Perhaps most." A murmur passed through the UC genin at Doi's words. "Now all of you have a choice. You may register with me to enter the exam. Or you may simply not register. It is up to you. Whatever you have been told, whatever pressures you feel, remember that it is your life at stake. There will be many other exams, many other chances. Think very carefully. This is the most important decision of your life. Now, if you are still determined to take the 54th Iwa Chuunin Exam, please step forward."

Sakura didn't look back. She walked straight across the yard to the long table. Temari and Kankuro followed close behind.

Doi sat down behind the table. He was a thin, skeletal man, as black and spindly as a windblown tree. "And you three are the first," Doi said. "Like lambs to the slaughter." He leaned over the table, scribbling on a sheaf of forms.

"Naw, you got it backward," Kankuro said. "We're the lions, not the lambs. Don't you know who we are?"

"I know who you are. Sign here."

There was a stack of forms to sign, releases of information, statements of law. While they signed Doi placed three small boxes on the table. Inside each box was a metal key, about the size of Sakura's index finger, silver and shimmering. On the side of each key Sakura saw etched the number '266.'

"These are your chuunin exam keys," Doi said. "Once you touch them, they will go 'live' and fix
permanently to your specific chakra signature. These keys will identity you, unlock your rooms, and
grant you access to the exam. You must keep them in touch contact with your skin at all times. If, for
any reason, you break contact with the key for more than ten seconds, it will go 'dead' and you will
fail out of the exam. Do you understand?"

Sakura nodded, and reached for her key. As soon as she touched it the key began to glow, pulsing
white. The key was warm in her hand, almost hot. The feeling was oddly pleasant. Her two
teammates followed suit.

Doi stared at them. "Haruno Sakura of Konoha, Sabaku Temari and Sabaku Kankuro of Suna, as
sponsored by Hokage Senju Tsunade. You are the 266th team to enter the 54th Iwa Chuunin Exam.
The First Trial begins at midnight in two days. Meet at the Overlook for further instructions. I wish
you the best of luck. You shall need it."

"Thank you, Director-sama." Sakura bowed.

"And a word of warning, for you three especially. As long as I am Director, this place is safe. But
the rest of Iwa is not. If you wish to go outside the compound, do so at your own extreme risk. I see
you."

"Oh, sure," Kankuro said. "Who'd ever want to get out of a Zoo?"

When they turned around, the courtyard was already a blur of motion. Teams of UC genin were
registering for the exam all along the long wood table. Not a few of the genin seemed to holding
back, however, scared by Doi's warning. Sakura saw that Ino and Chouji were two of them. They
were sitting with Shikamaru under a large banyan, gesturing at each other hotly. She thought about
going over, but somehow it didn't seem to be worth it.

Team Tsunade found their room on the upper floor of one of the stone buildings overlooking the
courtyard. The metal door was marked with the number '266,' with a lock about chest high. Temari
put her key into the lock and slid open the door. Inside was a small, cramped room, with bare stone
walls, three bed pallets, a small closet, and a bathroom stained brown with rust.

"Fucking Sage of Six Paths, this place fucking stinks," Kankuro said.

A faint smell was wafting from the room, vaguely familiar. The renovators had tried to cover it up
but had not been successful. "I think this building used to be where they kept the monkeys," Sakura
said.

"You telling me we're smelling ape shit?"

"Why, dear brother," Temari laughed, "it feels like roses compared to your room back home."

There was nothing to do but to shrug off their packs and lay out their things. Sakura had brought
little beyond clothes and standard ninja gear, nor had Temari, but Kankuro had a whole trunk of
puppetry to organize. She picked a bed by the window and sat down.

Well, now what? Sakura looked at her two teammates, and they looked back at her. The Sand
Siblings. They were not her friends, she knew that. But not her enemies, either. Comrades? Was that
the right word? They would be living together now, and fighting together. Sakura realized then that
she knew nothing about them. Nothing about what they were really like.

Kankuro broke the silence. "Here, gimme your key," he said to Sakura. He threaded a slim metal
chain from his puppet toolkit through the hole in the handle, making a necklace. "So you won't lose
it."
Sakura nodded. She put the key around her head and tucked it into the hollow between her breasts, warm and hard next to the bare skin. "Thanks," she said. Then she added, "It'll be dark soon. We should go train."

Kankuro nodded, but Temari shook her head, laughing. "Not today. I think Sakura has enough bruises from the last thrashing I gave her."

Something about the other girl's tone turned Sakura cold. "We have to learn to work together, if we want to pass the exam. Let's try to get to know each other."

"Is that how you leaf-nins do things?" asked Temari. "Let's all be friends?"

"And how is that you sand-nins do things?"

"Us? We just do our job. Your sensei and my brother put us together for political reasons. I don't particularly like it, but I accept it. We'll make a decent enough team. You do your job, and we'll do ours."

Sakura stood up. "Fine. It'll be that way, if that's what you want. But I don't think you get it, Temari. You lost. Your and your whole village, you're losers, you tried to fight with us and you got your asses kicked back to the desert. Then we had to go over there and save you from yourselves. You see this?" She pointed to her forehead protector. "That means I'm a leaf-nin. That means I'm in charge on this team. Got that?"

"You mistake me, Sakura." Temari had pressed her lips into a tight white line. "I am not your enemy. You would do well to remember it. Come, brother."

The Sand Siblings went out, slamming the door, and then Sakura was alone in the room. She sat back down. She wasn't even sure what was behind her outburst. Why did I do that? It seemed like something Tsunade-sensei would do, not her. I shouldn't have fought with them.

Just then there was a knock on the window.

She looked out through the glass at the cheery round faces of Shiranui Genma and Yamashiro Aoba. The two leaf chuunin examiners were rolling a cart stacked high with letters and packages. "Heya, little Sakura, found ya," Genma said. "These are for you."

He handed Sakura a stack of folded-up letters. The girl knew the handwriting on them at once. They were from her mother. "They've been piling up ever since you left Konoha," Aoba explained. "Couldn't deliver them to the Embassy, so they ended up here."

The two examiners went on their way, whistling some dirty song. Sakura stared at the letters in her hand. There's got to be at least twenty of them. For there to be so many, her mother must have written one every other day. International mail was not cheap. How could she afford to send them all the way to Iwa? It must have cost her half her salary.

She opened the first envelope, dated from May 14th, the day after they left on the Embassy. The envelope had two letters in it, one from her mother and one from Kyoki. She read the one from her sister first:

SAKURA! I miss you so much. I no its only been one day but I still miss you! Mom said you ar going all over the world. that must be so cooool! i wanna go on the Embassy too. But Mom said i was too little to go places yet i have to grow up first, like my BIG SIS! Konoha is boring. Everything is the same all the time and school is so borin. Plus all the cool people are in Iwa. But I love my friends here. Juju is my best freind now. So is Mimi, but she says you can only have one best freind, but Juju
says you can have a lot of best freinds as many as u want. I think Juju is right. we should all be best freinds, yesterday Juju came over to play stuffed animaels with me. Oh! Today a man named Mr. Ogata came to visit us from far away. mommy says he was daddy's freind. I think he is a very nice man and gave me a BIG PINK teddy bear. I named him Mr. Flufy because hes so so soft! Mr. Ogata and mommy went for a walk in the Steam Gardens, and I wanted to come, but they said no. so Juju and Mimi came over to play. We have a lot of fun. SAKURA, come back soon!

HUGS XXXX KISSES

Your little sis,

KYOKI

Then she read the second letter:

Dear Sakura:

I am told you will not read this letter until you arrive at Iwa. But your sister and I are still going to write to you, as often as we can. You must know that you are in our thoughts always.

Sakura, I can't fully understand what you are going through right now. I have never been a ninja. But I know it is not easy. You are a very private person, and that is your strength. But in times like this you don't have to bear it all alone. Please, reach out to your friends. Let them help you.

Well, now you must think I am nagging you. I am your mother, so I can't help it. We can talk about other things. Did you open the package I gave you? I made you your favorite baked cookies and other sweets. You probably ate it right away!

You may be wondering how we are doing. Kyoki misses you terribly, and it has only been one day. I wish you were back home, too, but I understand why you left. Other than that everything is well. In fact, something very nice happened today. An old friend, Ogata Shingo, just stopped by the village to chat. He was one of your father's best friends. He would have loved to meet you.

I know we will see each other soon. Be safe, and be happy. I love you always.

Mom

Who the fuck is Mr. Ogata? Sakura wondered. The question proved to be prescient. By the second letter, Ogata Shingo was putting flowers on her father's grave. By the fifth letter, Ogata Shingo was paying for the postage of the mail to Iwa. By the eighth letter, Ogata Shingo was spending nights in their apartment. By the thirteenth letter, Ogata Shingo was preparing to move into their apartment. By the sixteenth letter, Ogata Shingo had not only moved in but was asking Kyoki what kind of weddings she liked. And in the final letter her mother wrote, "I love him, oh, you don't know how much I love him, he is like your father, he is a great man, and today he asked me to marry him and I said yes."

Sakura felt nothing. Oh, the facts were clear enough. She had been gone all of one month and her mother was engaged to a person she had never met. Yet the fact of her mother's betrayal did not move her. It was as if it was all happening to someone else, not her at all.

Sakura sat down to write a letter back. She scribbled for a long time, filling up a dozen sheets of paper. When she finished she did not even remember what she had written. I can't feel anything. I must have used up all my feelings last night, there's none left.

It was dark outside, and the stars were coming out. She had meant to find a mailbox to mail her letter,
but afterward she did not want to go back to the room which smelled of ape shit. Instead she jumped onto the roof of the stone building. Here, five stories up, though the high walls still hid the rest of Iwa, she could look out over the Zoo. The air was sharp and clear. From below she heard a hubbub of voices, drifting in the summer sky, but could not make out the words.

"Sakura-chan!" a familiar, happy voice piped up. "I found you."

The girl turned to face the boy behind her. "What do you want, Lee?"

Rock Lee grinned stupidly. "Sakura-chan… I made you a present. Congratulations! You got your forehead protector back. I knew you would."

There was something strange about the way he sounded, as if his tongue was knotted, slurring his speech. She could smell the alcohol on the boy's breath. "You're drunk," Sakura said.

"No I am not! I just had a little sip, that's all. That's all. Neji's fault… Neji said girls play hard to get. He said don't give up. See? I made you a present. You liked it so much, here…"

The boy pulled out a glittering glass-like kunai from his pouch, fumbling with it. Another chakra-cast kunai, Sakura was not surprised to see. He had made another one. Lee swung the kunai, almost cutting himself. Sakura had to wrest it away from him. Lee almost fell, and stumbled into Sakura's arms.

Lee smiled. "You like it, don't you? Anything for you, Sakura-chan. My love. My looove…" The drunken boy leaned in close, stretching out his hands around her. "Sakura-chan, your beauty is astounding…"

"No, Lee. Stop."

Usually a word was enough. But this time the boy didn't stop. His eyes were wide and glassy, his cheeks red with wine. "Don't run, Sakura-chan! You are my girlfriend, aren't you?"

"No, Lee. We're just friends."

"Maybe you just don't know it yet," Lee said again. He wrapped his hands around her shoulders, gripping her so hard it hurt. His face leered above her, wild and needy and revolting, thick black eyebrows furrowed tight, small lips puckering, making wet sucking noises.

Sakura slapped him.

Lee drew back, stunned. He cradled his cheek as if Sakura had hit him with a crowbar.

"No," Sakura said. She made her words as firm and hard as possible. "No. I don't want any more of your gifts. Do you understand? I don't love you, I never did. Now go away. Go. Away."

He blinked. Thick eyebrows quivered. "But you… you called me the #1 Most Romantic Ninja…"

"Fool," she whispered.

The boy stared at her. He stared… and stared… and stared. His eyes were like dead black orbs, like coal stones. And then at last Rock Lee slunk away without another word.

Sakura thought her face would be flushed, her heart would be pounding. But she was calm and cold as ice. I shouldn't have done that, she thought. She should have been gentle, but somehow she was forgetting how.
A wind blew from the north, over the walls of the Zoo. The cold metal of her ninja headplate pressed her skin, and against her chest the chuunin exam key was hot to the touch. Suddenly it felt as if the Zoo was like a cage, smothering her, suffocating her. All at once she wanted to get out of there.

Sakura leaped off the roof, rolling on the courtyard tiles, and pushing chakra to her feet ran straight up the high stone wall. In an instant she was vaulting over the top. Two ANBU were in front of her, and though one reached for his sword the other stayed him, and they did not bar her way. Then she running down the other side, out of the Zoo.

Into the Village Hidden in the Stones.

She did not know where she was going. She only knew that she wanted to run. She ran from roof to roof, jumped from street to street. Iwa pulsed beneath her, a glitter of lights, a blur of figures, men in braids and women waving bamboo fans, naked babies and laughing children. The foreigners were locked behind cages, and it was safe to come out again. She ran and ran, until she had run out of the village, run across the bridge into the forest on the other side, and there was nowhere to run to. She stopped to catch her breath, leaning against a large moss-covered rock.

This is the Sagewood, she realized, remembering maps of Iwa she had studied. A great forest to the north of Iwa, so named for the Sage of Six Paths who had walked its paths. Sakura looked around. Faint starlight shone down through gaps in the canopy, illuminating huge twisted black trees. Locusts trilled from a thousand places, and frogs croaked in hidden ponds. A wind rustled through the leaves, making the branches dance.

It almost reminded her of the forests back home. But the trees of Konoha were redwoods, tall and straight, spreading dappled shadows over bright streams, nestling beds of wild dandelions. No, the Sagewood was not like that. It was a dark, primal place. Thick black sentinel trees crowded close together, twisting nets of grey-green needles. Misshapen roots wrestled beneath the soil. The air smelled of rotting wood. This was a place of deep silence and brooding shadows, and it was no place that she knew.

And when Sakura turned to look behind her, she saw that the rock she leaned against was no rock at all, but a face tipped sideways. It was larger than she was, made of a thousand granite bricks, and as many years older, with a nose cracked in half by winter ice, and crumbling cheeks pocked with lichen. The face of a god, she knew. This must be part of some ruined temple, buried in the forest.

The eyes of the dead stone face glowed.

For a moment the girl thought the face had come alive. But then she realized the back of the stone head had been worn away, and light was coming from behind it, through the pits of the eye sockets. She climbed on top of the face to get a better look.

A gleam of light winked below her, far in the distance. The light was white and bright and strange, and it looked like nothing so much as a star in the night sky. A star that had fallen to earth.

Would anyone care that it's gone? she wondered. There are so many stars, and they all look the same. Would anyone even notice? Only once, she thought, when it was falling, and it blazed a streak of fire across the sky, only then would men see. A flash. And then again they would be blind.

The girl walked forward, toward the star fallen in the woods.
Sakura walked through the Sagewood, following the light. She pushed her way through dark tangles of branches, she splashed across streams choked with dead leaves. Somewhere high in the mountains, lonely and faint, a cuckoo called.

Soon the ground began to slope downward, plunging beneath the forest into some sort of deep ravine. Here stones covered the ravine cliffs, littering the floor in huge crumbling piles. This is the ruined temple, Sakura realized. Moss grew on stone idols like hair. Roots sunk down through the wreckage of former shrines. Branches twisted up from broken temple walls. In the center of the ravine, a huge pine tree, the biggest tree Sakura had ever seen, squatted on the ruins of a pyramid-like tower. Its massive trunks stretched in every direction, overspreading the sky, bending toward the ground.

And in front of this pine tree she saw the source of the gleam of light, the fallen star.

It was a sword.

The katana was thrust deep into the forehead of a crumbling granite sculpture, buried in the face of a dead god. Starlight rippled off the blade, caught the edge of it, made the metal gleam as white as ice.

Sakura reached out a hand and gripped the hilt of the katana. It was cold. She pulled, then pulled again with all her strength, but the sword didn't budge from the stone. It was like they were fused together. Sakura was bending down to look at the blade more closely when she saw the inscription. The tiny characters were neither carved, nor stamped, but somehow burned inside the edge of the blade itself. And the words said:

I SEE WITH EYES IN THEIR LAST EXTREMITY

"I see with eyes in their last extremity." Sakura knew the words. It was a line from an old poem. Almost unbidden, by instinct, as in an echo, she remembered the words that followed, and in the darkness she spoke them aloud: "Long is the night to I who am awake."

"That's true for both of us," a voice said behind her.

Sakura turned. A boy stood there. He was tall and thin, and wearing a plain gray robe, but elsewhere his features were all in shadow. Through the night, Sakura glimpsed the white of his smile.

"Forgive me for asking, but are you trying to steal my sword?" the boy asked. His voice was soft and cutting all at once, like a knife made from smoke.

Sakura was flustered. "Uh, no. I, uh, I was just—I was wandering…"

"Ah. I thought not. Besides, you don't seem to be a very good thief."

Sakura had to laugh. "I guess not."

The boy smiled again. "In that case, I'll tell you the secret, if you wish to pull the sword from the stone. Look." The boy gestured with his open hand toward the blade.

Sakura saw. The metal of the blade started to glow, molten red with heat. It grew hotter and hotter,
first ruby red, then diamond white. Ripples of heat sloughed off the sword, and the stone beneath cracked.

"Go ahead," the boy said behind her. "Pull."

She grabbed the hilt and pulled. The sword came out with a sudden motion, moving through the granite as easily as through hot fat. Sakura held the katana before her, raised it high. Waves of burning heat shimmered around it, distorting the white steel. It was beautiful, extraordinary. She turned the blade, and in the glittering mirror surface suddenly she saw the boy's face reflecting behind her.

The stone-nin's eyes were burning gold.

**Enshogan**! Sakura reacted on pure instinct. She pivoted with all her speed and swung the sword in an arc behind her. The boy ducked just before Sakura took off his head. Instead she hit a granite pillar behind him. The superheated sword sliced the rock in half, and the top of the pillar tumbled to the ground with a hissing thud.

For a moment the boy looked at her with wide eyes—eyes dark and dim, now. Then he laughed. "I fear you're not a very good murderer, either," he said.

Sakura stumbled back, breathing hard. The sword cooled in her hand, the heat dissipating rapidly. In the fading light she could see the boy's forehead protector, a rock carved against a rock, the symbol of Iwa. And she could see his eyes, dark and slitted. *Heat… the power to control heat—the bloodline power of the Enshogan eyes…* She should have realized.

"You're a Sougon," Sakura said.

The boy inclined his head. "My name is Sosano."

**Sougon Sosano.** She knew the name. Of course she knew it. "What… what do you want?"

"A strange question. You trespass into my garden in the dead of night, and then you steal my sword, and then you try to kill me with it. But you ask me what I want?" The boy's tone was one of great amusement. He smiled, a glimpse of white teeth. "Please believe me, Haruno Sakura. If I meant to kill you, you would already be dead."

They stared at each other. Sakura's face was flushed, her heart was pounding. She was not sure what to do. Long moment after long moment passed.

"I'm sorry," she said at last. "I… didn't mean to intrude."

Sakura offered the katana back to the boy, hilt up. Sosano took it. His hand grasped Sakura's own on the sword hilt.

Just then the sun came up, peeking out from behind Sakura. The light threw the whole ravine into relief. Colossal ruins seemed to appear as out of thin air, stone walls and stone pyramids and stone towers and stone faces, thousands of them, staring down at her with mossy black granite eyes. Over the dead ruins grew living things, trees so tall they seemed to wrestle the sky, creeper vines like packs of giant snakes, wild flower beds of purple glories and blue irises and yellow mountain roses. *It's beautiful,* she thought, *so beautiful and peaceful and lonely.*

"The night is over," Sosano said, his voice soft as smoke. "But we are both still awake. It was fate that brought you here today, Sakura. Without your wandering, we would have missed this dawn."
Sakura noticed then that his hand was still on hers, lingering on it, hot to the touch. The boy seemed very close. She could smell him, his scent, like the forest, like wet grass, like ripe chestnuts and leaves and mushrooms and old knotted bark. His skin was dark, his body as lean and strong as a pack wolf. Lustrous black hair receded from a pointed widow's peak into a thick, flowing braid that swung down his waist. A fine mouth and a sharp nose framed his handsome regal face. And as Sakura looked up into the boy's eyes, into the slitted pupils dark as shining ink, the boy smiled.

Suddenly in her mind she saw another face. The face of the dead assassin she had seen in the Kazekage Palace, the face of the mysterious masked ninja she had fought in a burning forest. It was the same face—the same eyes, the eyes most of all, eyes coiled with inflamed blood vessels, eyes that were golden flames.

The eyes of a killer beast.

*It's him.*

She jerked back her hand and backed away, almost stumbling on a stone.

Sosano's eyes followed her quietly. "Are you all right, Sakura?"

"You're a Sougon," Sakura said again, the words confused in her mouth. "You're the Tsuchikage's son."

The boy laughed. "And so I am, I won't deny it. Does that trouble you?" With a single smooth motion he took the katana and slid it into the scabbard at his waist. "You should not be. This is not the place for troubles."

Sakura backed away a few more steps. *No, I should not be here. *"I must go," she managed to say.

"If you wish. I hope you will return, however. You have come to the right place. It must be fate, for so few ever do."

"What do you mean?" Sakura asked, despite herself.

Sosano's dark eyes glittered in the dawn. "The foreigners never understand. The buildings they see, the streets, the sculptures. They see the surface. But that is not Iwa. Iwa is the roots beneath. Iwa is the moon in the pines. Iwa is dew in the dusk. Iwa is the mating call of deer, that we are truly awake. Here, we come to be alive. Here, we think most of those close to us, and want them to share in our hearts. Here, in a summer wood." He paused. "Stay a while, Sakura, and I shall show you."

Sakura stared at the boy, bewildered. Something stirred deep inside her, and for a moment, an unbearable heartbeat, she almost said yes. But then sense returned to her. Sakura shook her head. "I must go," she said again, as if the words were an incantation.

"Then I wait for our next encounter. At the Overlook, perhaps." The boy bowed low, making the ritual earth-kin greeting of both meeting and parting. "I see you, Haruno Sakura." Then he smiled.

Sakura did not look back. She ran away as fast as she could, leaping over the ravine cliffs, jumping from tree to tree back in the direction she came, toward Iwa. The sun was in her eyes, shining bright in a cloudless sky. The stars were gone. The sun had blotted them all out. *I wonder, she thought unbidden. I wonder if he can still see the stars, with those eyes.*
Amnesia

The two Sand Siblings were back when Sakura slid open the door of their room in the Zoo. Temari was kneeling on the floor, her huge metal fan fully open in front of her, the three purple stars painted on the fan staring out past her like creepy eyes. To Sakura's surprise, she saw that Temari was praying. The sand-nin's head was bowed, her eyes closed as she muttered softly under her breath. As Sakura walked into the room the head shifted slightly, and one of Temari's eyes opened a slit, a dark teal iris as hard and sharp as the point of a drawn arrow, before closing again.

Kankuro laughed. "I think she's still pissed off at you." The boy was lounging in his oddly colorful pajamas, a half-disassembled puppet strewn across his lap. "Too bad you didn't come back last night, or she'd have tried to kill you in your sleep. A half-naked kunoichi catfight. Now that'd I have liked to witness. I prayed to God it would happen, I swear, but God only listens to my big sister."

"Maybe tomorrow," Sakura said. She was moving to sit down on her bed, exhausted, when suddenly she noticed that something round and pink was already occupying it. Her mouth fell open. "Tonton?"

The pig perked up at the sound of Sakura's voice, ears twitching, oinking happily. She was sleeping on Sakura's pillow.

"Oh, yeah. One of your leaf-nins brought her over this morning." Kankuro shrugged. "Came with a note from the Queen of Torment. Says you're still the pigwasher, you got to give her a bath every day, etcetera. Oh, yeah. And the next time you try to chop off Sougon Sosano's head, don't miss."

"What?" Sakura snatched the offered note from the puppet boy's hand. It was in Tsunade-sensei's own handwriting, blasting Sakura's stupidity for wandering enemy territory alone, and summoning Sakura to her quarters at once. "How did Tsunade-sensei know?"

"Don't ask me. She's your sensei." Tonton oinked.

When Sakura showed up at the Hokage's villa in Tsukai Gardens half an later she was still fuming. She barely even noticed the looks the Iwa villagers threw at her as she hurried down the tangled grids of streets, her Konoha forehead protector making her stick out like a rotten tooth. Sakura was too distracted by all that had happened: by her fight with the Sand Siblings, by Sougon Sosano, by her mother's sudden marriage, by Deathtrap Mountain. She had barely slept in two days. I'm not in my right mind.

It did not help when the first thing the Hokage said to Sakura after being shown into her private courtyard by the ANBU guards was, "What are you doing, girl? Do you want to die?"

"No, Tsunade-sensei," Sakura said.

"Then what is it?" the Hokage asked. "Is there some good reason you decided to run away into the Sagewood by yourself? Don't you know the Sougon boy could have killed you? Don't you know who he is, who his parents are?"

Of course she knew.

Sosano's father was the Fourth Tsuchikage, Sougon Sawar. And his mother… his mother was Sougon Seurin, called Seurin Shadowstar, one of the greatest kunoichi who had ever lived. But
Seurin had died in the Third Ninja War, leaving Sosano to be raised by his father and his uncles.

There was another wrinkle to his family tree. Seurin Shadowstar was not only Sosano's mother. She was also Sosano's aunt. Seurin and Sawar were brother and sister as well as husband and wife. It was a common practice among the members of certain ancient bloodlines, to be sure. Incest helped preserve the bloodline, keep it pure and strong.

The Uchiha clan had been much the same way. Always marrying within the clan, cousins to cousins, brother to sister. It was a rarity for Sasuke's father, Uchiha Fugaku, to do what he did, which was marry a complete outsider—someone totally unrelated to the clan. Fugaku had to go against the clan elders, but Mikoto won them over with her grace and strength. And because my father liked her, thought Sakura. My father always said that he could talk Fugaku into doing anything.

"I know," she said. "The Tsuchikage is the enemy of Konoha. But that doesn't mean his son is the same." Sakura hesitated. "I've always heard that his mother, Seurin Shadowstar, was a honorable shinobi—"

"Seurin Shadowstar is dead." The Hokage's voice was cold as ice. "And Sougon Sosano is his father's son, Sakura. You must never forget that."

She would have said more, but then a cuckoo landed on the cherry tree in the center of the courtyard, cawing plaintively. Both of them turned to look at it. Strange, for a cuckoo to come all the way down from the mountains, to land in a human village. But Tsunade seemed to know the bird, somehow, and when she held out her arm the small, gray bird fluttered its wings and hopped over to it. Its somber song filled the garden. "Yes, I remember," the woman whispered, and then at once the bird took flight, darting into the sky. When Tsunade turned to Sakura again her face was as withered as the fallen spring blossoms of the cherry tree, dark and drained. The garden was silent.

What was that? she wanted to ask, but she knew the Hokage would not answer. Instead Sakura bent her head, closing her eyes. The cuckoo's call echoed in her memory, too—she had heard it last night, the same one, in the forest. A summer wood, Sosano had called it. She could hear him as well, see him and smell him, his proud, smoky laugh, his soft breath that tasted of dawn grass, his eyes that burned like the sun. If I meant to kill you, you would already be dead, he said, and Sakura knew it was true. She was the leader of the UC in the chuunin exam, but she had stood no more chance against him than she had against Sasuke, that night a lifetime ago, on the bridge over the frozen river. And then all her anger was gone, too, her bitterness, because she was still alive, she was still here, and there was still a mission, there was so much left to do.

"I'm sorry," she said, opening her eyes. "You're right, it was stupid. I—I wanted to get away. The Sand Siblings, my mother, the Zoo, the chuunin exam. Everything. It was—it was too much. I was stupid."

"Yes." The Hokage's voice was soft. "And it has only been one day. I warned you, Sakura. This is a place unlike any other on earth. Any sign of weakness and it will eat you up like a worm."

"No." Sakura shook her head. "No, it won't happen again. I can handle it."

"As you handled Sougon Sosano?"

She knew what the Hokage was driving at. Sosano was a genin, too, and the Tsuchikage's son, thus the de facto leader of the Confederacy bloc in the chuunin exam. Her counterpart, on the other side. "He's stronger than me," she admitted.

"He is the strongest genin in the chuunin exam, most likely in the whole world. Stronger than Gaara
was. S-rank. You're a high B-rank, at best. Say the two of you meet in the exam. What do you do?"

Sakura thought about it. "Hide."

"Yes, that seems smarter than standing around reciting poetry. But remember he can see heat; he can see your body radiation. Then what?"

"Then I'll run, and if I can't run, I'll make clones to confuse him. How do you know what I was saying to Sosano in the forest, anyway? Did you plant a bug in my clothes or something?"

Her sensei ignored the question. "Your clones are useless. A stalling tactic, and not a very effectual one at that. How do you fight him?"

"Well, with the Enshogan he can see everything coming, and he's so fast. A direct attack would be suicidal. Maybe I'd try to set up a trap beforehand, like a shuriken dummy or a barrier circle. Then I'd distract him with genjutsu. Then open the chakra gates and squeeze him with chakra fields from range."

The Hokage nodded. "Good. How many gates can you open?"

"Three. Maybe four."

"If you open four now you'll be paralyzed for the rest of your life. The Gates are kinjutsu for a reason. Every time you use them your body is torn apart from the inside. Every single tissue, every single cell. The damage never fully heals, and each time it gets worse. You feel the pain already, don't you?"

"No," Sakura lied. There was a dull constant ache over her body everywhere, and inside the worst. It wasn't so bad, like soreness after a hard workout, except that she knew it would never, ever, go away. Medical textbooks were full of case studies of ninja who had opened the Gates one too many times and then never walked again.

"Fool. Chakra Gates make you feel a god, for a time, but if you open them in every fight you'll soon be dead. They're a crutch. You should never be in a position where you have to use them. Fight the Sougon boy without Gates."

"The same thing then, just not as good. Taijutsu and ninjutsu won't work. Genjutsu is the only way. I'm a genjutsu type, and he's not."

"Are you? Show me." The Hokage flashed a seal with one hand, almost too fast to see, and a mud clone rose from the earth in front of Sakura. To her surprise the clone formed not into an image of the Hokage, but of a tall, lean boy in gray robes. Sosano. The boy slid a shining steel sword out of the scabbard at his waist and offered it to Sakura, hilt up. "Go on," the boy said in a soft smoky voice. "Chop my head off."

"You transformed your own clone," Sakura said to the Hokage. "How'd you do that?"

The woman allowed herself a slight smile. "First things first. Go on, use the katana. Fight him."

Sakura took the sword and swung at the clone's neck. Sosano ducked. "Too slow," the Hokage said, and Sosano laughed, haughty and arrogant. The girl narrowed her eyes. She swung again, but this time she added a genjutsu, whispered under her breath. Binding. The wave of disruptive chakra hit the clone just as her sword reached the apogee of its swing. Sakura saw, no, felt her chakra blast interrupt the electrical impulses between the neurons in the clone's muscular nervous system. His muscles froze for the slightest fraction of an instant. But then an internal chakra wave, a counter
chakra field, flooded out from the clone's chakra circulatory vessels and wiped out the outside interference. Sosano ducked the sword swing as easily as before. Sosano laughed again.

"Good," said the Hokage. "You completed Binding. Show me the others."

"Blackout," Sakura said. The first and easiest genjutsu Tsunade-sensei had taught her, a burst of chakra thrown at the sensory nerves feeding into the brain, causing a sudden loss of vision, hearing, taste, and smell. "Mirage." Another sensory genjutsu, more subtle, inserting a false afterimage in the optical nerve so that it looked like an object in motion was still where it had been a few seconds ago. "Sleep." A targeted attack on the neural trigger in the brain that automatically causes unconsciousness if it senses a lack of oxygen, knocking the victim out if he couldn't counter in time. All C-rank genjutsu, all easily countered by the Sosano clone. He ducked every sword swing.

"Good," said the Hokage. "Your genjutsu are much stronger."

Genjutsu scaled with chakra control. Sakura had a vivid demonstration of that at the beginning of her training, when the Hokage was teaching her Blackout. Sakura had tried to use it on her sensei, only to be countered in midair, before the chakra burst had even crossed halfway between them. Then the Hokage had used the same genjutsu on her. The Blackout came over the girl like a tidal wave, a tsunami, the chakra field as strong and solid as steel bars, and no matter how Sakura tried, what kind of internal field she tried to generate, she could not break it. She had stumbled across the ground for what seemed like hours, blind and deaf, before Tsunade-sensei released the genjutsu. Let that be your second lesson, girl, the Hokage had said. To ninja like us, chakra is everything.

Tsunade-sensei could not do the same thing to her now. In the two months on the Embassy, Sakura's chakra control had improved a dozen times over. "Yeah. And I can chain genjutsu together now," Sakura said. "Watch."

With one hand she swung the katana hard in an overhead arc. But as she did so she concentrated, and from the tenketsu in her other hand released a rapid series of chakra bursts, five in a second, five Blackouts one after the other. They were all countered, as she knew they would be, but the extra genjutsu distracted the clone, and when Sosano leaped back to dodge, he reacted noticeably slower. Sakura attacked the boy again, side slashing, and this time between her Blackout spam she added Sleep, forcing him to defend against two separate genjutsu at once. The boy moved even slower. She rushed at him with full force, slashing, thrusting, a whirl of steel, a storm of illusion attacks, forcing the clone across the courtyard. A dozen times Sakura thought she had got him, but somehow the clone always slipped past the blade. Sweat ran down her face and her arms from the effort of keeping it all up.

Just a little more, she thought, I just need to slow him a little more. She began to gather chakra in her feet, pooling it to the bursting point. As the boy dodged left she leaped again, her feet in the air aimed at the boy's head. The Binding attack exploded from the foot tenketsu as from a wound crossbow. At the same instant Sakura released Blackout and Sleep from her hand. Three genjutsu hit the clone at once, and for a long second he was overwhelmed, paralyzed. Yes! She slashed her sword, meaning to chop off Sosano's head, but spun backward instead, losing her balance. Too late she realized she had put all her concentration into the genjutsu attack and forgot to follow through the physical one. With an oof the girl crashed in a heap to the ground.

"Very good, Sakura," said the Hokage. "But not good enough. Your genjutsu slowed down your taijutsu too much, and vice versa. Gentaijutsu is very powerful, but only with sufficient skill. And, I pray ask you, don't use a katana either. Your technique is uglier than a leper's face." She waved her hand, and both the clone and Sakura's sword dissolved into mud. "If you wish to fight Sougon Sosano, you must do it on your terms, not his."
Sakura understood. "You're going to teach me a new genjutsu, aren't you, Tsunade-sensei?" she asked, stumbling to her feet. Hopefully she added, "Maybe a space-time one?" The Hokage was legendary for her space-time genjutsu; it was said she could make a man live an entire day in a single second.

The woman laughed, soft as chimes. "No, this genjutsu is only A-rank. Amnesia."

Sakura had never heard of it before. "Amnesia?"

The Hokage waved her hand.

She felt the genjutsu coming, felt the foreign chakra field enter her body, her brain. At once she countered with an internal chakra field, pushing her own chakra through the tenketsu in her head. The two fields collided; the Hokage's field was stronger, but not by much, and the source was so much further away that Sakura could reinforce her field more quickly. She concentrated, and with a well-timed surge pushed back the invading genjutsu. Suddenly the genjutsu returned, no longer a spherical field but a spear of chakra, sharp and propelled with extraordinary force. It sliced through Sakura's defenses like a knife through flesh, on a clear course for the center of Sakura's brain. The hippocampus. Sakura couldn't stop it from hitting, but that was not fatal; it was hard to prevent a strong genjutsu from connecting for at least a couple of instants. She would just have to break it after, by surging another wave of internal chakra. She could break it—break—

_What?_ She had been thinking something, but now she couldn't remember it. The girl blinked. What had happened? Where was she? She looked around, totally confused. She was in a garden. A woman was standing in front of her. Who was the woman?

"This," said the woman," is Amnesia."

And then suddenly it was over, like a switch had been turned off. The memories rushed back into Sakura's mind. She shook her head, trying to clear away the brief but total confusion. What kind of jutsu was that? _I couldn't remember. I couldn't remember anything…_ "How did you do that?" she managed to ask.

"How do you think, girl? Figure it out."

Sakura held a hand to her head, frowning. "Well… the hippocampus controls memory. Memory retrieval and formation. I still remember what happened during the genjutsu, so you didn't change my memory, you must have just blocked me from accessing it. There are specific neural pathways by which the frontal lobe retrieves memories from the hippocampus. You disrupted the pathway with a chakra field. Amnesia. I couldn't break it, because I didn't remember that I was in a genjutsu. I didn't even know my name."

"Yes. Like any genjutsu, the theory behind Amnesia is very simple. The brain and nervous system has any number of weak points that can be attacked. Memory is one, sense perception another, and consciousness yet another. But unlike with ninjutsu or taijutsu, the higher-ranking the genjutsu, the subtler the weak point is. Amnesia is, in its objective effects, a weaker jutsu than Sleep. Why is that?"

"Because it's all in the execution," the girl said. "There are two factors that determine the rank of a genjutsu. One, the place it targets. Two, the kind of field manipulation applied. The bigger or deeper the target, the more complex the field, the harder the genjutsu is to counter. And all of it comes down to chakra control." She frowned. "The hippocampus is the heart of the brain. The chakra vessels and neural nets there are so dense, it's super hard to affect it with an outside chakra field. I don't think I could do it."
"No? Think, girl. How do you multiply the density of a chakra field?"

"A couple of ways. Rotate it in a spiral, like in a chakra string. Or brute force the density by increasing the amount of chakra ejected. Or... you could run a current, you could loop the chakra field back on itself." Sakura realized she had hit on the key point. "Chakra flow! That's perfect for a genjutsu, because you're trying to sustain a field over distance, against resistance. Chakra flow increases density, pressure, and speed."

"Exactly. Amnesia is a chakra-flow genjutsu. It exploits the memory circuit in the hippocampus itself, by trapping the electrical signals sent by the hippocampus in a loop within the circuit, so that the signals never escape. Now, girl, that's the theory. Show me your chakra flow."

Sakura had never actually tried to chakra flow before. But if I can already open the Chakra Gates, how hard could it be? In principle it should be much easier; all she had to do was create a chakra projection field from her tenketsu with the proper shape manipulation. She whipped out a chakra-cast kunai from her belt and concentrated, meaning to flow the chakra out of her hand, into the kunai, and then back out through her hand again. On the first try she managed to get a weak current loop going, though there was an incredible amount of leakage, and it collapsed in a few seconds.

"It's too wide," said the Hokage. "Don't make the current wide, you need to increase the pressure and speed, the more the better."

Sakura nodded. Soon a healthy chakra flow was streaming along the edge of the kunai, the blue-white current bright as a flame, mingling with the faint mirrored glow of the chakra-cast kunai. Once she knew what to do, the shape manipulation was even easier than she had thought.

"Don't think it's that simple," the Hokage said. "You're using a chakra blade, and you're looping it through your hand. Try looping the current within metal."

That was harder. The shuriken she used was far more resistant to the chakra flow, plus every time she tried to make a self-sustaining current loop around the shuriken edge it dissipated after a few revolutions. I need to make it more dense, she realized. She pumped in more and more chakra while still keeping the same current width. Now the chakra flow was a snake eating its own tail, feeding on itself. Tons of chakra was still escaping the loop, but there was so much of it that the current could last a good couple seconds by itself, without additional reinforcement. If she threw the shuriken at something now it would give a nice, sharp shock upon contact.

"And I can add nature manipulation, right?" she said. Sakura knew that adding earth chakra to the chakra flow, for example, would cause the current to impart extra force and mass. A thrown earth chakra-flow weapon would hit as if it were much heavier than it was. She wanted to try it but making a hole in the Hokage's private garden was probably a bad idea. Then a question occurred to her. "What if I flowed a earth current through my own body? That's the principle behind chakra-enhanced strength, isn't it?"

The Hokage nodded. "Yes. But I advise you not to attempt it... not if you like living. Your body is not a metal shuriken. At your level of chakra mastery a failed earth current would rip your heart in two."

Sakura shrugged, running a hand through her pink bangs. But I bet I could blow a really big hole somewhere if I wanted to. "Can I try the genjutsu now?"

"Yes. Try it on me."

"On you, Tsunade-sensei?"
"I won't resist. Just focus on making the chakra-flow loop in the memory circuit." The Hokage closed her eyes and stood as still as a statue.

"Well, okay." Sakura brought her mind back to her medic-nin textbooks, trying to visualize the structure of the hippocampus, the varying tissues and neural clusters that made up a person's memory. There. She formed a chakra flow current between her hands, then projected it outward, toward the Hokage's head. Unfortunately her sensei's head was not a textbook, and Sakura couldn't directly see into it. She probed, moving the current this way and that, edging it into the brain, ever deeper. The Hokage was motionless. There, the memory circuit, Sakura felt it! Shadow afterimages of another person's memory rushed back through the chakra flow. But just as she reached it the current dissipated, overwhelmed by the much stronger internal chakra field with which it had made contact.

Sakura bit her lip. That was bad. Amnesia worked off the same basic principles of Binding, she knew, only with the addition of chakra flow. Just like Binding disrupted the electrochemical signals between the muscular nerves, she had to do the same in the hippocampus. But the brain was so much denser, the signals so much more intense. How to strengthen the chakra flow? Then she remembered how the Hokage had attacked her with the genjutsu before. A spear of chakra. Of course, that was it. Once she had already broken into the memory pathway, all the electrical impulses within it would be redirected via her chakra flow into an internal loop—co-opting the internal chakra field, piggybacking off it like a virus on a cell membrane. It was getting in that was the hard part. She needed to pierce the hippocampus with sufficient force.

Concentrating, she sharpened her chakra-flow projection field, bringing her hands together. A visible lance of current formed, crackling with hot blue-white energy. It almost looked like a chakra scalpel, and the comparison made Sakura realize what allowed a scalpel to cut into hard tissue was the extreme density of it. So she pumped even more chakra into the current, then flung it at the Hokage's head. The first attempt failed, as did the second, the third, the tenth. On the eleventh she successfully speared the memory circuit, but screwed up the follow-up chakra loop. And so on, the rest of the morning, until at last she had it, she poured her chakra into the Hokage's memory pathway and it held, she had put her sensei into Amnesia.

"Yes!" Sakura was elated. An A-rank genjutsu, she had done it! She sat down in the garden grass. Suddenly she was exhausted, spent from the training, the fight with the Sosano clone, and from two days of sleepless stress.

The Hokage opened her eyes, dark and enigmatic. "That was fast, girl. Very fast. I'm impressed."

Sakura thought her mouth was going to fall off. "You broke the Amnesia."

"And?"

"But—that shouldn't be possible..." Sakura trailed off. How could the Hokage break a genjutsu if she didn't remember she was in one? Did she do the Amnesia wrong? Was her sensei somehow immune, did she have some sort of special implant in her head?

The Hokage laughed. "Come, girl. I thought you were supposed to be smart."

She frowned, shaking her head. "Amnesia isn't like a sensory genjutsu. If you're trapped you can't break it. It's impossible. Someone else has to break it for you. I didn't break it, and I would have felt it if someone else did, because of the chakra signature. So you broke it. But that can't be. Unless..." Suddenly, as if in a revelation from the Sage himself, all the pieces fell into place. "Unless that's... that's not your real body! That's got to be it. You're a clone."
"Of course."

It all made sense now. Sakura talked excitedly. "And that's how you avoided the assassination attempt in Suna. Because you were always a clone. I mean, duh! The Sougon clan is out to get you. So obviously your real body would be in hiding. You've got to protect yourself. Even when I talked to you, right? Even in Konoha, and on Deathtrap Mountain?"

"In the Konoha hospital it was my real body. Every time you saw me after that, yes, it was a clone. Note that I control my clones directly. That's how I broke the Amnesia."

"But I bet your real body is close by. You must be, to control them. It's somewhere in Iwa. Are you transformed as someone else on the Embassy?"

The Hokage gave a faint smile. "Don't pry, girl. Some secrets are best left unsaid."

Just then one of the ANBU entered the courtyard, kneeling on one knee. "Hokage-sama, Examiner Nara is here."

"Show him in."

The ANBU left and returned with Shikamaru. The leaf-nin chuunin bowed, then straightened, a strangely tense expression on his face. He smiled at Sakura, but it did not quite go to his eyes, and he kept on putting his hands into and then out of his pockets. Jumpy, Sakura thought. But why?

"Nara," the Hokage said. "Do you have the information I want?"

"Yes, Hokage-sama. Director Doi debriefed all the chuunin examiners on the details of the First Trial. It's structured like a scavenger hunt. The genin have to find a secret location within Iwagakure."

"Where is it?"

"I'll know before the start of the exam tomorrow night."

"Good. Make sure you share the location with our side."

Shikamaru swallowed, a pale lump crawling down his windpipe, and Sakura almost did as well. Shaking down a chuunin examiner for information was cheating—an outright violation of the most basic rules of the exam. Was this how the chuunin exam was going to play out? Were all the examiners already compromised, the integrity of the exam destroyed?

"If the Director finds out—" Shikamaru started.

"Then you'll be arrested." Senju Tsunade smiled grimly. "Don't let him find out."
The Overlook

Sougon Castle squatted atop the Overlook like the bleached skull of a dead thing, white and pale and monstrous. Sakura could not decide which sort of thing it was, until she had walked close enough to the gated portcullis that its points showed, long sharp spears of steel that glittered in the sunset. A lion, she thought then, it looks like a lion, and its jaws are large enough to swallow me whole. Without delay Tsunade-sensei led the leaf-nin party into the bowels of the castle.

The Tsuchikage had invited them to dinner.

Inside the castle all was silence. "Well, that's a welcome sound," Dr. Honjo Micho said wryly. "I half-thought my old eardrums were going to burst on the way here."

Beside her, Anake sighed exaggeratedly. "Be careful what you wish for, Micho-sama. My grandfather says that it's always quietest just before death."

Their ride to Sougon Castle from Tsukai Gardens had been shadowed every step of them way by angry villagers. The Hokage's honor guard had stopped the heavy objects thrown at them, but they could not stop the shouts. "Death to the Betrayer! Death to the Whore of Leaves! Death to Konoha! Death to Konoha!" Sakura felt like she was part of an ancient execution, when they'd parade a criminal up and down the streets before chopping off his head.

The Overlook was the execution ground. It had loomed up before them, larger and larger, a white mountain at the tip of the village. The base was stained by rain and beaten by wind, but its peak was carved into great pyramidal structures, towers and keeps and recessed halls. Sougon Castle was an entire castle built inside a single giant rock, hollowed out of the top levels of the Overlook. And the lower levels as well, if the tales were true. It was said a man could walk a year beneath those walls and never be able to find his way out.

After passing through the castle gates, Sakura could believe it. This is an old place. She could feel it in the weight of the stone, in the shafts of sunlight that pierced through long slanted windows to light the interior. And lonely. Everything seemed slightly too big, too tall and wide, as if it not built for mortal beings. The walls were cold and almost entirely devoid of decoration. The only one she could see was a suit of samurai armor, right by the entrance. The red lacquered dreamsteel was of extraordinary craftsmanship, at least as old as the castle itself. Blackness stared out from the eyeholes of the mask; suddenly she saw burning flames.

The Hokage rounded on her. "I will do the talking. You are not to speak unless spoken to. Have you studied the Yamanaka report?"

Sakura nodded. "Yes."

"Then you know who you must watch for. Observe the genin, dissect them. You will be fighting each other before the night is out."

Officially, the Overlook dinner was a welcome party to kick off the chuunin exam. Unofficially it was a way for all the villages to gauge each other's strength, and to set the stage for the political power plays of the next three months. Three representatives from each village had been invited; each representative was also allowed to "sponsor" one genin entrant. The Hokage had sponsored her, and Hyuuga Hiashi and Dr. Honjo Micho, the other two representatives, had chosen Neji and Anake. All the strongest genin would certainly be making an appearance.
And they were very strong. Chief Inoichi had prepared a secret databook on all 1,149 genin entrants, ranking them by strength, profile, and as many of their jutsu as he could find. The databook was undoubtedly illegal, and undoubtedly everyone else was doing the same. Sakura had read it in her spare time when she wasn't training or sleeping.

It did not help her sleep. There was a huge pool of entrants—double the usual—and an absolutely absurd number of them were A-rank. A-rank ninja were supposed to be *jounin*, the ninja elite… not *genin*. In the last chuunin exam in Konoha, only Gaara would have qualified as A-rank, Sasuke and Neji as high B-rank, and Lee and Temari as mid B-rank.

This time there were *eight* A-rank *genin*, and twenty seven B-rank *genin*… and those were just the ranked ones. A number of entrants had been unranked because Inoichi had no information on them. Another A-rank ninja could very well pop out from that pile.

*Or S-rank.* The designation "S rank" was reserved for the world's most dangerous ninjas… shinobi on the level of the Fifth Hokage herself. Somehow the genin Sougon Sosano had received it. Of course he did. It would be suicide to fight him one-on-one; the only way to beat him would be through teamwork.

Teamwork. Sakura had always thought she was good at teamwork, but now she knew that it was only the teams she had been on, with Sasuke and Naruto and then with Ino and Chouji. The Sand Siblings were another matter. They were willing to train with her, to be sure. And everyone worked hard to learn each other's fighting styles.

Yet something was still missing. From an objective perspective, Team Tsunade should have been a very strong team. But somehow the whole was less than the parts. Somehow the timing was just a little off, the warning just a little late. The Sand Siblings blamed her, and she blamed them. *We don't trust each other,* Sakura thought. *A team is built on trust.*

At night she found herself burning with resentment, and even Tonton the pig annoyed her, with her stinky fur, her squeals and annoying pawing. She had to take a pill to sleep, and the next day it seemed she had not slept at all, for all the good it had done her. She was supposed to be training Amnesia and chakra flow, and could not do either. Frustration begat frustration.

The worst thing was when Neji and Tenten showed up. Neji had turned his cold white eyes on Sakura. "You shouldn't have said those things to Lee."

Tenten followed in a shrill voice. "Do you know what Lee's been doing, ever since you slapped him? We came back and found him crying in the room. He wouldn't even tell us what happened for a whole day. He was drunk. You know how Lee gets when he gets drunk, damnit. Why'd you do that?"

Sakura felt bad, but Tenten's tone raised her hackles. *Didn't I just save your life?* And she was aware of the eyes of the sand-nins on her. "It was for his own good. He's delusional, and you're his enablers." As if to emphasize the point she fished out Lee's two chakra-cast kunai and handed them to Neji. "Look, give these back. I don't want them."

Neji only stared. "You're so cold, Sakura. Lee doesn't care about daggers. All he cares about is you. Even when your sensei abandoned you, he was always there. And you used him, and as soon as you were back in the Fifth's good graces you turned around and dumped him like a piece of trash."

The words cut Sakura to the quick. "You're wrong."

But Kankuro had only laughed. "Better tell Rock Lee the truth, Hyuuga. Meet the new Sakura. Meet..."
the pink-haired bitch."

*I'm not a bitch,* Sakura told herself. *Am I?*

Now Sakura followed Neji and his uncle as they climbed the winding steps of Sougon Castle. Neji did not speak to her, and she did not look at him. Instead she glued her eyes to the bare stone walls. Sounds were coming from ahead; she could just make out the music of table harps, and the buzz of laughing voices. Suddenly the walls expanded, opening out into a huge vaulted cavern.

They had reached the highest level of Sougon Castle, the hollowed out peak of the Overlook. It was large enough to swallow the entire Hokage Tower; but portioned by traditional-style paper walls into smaller rooms, it had a feel of warm intimacy. At least a hundred guests were mingling, talking. Temari and Kankuro were in one corner, along with the Suna genin Ryokan Satetsu, Mukade's son; Shikamaru and several chūnin examiners from other villages were in another. By a long fluted window that looked out on the Dreamstone River, she saw Team Tosuken. Tenshe was scratching his head, Erima was licking her black knife, and Aumono was dangling a serving girl on his lap. Sakura did not see Sosano.

"Tsunade-kun!" a raspy voice boomed out. It belonged to a flamboyant old woman, stunted and wrinkled, dressed in a frilly purple gown that covered her head to toe. Sakura was glad of it, because what showed was frightfully ugly. When the woman grinned, cinnamon smoke poured out between rotten teeth. "Tsunade-kun, my beautiful child! Come, it's been so long!"

And then she gripped the Hokage in a great hug. The Hokage could have been a statue, for all she moved in return. "Kikuko," the Hokage said. "I thought you had retired."

*That's Kikuko?* Nobunaga Kikuko the Spinster was one of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist, a legendary kunoichi. Sakura had seen her photograph in the intelligence dossier, but it must have been decades out of date.

The Spinster snorted. "So did I. I'll tell you true, the only way out of the shinobi world is the grave." The mist-nin sucked on her pipe, thick white smoke curling in the air as she studied the rest of the party. "Ah, Hyuuga. Frightful eyes. Have you ever considered wearing sunglasses?"

Hyuuga Hiashi's face was a sculpted white mask. "No."

She cackled. "For the rest of us, you understand." A hand swept out to touch Micho's shoulder. "And Micho Manslayer, you old dear. I see you've still not figured out how to use a comb. Would you like a smoke?"

The old doctor ran a hand through his tangled mane of white hair. "Thank you, Kikuko, but no. I gave up smoking when I gave up killing. Too dangerous for my health, I'm afraid." He smiled faintly. "And for the health of others."

"Ah, yes. I remember now. No killing, and no smoking. Might as well give up that little mast between your legs, for all the good it does you." The woman turned again. "Ah… and you must be Haruno Sakura. The tales I have heard are absolutely true. What a lovely young apprentice Tsunade-kun has acquired. I can already tell that you will be, how shall we say it, a most worthy successor in all the critical areas." Her beady eyes roving down Sakura's body, lingering on her chest.

"What are you staring at?" the Hokage snapped.

"Oh, I was just thinking of that phrase you apes are so fond of, how does it go? The next generation always surpasses the last." Suddenly without shame Kikuko reached over and with her dry wrinkled
lips planted a kiss on the back of Sakura’s hand.

"You dirty old woman," a girl declared behind them. "Grandpa’s cursing you in hell."

Kikuko cackled again. "You must watch out for my student Yukari, sweet Sakura. She wants to steal you away."

Touin Yukari glared. She was a short girl, even shorter than her sensei, fierce and scrawny, a tomcat stuffed into the tight, dark blue genin uniform of Kiri. Though a cat without hair; the girl had shaved her head, bringing out the icy white of her skin, the sky blue of her eyes. Sakura remembered from the dossier that she was an A-rank Hyoton user. The same bloodline as Haku. And about the same age as well.

"Liar," Yukari said, "I'm not a pervert, like you."

"So you're both dykes, is that it?" Anake asked. She saw Micho raise his bushy gray eyebrows behind the boy. It was an amazingly rude question, especially to so senior a personage as Nobunaga Kikuko. But the old troll only laughed.

"You stupid," Yukari said, glaring even more fiercely. "You're just jealous I got more pussy than you'll ever get."

"Alas, our cruel kunoichi," said a smooth silky voice. "First they take our money, and then they take our power, and last they even take our women. Mercy, where art thou?"

The man who joined them now was lithe and dark, with a regal mouth and slitted eyes as black and shiny as pools of coal oil. Rich black hair receded from his brow in a widow’s peak as sharply pointed as his nose. Sakura could have sworn he was Sosano’s older brother, so alike they looked. But his clothing was entirely different. The man was dressed like a foppish hunter, in leather pants and riding boots; beneath an overcoat of patterned red silk, his shirt was armored with glittering bronze disks, and a necklace on a silver chain settled against his breast, a glittering amethyst shaped in the six-sided wheel of the Sage of Six Paths.

Yet Sakura knew at once that this man was deadly dangerous. One of his hands rested lightly the hilt of his unsheathed sword, the famous dreamsteel katana called the Masamune, and Sakura did not doubt that he could cut her down in the blink of an eye.

"Shirasu-san," the Hokage said softly.

Sougon Shirasu smiled. He was the Tsuchikage’s youngest brother but, if the rumors were true, their name was about the only thing they had in common. The Sword of Winter, others called him, for the legendary blade he wielded. "Tsunade. Beautiful as always. Though your scars are gone. A pity… I did so like to trace them with my fingers." His eyes seemed to find Sakura, quick and sharp. "You know, once upon a time I proposed marriage to sweet Tsunade. I got on my knees and I vowed my undying love. Then she drew a kunai from between her breasts, and said, 'This is my one and only bride.' An improvement on any man’s mast, I must admit, even mine. But perhaps with too sharp an edge."

"She was too gentle with you," Kikuko the Spinster laughed, blowing smoke rings from her pipe. "Do you know how Shirasu the Widower comes by his nickname? Before he beds a woman he asks her to wed him, and later, when he goes to seduce the next, he calls it a divorce. Shirasu has more ex-wives than a beached rock has drops of bird shit."

"You wound me, my lady. I’m against divorce on religious principle, as you know. I am an avowed
The Hokage seemed not to hear the entire exchange. She turned to the other man who had joined them along with Shirasu, inclining her head. "Director Doi-san. We last parted on Deathtrap Mountain."

Haghira Doi bowed, thin lips matching his spindly body. His dark face suddenly seemed pale. "I see you, Tsunade." He turned to Hyuuga Hiashi. "And you as well, Hiashi. Since we fought together against the Silla Brotherhood. Welcome, all of you, to the Overlook."

The stone-nin would have said more, but just then there was a flurry of movement, and the serving girls were bowing and saying, "The Tsuchikage enters."

A small party had emerged from the far wall, Iwa shinobi dressed in simple gray robes, with traditional katana swords at their side, like the samurai of old. The man in the lead was not very large, nor very tall or muscular, but his presence was enormous. Sakura knew him at once. Sougon Sawar, the Sun Breaker.

He shared Shirasu's narrow eyes and sharp nose, his widow's peak, but otherwise she could not tell they were related, either by appearance or impression. There was a tightness to his face and flesh that spoke of leather cured in the heat until it was as tough as iron. Skin clung to his cheeks, showing the outline of bones, and his mouth seemed as if it had forgotten how to smile, and had never known how to laugh. Hard, Sakura thought. Hard like buried stone.

Following the Tsuchikage was a man that Sakura had seen before…

… though she had never seen his face.

Sougon Charasu. The middle brother of the Sougon Siblings was the most imposing of them all. Where Shirasu was lithe and foppish, and Sawar tough and austere, Sougon Charasu was a hulking beast, so massive and muscled he made Sosano look like a child's stick figure. Yet there was a grace to him as well, a raw, liquid power. Charasu of the Inferno, they called him. Burning fire seemed coiled inside his every gesture. When the man turned his head to look over the gathered crowd, his eyes were as black and piercing as those of a hawk.

Charasu's eyes passed over Sakura without a second glance. She frowned. Does he not remember me?

Sakura had fought Sougon Charasu twice before. First, during his attack on Honjo Laboratory in the Forest of Death. Second, during the Battle of Red Rock Cliff. Both times the masked Sougon shinobi had taunted her, belittled her, tried to kill her. Yet now Charasu did not even seem to notice her existence. Why? There seemed to be something different about Charasu, as well.

Sakura could not quite put her finger on it.

Following the Tsuchikage and his brother were two genin, marked out by their uniforms, and the chunin exam keys hanging down from their necks. Haghira Geigin, Doi's son, walked like a hunched giraffe, as if trying to hide his exceptionally long neck and his spindly, skeletal frame. Beside him, Bakura Orajuchi was the very image of a bat in human form, with his leathery skin, huge black eyes, protruding snout, and twitching bat-ears. Sosano's teammates, she knew.

Sosano was still nowhere to be found. No one seemed to note his absence, however; they were too busy bowing, even Tsunade-sensei. As guests in Iwa and in the home of the Tsuchikage, it was only polite.
The Tsuchikage bowed to them in return. "I see you," the Tsuchikage said. His eyes roved over the gathered guests in one motion, before fixing on the Hokage. He seemed to want to burn her where she stood. "I welcome you to the Overlook, and to Iwa. Dinner is served. Be seated."

"A man of many words." Sougon Shirasu flashed a smile at Hokage, gesturing to the dinner tables. There were five of them, low traditional-style tables made of black cherry and laid out on raised platforms. "And now we must part ways, dear Tsunade. The Tsuchikage shall want you to join him at the center table. And I'll be over there, on the other side of the room. I fear my presence causes Sawar indigestion."

"You are his brother, Shirasu."

"Indeed? He has mistaken me for a mushroom. He keeps me in the dark and feeds me shit. As well, perhaps. Diplomacy is only manure of a different sort, and with a rather more tedious flavor." He winked at the Hokage. "Lady Kikuko, will you join me?"

The Spinster tittered, hooking her arm through Shirasu's. They left, along with Yukari. All the other guests was scattering as well, dispersing themselves among the tables. The Hokage nailed Sakura with a look. "Remember, girl, don't talk."

The center table had only twenty places, but no chairs; the guests sat cross-legged instead. Sponsored genin stood behind their sensei, off the dais. By unspoken agreement there was one representative from each village, plus a few diplomats. The Confederacy—Iwa, Kiri, Taki, and Numa—was sitting on one side of the table, and the United Countries at the other. Baki and Tosuken were already there, with Temari and Aumono.

The Fifth Hokage slipped off her shoes and stepped onto the raised table dais, taking a place between Baki and Tosuken. Standing behind her sensei, Sakura could just see over the Hokage's head. Straight across from her the Tsuchikage sat with shinobi from the Mist and Waterfall villages: Keel the Annihilator, another of the Seven Swordsmen; and Misain Dayu the Cinder, so called for his scarred face. With horror, Sakura recognized Dayu as the very Akatsuki terrorist who had attacked her in the Asylum. Dayu had lit the rain on fire using his Mizuho bloodline.

Besides the United Countries and Confederacy, a number of unaffiliated villages also sat at the table. Among others, Sakura saw Makoto Muro, Warlord of the Blood Country; Ikenobo Zeami, called the Princess of Dragonflies, leader of Grass; and Kasuga Darui the Black Cloud, renowned jounin of Kumogakure. Nearly every shinobi was as equally famous.

This is the beginning, Sakura thought. The Hokage's words on Deathtrap Mountain echoed in her mind. Our mission is simple. We must topple Sawar, expose his conspiracy, destroy the Annihilation Device, and bring the Earth Country into the United Countries. The fate of the world hung in the balance.

The Fourth Tsuchikage made the first move. In a cold flat tone he said, "Tsunade. It has been seventeen years. Yet you have not aged a day."

"Indeed." The Hokage's smile was like curdled milk. "I must say, Sawar, you look rather the worse for wear."

"Because I do not hide myself behind lies."

Kasuga Darui of Kumo grinned, showing his black painted teeth, a ghastly sight in a pale white face. Darui of the Black Cloud, they called him. "Well, Tsunade... now that you're here, there is a topic on everyone's mind, neh? We've all been wondering for months now."
"You are referring to the United Countries, yes?"

"Of course not," Darui said, to widespread laughter. "We are wondering how the Queen of Torment let Uchiha Sasuke slip through her fingers. An unprecedented international humiliation, neh?"

The Hokage's smile was like curdled milk. "Orochimaru plucked the boy out from under us. That's the whole story."

"Is it, neh? The last member of the Uchiha clan..."

"Tsunade is only doing what she always does," said Sougon Sawar. "Gambling. She has never learned that she is no good at it."

The Hokage's eyes met the Tsuchikage's. "An interesting metaphor, Sawar. What's the game, and what are the odds? Is it the United Countries? Look around you. These young men and women are gathered here tonight to take part in a grand contest that will foster lasting friendships between our villages. None of them have known war in their lifetimes. My friends, I will not mince words with you, nor dance around my meaning. The United Countries has come to Iwa for one purpose only, and that is to spread a message. Open your hearts and minds, and you will know the truth of what I say. Peace is already here, it has been here for seventeen years. We only have to not let it slip away."

The Tsuchikage scowled. "You have a way with words—I will not deny it. But that is all that you ever had. Peace, you say. I say it is a false peace. As false as you, Betrayer."

There was a short pause. Baki stepped into the breach. "You have your differences with Konoha, Tsuchikage-sama. We understand that. I have had my quarrels as well. Yet I also remember a time, not so long ago, when many of us around this table fought together, as comrades, against the Silla Brotherhood in a battle of screaming snow. Was that a false day as well?"

"It was a day of justice," said Sougon Sawar. "The Dancing Ninja and his band of outlaws reaped what they had sown. Woe to him, and to all those who dare to challenge the people of Earth. Their time will come as well."

The Hokage seemed taken aback. "You speak of war."

"And what if I do?"

"Rank madness. A Fourth Ninja War will surely result in the death of millions, most of them innocent. Little children, infants. That is no form of justice I know."

Sougon Sawar's eyes narrowed, glinting dangerously. For half a second Sakura thought he would make them burning flames. "And was it justice when you killed my wife?"

"Seurin would be ashamed at what you have become."

"How dare you."

Kasuga Darui moved to calm things down. "My friends, this is a celebratory dinner, neh? Neither of you seem to be eating. In my diplomatic experience, great things can be achieved on occasions such as this, but rarely on an empty stomach. I implore you both, let us feast while the food is still hot."

"You forgot the wine." Densuke Tosuken raised his cup. "Shall we have a toast?"

The conversation settled down for a time, after that. Guests talked in small groups, mostly trading gossip or old battle stories, with little political content. Meanwhile serving girls brought in the dinner
courses, one after the other: crushed chestnuts dipped in citrus sauce, strips of broiled fish cakes, steamed beef mixed with sweetened black soybeans, simmered mushrooms, radish and carrot soup, tortoise eggs and pickled tofu, barbecued whitefish, tender lotus roots roasted in red peppers and garlic, steamed meat buns, shaved ice flavored with syrup, rice balls wrapped with nuts, more and more, more than Sakura could count.

A feast, it was, and plainly delicious, for everything was eaten as fast as it arrived. Only the Hokage and the Tsuchikage had no appetite, settling instead for silence, glowering looks, and almost comical attempts to stare at each other without seeming to stare. Sakura cared very little for food—Ino liked to tease her that her tongue was thick as a branch, and just as dead—but watching Tsunade-sensei throw away everything on her plate was positively painful.

Snatches of conversation drifted across from the other dinner tables. Despite sitting on the opposite side of the room, in fact, Sougon Shirasu could be clearly heard. He was bantering with Kikuko and the distinguished Ambassador from Genoa, a man who wore a strange striped suit and the even stranger name of Imanuel Burgouine.

"And I have heard so much of this Prince of Dawn," Burgouine was saying in his curious southern accent, "but he has not seen fit to join us."

"My nephew is visiting his grandmother," Shirasu answered, munching on fish cakes. "Or so he says. I rather think he has a distracted air about him lately. Far off looks, poignant sighs, things like that. Why, if you'll permit me an indiscretion, I do believe at this moment he's pulling the clothes off some girl."

"Ah. I am quite familiar with what you mean. In Genoa, it is a universal practice for soldiers to seek out the pleasure of release before they go into battle."

"Yes, and at every other time as well, so I hear. I fear we do things a bit differently in the North, Mr. Burgouine. As you see, we prefer to starve our soldiers to death." He gestured to the standing genin.

The Tsuchikage stirred at that, shooting the two men at the other table an icy look. "Why should they eat? Gluttony is no part of the shinobi way. I agreed to this dinner only because the High Council forced me to. You can thank yourself for that little scheme, Shirasu. Very well, if grown men shall be pigs, so be it. I cannot stop them. But let the young remember what a ninja truly is."

"You're living in the past, Sawar." The Hokage had not spoken directly to the Tsuchikage for some time. "The war is over. I begin to grasp why you so easily dismiss the fruits of peace. It's because you have never bothered to enjoy them."

"The fruits of peace?" The Tsuchikage's words were gravel on dry stone. "You are a fool, Tsunade. Look around you. Peace, you say. What does peace mean to this lot of children, when before the night is over a good part of them will be dead?"

"You are the fool. The chuunin exam is violent, yes. But a controlled violence, entirely different from the chaos of war. Certainly further reforms should be implemented to prevent needless death or injury. A ban on unrestricted fighting should suffice. I will be sure to make it part of the agenda of the United Countries."

"You mean to eliminate courage from the chuunin exams."

"You may call that courage, I call it insanity."

"Neither, Tsunade," said Haghira Doi softly. It was the first time he had spoken all dinner. "It is
simply our way. Freely given, and freely chosen. The stakes are high, yes, but so are the rewards. For in battle we are judged not by wealth, nor birth, nor skin. But only by our strength as soldiers and as leaders of men. We are all, in that most fundamental sense, equal. This is the ideal of the shinobi village, and of the chuunin exam. And, if I may say so, it deserves our highest respect. Peace is a noble aim, and one which we welcome in Iwa. But if you mean to change our very way of life, then I must tell you, that we do not want to change."

"Well said, Doi!" applauded Kasuga Darui. Many others nodded their heads.

The Hokage knew she had overreached. "You mistake me, Director."

"It is my sincere hope that I do."

Makoto Muro smiled. "I think there's a better way to settle this. After all, we are speaking of the very brats around this table. Let's ask them, shall we?" The Warlord of the Blood Country looked right at Sakura, pale eyes gleaming with malice. "How about the Fifth's apprentice? Do you agree with this… reform of the chuunin exam?"

Sakura met the blood-nin's gaze, and tried not to swallow. "I don't know. I just want to do my best."

"Spoken like a true leaf ninja." Muro chuckled. "You always do."

"But it's not a game," Sakura continued suddenly. She surprised even herself with her words, tumbling one after the other. "Not for us, anyway. We're just kids, we don't know about strategy, or politics, or whatever. But we do know this. You great shinobi, you village leaders, you old men who sit around and drink and feast and move pieces around a board, and decide war and peace with lies and secrets. Justice, you call it. When you high lords play your game of thrones, it's always us who live or die."

There was a short silence.

Then a voice came from behind her. "Well, yes. Those would seem to be the only two options." It was a knife through the air, soft and sharp, mocking and gentle, and Sakura knew it at once.

Sougon Shirasu laughed. "Impeccable timing, Sosano. As always."

"You know I aim to be fashionably late." In the bright light of the dinner hall, Sosano's resemblance to his uncle Shirasu struck Sakura even more strongly. His dashing smile was the same, his quick and playful eyes. But he was wearing the same gray robes as his father, and carrying the same katana sword. And when he approached the dais he bowed low and deep.

"I'm sorry, Father. You know how Grandmother gets. Always so worried I'll set off on a mission and never come back."

"Utter stupidity," said Sougon Sawar, frowning. The Tsuchikage was as clipped and cold with his only son as he was with anyone else. "She clings to you now more than when you were in diapers and swaddling clothes. If that woman were not my own mother, I swear, I'd have put her out to pasture long ago."

"That is no way to talk, Father. I rather enjoyed the visit, truth be told. Grandmother makes a wonderful roast hare pie." Sosano took his place behind the Tsuchikage as all the genin shot him dirty looks. He smiled at Sakura, eyes closing to slanted arches. "My attitude toward the chuunin exam is really quite simple. All men must die, and shinobi rather faster than most. But first we'll live. What say you to that, Sakura?"
I'm here, aren't I? "I don't think it would work so well the other away around."

Sosano smiled again. "Right to the heart of the matter. Won't you join me outside?" He gestured to a doorway cut in the stone wall, leading outside to the Overlook's balcony. "I wish to show you something. With your permission, Father, of course."

The boy did not wait for a reply, either from her, or his father. One instant he was bowing, walking away as he did so, and then in another he was up and out of sight.

They were all staring at her now, the jounin sensei, the genin, and the Tsuchikage most of all, a scowling frown that sent a shiver down her spine. Sougon Shirasu was tapping his fingertips together. "Oh, my," he laughed, "this is unexpected. Her?"

Sakura leaned down to hear her sensei's whisper. "Go," the Hokage hissed.

"Follow him?"

"Yes. But remember who you are. He's after you for a reason."

Sakura did as she was told. Outside, Sougon Castle spread out all around her. She did not see Sougon Sosano until she looked up. He was leaning on a battlement wall at the very top of the Overlook, his back to Sakura. The golden Sougon clan crest stitched over his kimono glittered in moonlight. Sakura climbed the stone-cut steps to stand beside him.

"You called me out here," Sakura said.

"And do you know why?"

Sakura remembered what the boy had said to her two nights ago. "Because of fate, I suppose."

Sosano laughed lightly. "Yes, in a way. Because there will never, ever, be another night like this one." He bowed, then spread his hands around him. "And I wished to show you. I see you, Haruno Sakura. Look."

Before her, to the west, mountain shadows loomed like great black snakes. Somewhere out there were the three great gorges called the Scar, she knew, and the Dreamstone River which had carved them out of the mountains. It was all covered in inky darkness, a fog of black that vanished into a bottomless mouth. I see nothing, she meant to say, but when she turned around a sudden blaze of light drew her breath away.

Below them, on the other side of the Overlook, the lights of the village had come on. For a moment Sakura thought of Suna, of red crumbling walls and hanging tombs, of flashing kites and a pillar of light blazing in a dark night. She thought of Ame, of rain falling in curtains over a metal city, of mazes of rusted steel and a black spire against the clouds. She thought of the rolling grass steppes of Kusa, the roaring silver spires of Taki, the creaking polebarges of Kawa, the grasping Five Towers of Ashwarren in sunset shadow. And of Konoha, climbing the rock face of Hokage Mountain, to look over the village that was her home, to look upon the streets she had walked, the forests she had trained in, Ramen Ichiraka and Naka Shrine and Hashirama Square and the Steam Gardens, and the little apartment by the blacksmith where she had spent most of her life, and the big house with the red door where she had been born and her father had coughed and wasted away and died on the last day of the year.

Iwagakure was all of those things, it seemed, and more.

From the peak of the Overlook, she could see the whole village spread before her, all the way to
Onden Barrier in the far east. Onden Barrier was where the two strands of the Dreamstone, the White and the Yellow Rivers, rejoined after being split apart by the Overlook. Iwa was more or less shaped like a fat eye, running from east to west. The central island was the eyeball, and the two rivers the eyelids.

Six bridges crossed across their span, three on either bank: the Lion, Bat, and Wasp to the south, and the Deer, Slug, and Spider to the north. Tiny fishing boat lights glittered off the meandering Yellow River, and beyond them rose a jumble of dark, hulking shapes. Sakaicho, she knew. The slum area of Iwa, populated with landfills, pockmarked training grounds, and Sakaicho Prison.

The village proper was divided into four districts: two at the tips of the eye and two squeezing the center. In the east, the rural Onden district was a maze of terraced rice paddies, flooded at this time of year for the summer planting. The dark water was broken only by the sloping forms of Onden Barrier and ANBU Headquarters. Southwest of Onden was Aoyama, a large residential district that housed the Zoo, the Iwa Ninja Academy, the Chuunin Exam Stadium, and the infamous Haghira Tower. To the north, along the banks of the rushing White River, was Shitamachi, a bustling nightlife and waterfront entertainment district. Amidst the dazzling neon lights, Sakura could just make out a dark hill lined with trees, as beautiful as it was lonely. That could only be Tsukai Gardens, she knew, famed all over the Earth Country for its carefully cultivated perfection. Beyond Shitamachi, across the river, was the wild, tangled Sagewood.

West of Shitamachi and Aoyama, at the tip of the island, was Kuramae. The heart of Iwa. It was arranged like a fan, with broad avenues converging toward the Overlook. Directly below her, she could see Uzaemo Square, and the most important buildings in Iwa arrayed around it: Kindness Hospital, Katsu-ji Temple, the Iwa Council Chambers. It was just as large as Hashirama Square in Konoha, but even more magnificent. There was no wood or brick, here, but only stone, the priceless dreamstone coveted the world over, white as snow and light as cloth and harder than the finest steel.

The vista was utterly unlike what Sakura had seen three days ago, when she entered Iwa for the first time. Then, the village had been empty, cold. The heart of Iwa, she had thought, a heart of stone.

She thought the same now, but somehow the stone had transfigured itself, pulsing with people and laughter, with the buzz of street hawkers, the wafting smell of frying fish and barbecued chicken. Red lanterns lined every street and alleyway, and blazing fires swathed ancient stone in warm light. They were brooding, pyramidal shapes, but in the flickering fire they seemed to come almost to dancing life. Iwa is the earth and the stones, a voice echoed inside her. Here, we come to be alive. Here, we think most of those close to us, and want them to share in our hearts.

Sougon Sosano was looking at her with dark, glinting eyes.

"Do you see?" he asked softly.

"It's like an Earth garden," Sakura said.

"Yes." Sosano moved closer. "That is exactly right. In the rest of the world, gardens tend to be symmetrical. But the Earth garden is asymmetrical, and this is because the asymmetrical has the greater power to symbolize multiplicity and vastness. So Anayama Tokusai remarks, with a spray of flowers, a bit of water, one evokes the vastness of rivers and mountains. That is how we see beauty in the Earth Country. And so it is with Iwa, writ large." He showed her with his fingers. "The Overlook is a stone placed at the head of the village, dividing it in two, as a man is divided from a woman. The Yellow River is a muddy creek, and the White River a pebbled brook. Sakaicho is a hard rocky face, and the Sagewood a wall of vines. The steps of Onden Barrier are prayer ponds. Kuramae is an open courtyard. In between, in the same place as the heart on a chest, is Tsukai Gardens, a blossom within the bamboo grove of Shitamachi. Aoyama is a shadowed house, and
Haghira Tower a hidden cave, the place of ghosts. Onden, Shitamachi, Aoyama, and Kuramae. The four corners of one island garden, as the four organs of the body, as the four seasons. In the spring, cherry blossoms, in the summer the cuckoo. In autumn the moon, and in winter the clear, cold snow."

Sakura stared at the sight for a long time. "It's very beautiful," she said at last. "Thank you, Sosano. For showing me this night."

"Of course." The boy bowed. "Please call me Sosa."

"Sosa." Sakura breathed deeply, taking in the name. Taking in the cool mountain air, the taste of mist and spray and stone. "The village… it feels sad, somehow. A little bit. Like a bittersweet song."

"Yes. The river is sad, and the stone is tired. And this night most of all."

"Why?"

"Because before it is over, blood will cover them both. The First Trial begins, and many young lives end. Death is in the very earth."

Sakura looked away. All men must die, and shinobi rather faster than most. Below, in Uzaemo Square, the genin were already gathering. Hundreds of young people milled about the plaza. It could have been a dance, a concert, except that the dancers were wearing shinobi armor and holding steel blades. In one corner she saw Team Asuma. Ino grabbing her ponytail, Chouji rubbing his stomach, Anake with head raised up to look at the crescent moon, thin and pale as a sickle of ice. A wind blew from the mountains, prickling her skin. When she looked back, Sosano's robe was flapping, and his long black braid fluttered against the clouds. Moonlight reflected off the white stone of the Overlook and made the boy's forehead protector gleam like silver.

"But first we'll live," Sakura said softly.

"Yes."

Then he was close, so close. She could feel his power, his strength, his beauty. Remember who you are. And suddenly she saw him again. A boy with skin pale as the moon, and hair black as a raven's, and eyes that were as dark and red as living blood, the boy she had loved, the boy who had met her on a frozen bridge and told her that she was a spring girl, and that she could never come with him.

"What do you want?" she whispered.

"You ask me that question again. You know what I want."

"We're enemies."

"Are we?" It was not a question. "A word, a phrase, a belief. So often they complicate a simple thing. A boy sees a girl, a girl sees a boy. I saw you on the first night we met, Sakura, and I looked into your eyes. Eyes like the bright green forest, sweet and young and sure. But something else, too. A secret glimmer, a darker truth. Something strong. It frightened me, it thrilled me. And then I knew I was still alive."

And then Sosano's arms were moving, he was leaning down and pressing his mouth to hers. They kissed. But Sakura did not close her eyes. Nor did Sosano. Instead they stared at each other as their lips touched. His lips were soft as silk and warm as a summer night. She did not move. Remember who you are. His black eyes were right against hers, and she wondered when they would become burning flames.
Then the kiss was over, and Sosano pulled away. He swallowed, breathing in heavy gulps. For an instant all his charm, his smooth appeal, left him, and then he was just another confused, fumbling boy. "That..." he managed to say, "That could've gone better."

Between Sakura's breasts her chuunin exam key was hot to the touch, as hot as the chakra-cast kunai in her hand. "It could've gone worse."

The boy frowned. He opened his mouth to say more, but just then there was a sound, deep and ringing and filling the wind. *Gongs.* Sakura looked for the source, and saw that it was coming from Uzaemo Square. And then she knew why the gongs tolled.

It was midnight.

Sosano stepped back. "The First Trial begins." He licked his lips, and swallowed again. His eyes were black narrow slits. "I... I must go. I see you, Sakura." Then he turned and walked away.

Sakura lingered a long moment, watching the village below. Deep brass beats wailed across the Overlook, again and again, a roaring dirge of thunder. When Sakura went back inside Sougon Castle, the guests were already gone, and only a few servants remained to clean up after them.

The Hokage was waiting for her. "What happened with the Sougon boy?"

"He's interested in me," Sakura admitted. "He... he kissed me."

She expected her sensei to be upset, but instead the Hokage said, "Good. He's let his guard down. If he's any sort of man, he'll try to kiss you again. Perhaps even tonight. Let him do it."

Sakura felt the chill in her sensei's voice. "And then?"

"And then? Sakura, you poor sweet fool, then you kill him."
In Konoha the bells tolled for many things, but most of all they tolled for death. Sakura still remembered the sound they made, a thousand silver bells, ringing through the streets, as her father's casket was carried through the mourning throngs to Madara Cemetery. There had not been such a roaring ever again, not even for the funeral of the Third Hokage. It's like music, she had thought, it's so beautiful, even as the tears ran down her little cheeks.

The bells of Iwagakure were very different. They rumbled through her like an earthquake; like something dark and old and secret.

Like stone.

*It's like music,* she had thought, *it's so beautiful,* even as the tears ran down her little cheeks.

The First Trial: The Night Hunt

I do not know this place, Sakura thought. And she thought of her sensei's words, on Deathtrap Mountain. I have to be strong. I have to be strong, if I'm going to live.

"I'm going deaf," Kankuro whined, "these gongs are worse than a pack of screaming kids."

"They sound just like you, when you were a baby," said Temari.

"Only 'cuz you forgot to change my diaper."

Sakura was standing with the Sand Siblings in Uzaemo Square. A thousand genin were around them; three hundred teams from fifteen different villages. Excitement pulsed through the crowd like an electric charge. The Overlook loomed behind them, but everyone had only eyes only for the brightly lit stage in front of the great bronze gate of Katsu-ji Temple. On the stage stood dozens of the chuunin examiners, including the Director Haghira Doi.

"Sakura! I found you!"

It was Ino. She pushed violently through the crowds of genin and wrapped Sakura in a fierce hug. From long experience, Sakura knew this meant Ino was happy. The rest of Team Asuma came trailing after her. Chouji scratched his head, and Anake shrugged, too cool for words.

But it wasn't just them. Team Gai was there, too.

"Lee," Sakura said.

Rock Lee gave no sign that Sakura had slapped him two days ago. He smiled brightly. "Sakura-chan! You are as radiant as ever!"

Sakura desperately wanted to go someplace private, but there wasn't any place to move. *If I don't say it now, I'll never say it.* "Lee… I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that those things to you, on the rooftop. I didn't mean it."

"It's okay! Never apologize for telling the truth, that's what Gai-sensei says! I know you don't want to be my girlfriend. You're weren't leading me on, like Neji and Tenten said. Even though you slapped me, the flame of my unrequited love shall burn forever! I just want you to be happy, Sakura-chan. I'll always be there for you." Rock Lee gave her a thumbs up, and winked.

Sakura felt her face turn as red as a tomato. Everyone had heard. Everyone was looking at her. Temari was trying not to burst out laughing.
Ino did a facepalm. "God, Lee, haven't you heard of discretion?"

"You're too kind to me, Lee," Sakura managed to get out.

Tenten smiled at her, thinly. "He's too kind to everyone. Come on. Let's go." She pulled Lee away, back into the crowd. Neji followed them without a word, blank eyes burning a hole in what remained of Sakura's dignity.

"Well," said Anake, "before we all kill each other later, anyone want some jellybeans?" He jiggled a jar full of colorful candy.

Sakura took a handful.

Soon enough the gongs reached a crescendo. Haghira Doi stepped to a microphone at the front of the stage. The ringing stopped, and in the sudden silence Doi's voice carried far across Uzaemo Square.

"Welcome to the First Trial of the 54th Iwa Chuunin Exam," he said, "the most difficult and most dangerous chuunin exam in history. Before this night is over, half of you will be dead. That is not an exaggeration. If you wish to save yourselves and your friends, please leave now."

He paused; none of the genin moved.

"Very well. The objective of the chuunin exam is simple. You are all genin, apprentice shinobi who have not yet proved your right to lead others. In Iwa, we believe that all leaders of shinobi must possess three core virtues: Insight, Duty, and Strength. The First Trial of the chuunin exam is designed to test the virtue of Insight. Raw power is useless without the ability to look beneath the surface; to understand the truth of any situation, whether in war or in peace. Thus, Insight is the first necessary ability of the chuunin.

"The First Trial shall take the form of a scavenger hunt. You have exactly one day to find an object called the Lock, somewhere in Iwa, which can only be opened with your chuunin exam key. You must activate your key with the Lock and then return to the Overlook before time expires." To demonstrate this process Doi held up a key which started to glow red. "I remind you that your key is a tracking device. We can and will track your position. There are only two rules. One, all three of your team's keys must be activated in order for you to pass the Trial. Two, any destruction of property within Iwa will result in immediate disqualification. Good luck, all of you. May the best shinobi prevail. The First Trial begins now."

Haghira Doi turned away and walked off the stage. The rest of the chuunin examiners sprung into action as well, leaping onto the rooftops of Uzaemo Square, spreading out throughout the village. A confused murmur rushed through the gathered genin.

"That's it?" Anake asked. "How're we supposed to find this Lock, without any clues?"

As if on cue, the stage burst into pieces. Thousands of small round objects were flung out of it in a high arc, raining down on the genin. Scrolls. Sakura grabbed one and unfolded it. The scrolls were all the same: a map of Iwagakure with a grid of coordinates overlaid upon it. Nothing else; no hints of any specific location.

Ino pulled on her ponytail in frustration. "I don't get it. Is there like, invisible ink or something?"

"It doesn't matter," Temari laughed. "We don't need the map."

Sakura understood. "Shikamaru is a chuunin examiner. He knows where the Lock is." The conversation in the Hokage's private courtyard had made that clear enough. "Tsunade-sensei told..."
him to help us."

"But that's cheating!" Chouji said.

"Of course it is," Kankuro said, "that's what the whole Trial is about, didn't you hear the Director? Where's Shikamaru?"

"He said he'd find us."

Teams of genin were slowly filtering out of the square. Temari led Team Tsunade and Team Asuma onto the roof of the nearby Kindness Hospital, to look out over the rest of the village. The night was very dark, the moon a smudge of white ink on an utterly black canvas; a vast emptiness of shadowed streets and silent buildings. All the life of Iwa had disappeared in an instant. There were no lights. Part of the First Trial, Sakura knew, the Director's order for everyone to stay inside and not interfere. There would be no else on the streets tonight except themselves. A thousand genin, leaping from roof to roof, barely visible.

"They look like ghosts," said Sakura.

"No," Temari replied. "Not ghosts. Hunters. And this is the night hunt."

It was not long before they came across the hunter's prey. Three dead bodies, lying crumpled right on the edge of a tiled roof in the Shitamachi district. Two of the genin had holes clean through their heads; the third one was simply dead, without any visible wounds. Evidently, however, his passage into the next world had been a painful one. The expression on the dead boy's face was grotesque.

"Grass-nin," Kankuro said. "Must've been ambushed, didn't even get a chance to fight back. These two got run through with some kind of piercing weapon. How did the last one die?"

"His heart's burned to a crisp." Sakura put her hand on the corpse to probe it with Mystical Palm. "It was lit on fire. From the inside."

Chouji looked sick. "How's that possible?"

How was it possible, indeed? How could you light water on fire? It didn't make any sense, but Sakura had seen it with her own eyes. She had seen rain fall through the broken roof of the Asylum and turn into a torrent of blazing fire.

"Mizuho," whispered Ino.

"Mizuho," Sakura agreed. "The bloodline of the Misain clan of Waterfall. Team Dayu has two of them, a brother and a sister. The brother, Misain Sebi, is reputed to be as strong as he is sadistic. He lit the blood in this grass-nin's heart on fire. An Instant Death jutsu."

"A clean way to kill someone," Anake mused. "No nasty bodily fluids to contend with. Or property damage, for that matter."

Sakura wondered if there was any difference, between a clean death and a dirty one. The end result was the same. She reached down to close the eyes of the grass-nin boy who had been burned alive. Then the eyes of the others. Around their necks, their chuunin exam keys were dark and cold. No doubt some chuunin examiners would arrive later, to pick up the corpses.

"I'm being signaled," Kankuro said. He flicked his fingers rapidly. Sakura could barely see the gossamer chakra strings that connected his fingertips with his puppets, Karasu and Kuroari. Kankuro was using the puppets to scout ahead—a precaution that the grass-nins had neglected to their
misfortune. "It's Shikamaru. He's close."

They followed Kankuro to the gaudy entrance of what appeared very much to be a woman's brothel. Sakura's impressions were confirmed when a scantily-clothed prostitute emerged from behind a curtain, beckoning them to enter.

Temari eyed the prostitute suspiciously. "Is that—"

"It's a disguise, okay? Don't even start."

Ino giggled. "I never knew you had this side, Shikamaru."

"The things I do for my comrades. Look, you guys are in a lot of danger." Shikamaru drew them into a small room within the brothel. Chouji kept on staring at Shikamaru's breasts until Anake coughed behind him. "Tonight isn't just about the chuunin exam. There are Confederacy genin here with specific orders to kill you. Watch out for Team Sawar, Team Keel, Team Dayu—"

"We saw their handiwork already," Ino said.

Temari was drumming her fingers on her metal War Fan. Click, click. "We know the risk. Now tell us where the Lock is."

"The Watermill at Onden." Shikamaru swallowed, an oddly delicate gesture in his cloned woman's body. "Half of the other examiners are leaking the location, too. Everyone will be heading there soon. Please, take care of yourselves, okay?"

"And for god's sake, learn some female anatomy. If those breasts were real you'd crack your back in two." Temari reached out to squeeze one; Shikamaru's whole disguise disappeared in a puff of white smoke. "Maybe I'll teach you about it sometime."

Shikamaru looked like a stake had been driven through his throat. Temari smiled again, which was twice more than Sakura had ever seen her smile in her life. Then she turned to glare at the rest of them, daring anyone to comment on what had just happened.

No one did.

They took back to the rooftops of Iwa.

Hurrying now, running. Running east. The Watermill at Onden. Sakura had seen it from the Overlook, barely. A small wooden building, centuries old than Onden Barrier which now engulfed it. She wondered how they would ever have found it without cheating. Packs of other genin were moving in the distance, all in different directions. Despite Shikamaru's warning, it seemed the only team heading for Onden Barrier was them.

As they passed into the Onden district, the crowded rooftops of Shitamachi gave way to fields of flooded rice paddies. It was so quiet here that Sakura could hear the rushing water of the White River to their left. Swollen by the spring thaw, the foaming rapids pushed up the village and drained into sluice gates along the walls. The gates in turn fed into Onden's irrigation system, channeling the river into the maze of rice terraces which covered most of the district. In the pale moonlight Onden looked like a staircase of shadows.
At the very top of that staircase rose a wall of stone. Onden Barrier. It was not nearly as big as the
Overlook on the other side of Iwa, but it was longer, jutting out at an angle to break the flow of the
White and Yellow rivers as they re-converged. The barrier would be the first thing any invader
would see; and possibly the last. Rows of barbed spikes swept out over the river. Even a ninja would
have a hard time scaling that kind of defensive fortification.

"Never seen anything so ugly in my life," said Kankuro. "Anayama Tokusai would be appalled."

"Who?" asked Chouji.

"I forgot, you apes don't care about the rest of the world. Anayama Tokusai, the super legendary
woodcut artist? Used to live in the Earth Country and do woodcuts of the landscapes around him.
Did his most famous woodcut, right here, about the Watermill at Onden. That was before they built
Onden Barrier or any of the other walls. I always wanted to see it in person. Well, make that past
tense. The Tokusai woodcut is better than the real Watermill." Kankuro sighed.

Chouji grumbled under his breath. Ino said, "Hey, excuse us apes, I'm sorry your lifelong dream was
shattered, but you don't have to be an asshole about it."

The real Watermill was a decaying wooden building, three stories tall. A water wheel dominated one
of the sides and made a continuous creaking sound as it turned in the stream that rushed beneath.
When Sakura stepped inside, the creaking of the water wheel gave way to the spinning noise of
metal gears; the machinery which turned the motion of the water into usable power for grinding rice.
For an instant it was so dark that she could hardly see. But then she turned a corner and a soft white
glow came from the center of the Watermill.

It was the Lock.

"Well, that was easy," said Ino.

The Lock was a vertical slab of metal, the same color as the chuunin exam key which hung against
her chest. A single keyhole was etched in the center. Sakura put her key into the Lock and turned.

Nothing happened.

She tried again, to the same result.

"It doesn't work," Sakura said.

"What?" Kankuro went over to fiddle with the Lock. "Is it broken?"

"It's a fake," said Anake, "isn't that obvious? The real Lock is hidden somewhere else in the
Watermill, probably."

Anake's logic was more than sound. Yet Sakura could not stop the prickling down her neck. No,
something's wrong. What had they missed?

Kankuro looked up from his fiddling. "Someone's coming. Three of them."

Everyone tensed, but to no purpose. A moment later three genin wearing Konoha forehead
protectors entered the Watermill.

Sakura knew them. "Team Ranka." A B-rank team sponsored by the jounin Sarutobi Ranka,
Asuma's older sister. The team itself was dominated by Ranka's rowdy nephews, the identical twins
Sarutobi Hiraru and Sarutobi Kanetsu. Both of them reminded Sakura far too much of Pug.
Rounding out the team was Aburame Auni, Shino's cousin.

"Hey, Sakura!" said Hiraru. "Hey, everybody!"

"Hey, loser," said Kanetsu to Anake. They'd all been in the same class at the Academy; evidently a little rivalry had developed.

Anake rolled his eyes. "Who'd you cheat from to get here?"

"Examiner Genma. Hey, wait! I mean, it's not cheating."

"Out of the mouth of babes."

This went on for some time, Anake trading petty insults with the Sarutobi twins, while Ino intervened to explain what was actually going on. For her part, Sakura went outside and climbed onto the roof of the Watermill. The rest of Iwa stretched out to the west, making her realize for the first time just how far she had run this night—all the way across the length of Iwa, from the Overlook to Onden Barrier. Everything was empty and dark.

Unexpectedly, Temari joined her.

"Shikamaru was wrong," the sand-nin said. "Heh. I always wanted to say that."

Sakura nodded. "We're the only ones here. Why? And why only leaf-nins?"

"Haghira Doi already told us the answer."

"Doi knew Shikamaru would leak. He knew all the examiners would leak. He planned it. The Lock isn't here at all."

Temari handed Sakura a set of infrared binoculars. "My brother's. Look."

She hadn't used binoculars in months, not since that night in the Forest of Death which had ended in the death of Pug, Kakashi-sensei's little brother. Sakura put them to her face and the world became a burst of brilliant green. Blurry shapes skittered over the roofs of Iwagakure like drops of oil on a heated stove, melting into each other, breaking apart again. All of the genin seemed to know exactly where they were going.

They were going in opposite directions.

"Fifteen different villages," Sakura said, with rising certainty. "Fifteen different sets of chuunin examiners. The Director must've fed the examiners for each village a different fake location. For Konoha, the Watermill at Onden. For the others…"

The map of Iwa was still rolled up in her belt. She took it out and studied it. Earlier that evening the map had seemed utterly useless. But nothing was useless, it only appeared to be so. That was the key to the First Trial. *Insight is the first necessary ability of the chuunin*. What about the map could help them find the location of the real Lock? Then she knew.

"Triangulation," finished Temari. She pointed to the map. "Look at that grid system, it's too detailed to be an accident. We can assume that each fake Lock is one relevant coordinate on the grid. With enough coordinates it will be possible to plot a central common point. Fifteen different Locks. Fifteen variables."

"I don't need all fifteen." Sakura closed her eyes, running through mock calculations in her head.
"Only ten. Maybe even eight." Her eyes flew open. "But we'll need the other villages to give their locations to us."

"Or steal them."

"That too. This chuunin exam is insane."

Temari grinned. "The hunt's just getting started. Just the way I like it."
Kankuro was whining again. "So let's get this straight. The Lock in the Watermill is a fake, the real
Lock could be anywhere in Iwa, and to find it we got to somehow steal information from fourteen
other villages, most of which, I remind you, are trying their damndest to kill us?"

His negativity could have given Shimura Anake a run for his money. Anake rose to the occasion.
"They're all trying to kill us. Konoha and Suna included. Or else why would we be here?"

"Because you signed up," Chouji pointed out.

The Sarutobi twins, Hiraru and Kanetsu, chortled loudly. Anake only shrugged. "A momentary
suicidal impulse."

"The peace of death can be so alluring," said Ino, smiling sweetly. "Of course, knowing you, Anake,
you'd kill yourself and then spend the rest of the afterlife complaining that you died."

"You know me too well."

Temari looked bored. "If you two boys are done whining, we have work to do. The other genin
teams are spread out all over Iwa. We'll need to split up and coordinate our information gathering
efforts. Kankuro?"

"Sure, sure, I have it." Kankuro pulled out a handful of tiny devices from his belt pouch. "Radio
transmitters. Just put it in your ear."

Both of the Sarutobi twins were scratching their heads, obviously baffled. According to rumor,
neither of them was exactly the sharpest tool in the shed. The Narutos of the new graduating class,
thought Sakura fondly. Every class has one.

"But, uh, how do we get the other villages to tell us where their Locks are?" asked Hiraru.

"Aren't they, like, a secret?" added Kanetsu.

Sakura was very used to explaining things. She'd been Naruto's teammate for an entire year, after all.
"The first thing is, you can try to eavesdrop on their conversations. Maybe you'll hear them talk
about the Locks. Second, you can make a deal. We're all trying to find the real Lock. They might
have some information we need, and vice versa, so negotiation is possible. And third, you can fool
them into thinking you're on the same side. Use a transformation to mimic another genin from their
village."

"Like this," said Temari. Transformation Technique."

In a puff of smoke, she became the waterfall-nin Misain Sebi.

"Who's that?" asked Kanetsu.

Clearly, neither of the Sarutobi twins had read the chuunin exam databook. Anake sighed. Temari-
as-Sebi glared up at Kanetsu. His hair was a tangled red, streaked with blue, his face still round with
boiyish fat. But his deep blue eyes were as sharp and cold as ice. A perfect imitation, of the boy
Sakura had seen at dinner at the Overlook.

"That's Misain Sebi," said Sakura. "He's the one who killed a grass-nin we found earlier, by igniting
"he's just a little kid," said Kanetsu. "like, ten or something."

"Twelve. Pre-puberty."

"And a complete psychopath," Kankuro added, grinning. "Throws puppies in the river and then lights them on fire, for fun. Not to mention the other rumors."

Chouji was paling fast. "What rumors?"

"It's said he still drinks milk from his older sister's breast. They're on the same team, you know. Misain Sebi and Misain Rei. A match made in hell."

Takigakure had been the most beautiful place that Sakura had ever seen, when she had visited it as part of the United Countries Embassy. It was built atop the legendary Torrentrage Falls itself, rising up from the roaring water like so many spires of silken ice. But Sakura had learned not to trust first appearances. In reality, the hidden village of Waterfall was ruled by the burning Mizuho fist of Misain Seve. Beneath all the glorious architecture lay one blasphemous truth.

Misain Seve was the father of both Sebi and Rei. He was also their grandfather, and great-grandfather. And the nineteen-year-old Rei was his latest wife.

*Their family is even more fucked up than the Sougon clan,* thought Sakura.

Temari pointed at Sakura, with Sebi's fingers. "You'll transform into Misain Rei," she said. "Kankuro will transform into Onira Kawai. We'll pretend to be Team Dayu and infiltrate the genin in the Confederacy. Waterfall, Earth, Water, Swamp. That's four different Lock locations. As for you, Team Ranka"—she pointed at Sarutobi Hiraru, Sarutobi Kanetsu, and Akimichi Auni—"you need to find the other teams from the United Countries. Wind and Rain. That's two more Lock locations. And as for Team Asuma—"

"—Our job is to infiltrate the neutral villages," finished Ino. "Got it. I even have an idea for who to transform into first. I saw this really cute cloud-nin boy in the Zoo yesterday. Did I tell you, Sakura? Kirazu Raiki is so dreamy." She giggled.

Chouji very much did not giggle. "Um…so… that's the plan?"

"That's the plan," said Temari. "Any other questions?"

No one had any. They put the wireless radio receivers in their ears, preparing to split up. The night hunt was beginning again.

The last word belonged to Shimura Anake. "Make sure to take a piss before you leave, guys. Because there ain't gonna be no more time for bathroom breaks. Or anything else." He almost sounded excited.

Team Tsunade, disguised as Team Dayu, ran across the quiet terraces of the Onden district back towards the main population centers of Iwa.

It was not long before they encountered a group of stone-nins.

The stone-nins were led by a large hairy boy with the name of Noatari Chusei, of Team Jidæi. Chusei had a suspicious cast of mind, and did not seem to like waterfall-nins very much.
"Team Dayu," he spat. "What do you want?"

Kankuro cleared his throat, an odd gesture, since he was supposed to be made of black thread and stitches. "We've been tricked. The Director fed fake Lock locations to each of the different villages. We've got to triangulate all the information to find the real Lock."

"I know," said Chusei. "Sosano told us."

"So? How 'bout you show us your Lock, and I'll show you mine."

The stone-nin hesitated. "How do I know you won't lie?"

"Hey, we're allies, aren't we? One happy Confederacy family."

Temari stepped in. "Tell us now, or I'll burn you cock to a crisp!" she declared, in her best imitation of Misain Sebi's boyish squeak.

"Easier said than done, waterfall-nin." Chusei stepped back warily. Something about his face began to change; his entire body. *He's turning into stone*, Sakura realized. She'd heard about the famous Stone Form jutsu, but never seen it in action. Noatari Chusei looked like a granite statue. His stone body was slower and heavier, but impervious to physical attacks. *This is bad… we don't want to fight them now.*

"Hey, hey," Kankuro protested. "We're not allowed to fight, remember? We'll be disqualified."

"Only if we cause property damage. The Director didn't say nothing about killing."

"Sakaicho Prison," said Sakura quickly.

Chusei frowned. "What?"

"Sakaicho Prison. That's where our Lock is."

Chusei looked at his teammates, then back at the disguised Team Tsunade. "Fine," he said finally. "Our Lock's in Katsu-ji Temple, by the Shiva moon goddess statue."

"Thanks." Kankuro grinned brightly, the stitches on his face cracking open to reveal slithery black threads underneath. "Good day to you, friend!"

Afterward, when they'd traveled some distance away, Sakura rounded on Kankuro. "*Good day to you, friend?* Onira Kawai is a notorious torturer, you think he talks like that? It's a wonder Chusei didn't see through us right away."

"Aw, I was just having a little fun." He shrugged. "Why'd you pick Sakaicho Prison?"

"Farthest place in Iwa I could think of."

Kankuro laughed. "Well, that was pretty easy. Sort of."

The next one really was easy.

They obtained the information from Team Osamu, a team of waterfall-nins running across Tsukai Gardens in the Shitamachi district. Team Osamu was not suspicious of them at all. In fact, Team Osamu was downright terrified, especially when Temari glared at them with Misain Sebi's sharp blue eyes.
Evidently, Sebi had a reputation in Takigakure.

Team Osamu had no idea about the fake Locks. Temari simply asked them where they were going, and their leader Rokusho Fuu responded that they'd heard the Lock was hidden under Walking Stick Hill. Temari thanked the waterfall-nins for the intelligence and sent them on their way.

"You think they're wondering why we're not following them?" asked Kankuro.

"Let them wonder."

They moved on. Kankuro checked in with the others, buzzing in updates through the radio transmitter in his ear. Other teams had achieved results, too. Ino said they'd stolen a Lock location from the cloud-nin—the library next to Chuunin Exam Stadium in the Aoyama district. Team Ranka had made contact with Team Pou of Rain, who claimed their Lock was on top of the Spider Bridge in Kuramae.

Sakura reminded everyone to double-check. "There's got to be people like us too, spies and infiltrators. The other teams could be lying."

"If you hear Sakaicho Prison," Kankuro added, "ignore it."

Just then Temari pointed. "Hey. Look."

Down below them, huddled in a dark alley, was Team Tsunade.

Kankuro chortled. "Well, well. It's us."

"I wonder who they are?" asked Sakura.

"Let's go find out."

When they dropped down next to the fake Team Tsunade, the reaction was unpleasant.

Fake Sakura glared at them, pulling out twin kunai. Her disguise was very good. *I might've been fooled, if I wasn't the real Sakura*. "Team Dayu," she hissed. "What do you want?"

"Oh, my," said Kankuro. "You don't seem to be very friendly tonight."

"Don't you know who we are?"

"Of course. The beautiful Haruno Sakura, and her loyal Sand Sibling companions. You kissed me yesterday, don't you remember? You came to my room and you whispered that you loved me. Me, Kawai the Dashing."

Sakura rolled her eyes.

"Liar," insisted the fake.

"You're breaking my heart, Sakura."

Behind Fake Sakura, Fake Temari swallowed. "Um… I think they're on to us."

"Okay." Fake Sakura paused. "Run."

They ran quite fast. The real Team Tsunade gave chase, Kankuro dropping his disguise to release his twin puppets, Karasu and Kuroari. The puppets tried to capture Fake Sakura by ambushing her from
either side, but Fake Sakura dodged, leaping onto the roof of a nearby building. Temari used her War Fan to draw out a thin flowing strand of wind, trying to lasso another of the impersonators, but that was dodged too.

"They're escaping!" said Temari.

_Time to see if my new jutsu works._ Sakura stretched out a hand toward the closest fleeing impersonator. "Amnesia!"

Fake Kankuro stumbled, the Amnesia chakra-flow loop slamming into his brain, cutting off his memory circuits. He looked around, utterly confused, unable even to remember his own name.

"Kabure!" shouted Fake Temari, turning back. Sakura hit her with an Amnesia genjutsu as well. Then, just for good measure, Sakura followed up her attack with Binding, freezing all the muscles in both Fake Kankuro and Fake Temari's bodies.

They fell backwards onto the roof, and turned into wave-nins.

"Hey, that genjutsu is pretty useful," said Kankuro. "You know… if you can't kill 'em instead."

Fake Sakura had circled back, obviously unwilling to abandon her teammates. "You got us." She stuck out her tongue, grinning. "Should've known better than to run from you. Well, I mean, before I thought you guys were Team Dayu. Didn't realize you were disguised, too." She tossed her pink hair, with both eyes open, pale green in the crescent moonlight. "Sakura."

"Who are you?" Sakura demanded.

The fake made a hand seal, releasing her transformation in a puff of white smoke.

It was Unchiku Nonou, of Team Narumi.

Sakura had seen the girl before, during their dinner at the Overlook. Nonou was roughly the same age and build as Sakura herself, with frazzled red hair and a deeply freckled face. Unquestionably plain, her wide mouth, sharp nose, and large green eyes gave off the impression of a perpetually startled horse. Her genin uniform was dark blue striped with orange, spandex combined with mesh armor. Her forehead protector gleamed with the symbol of Namigakure: a sharp point that curved from right to lift, like a crashing wave.

The Village Hidden in the Waves had been founded only a year ago. Sakura recalled that the instability of the Wave Country had caused Kirigakure to move in and establish a small satellite village there, under the leadership of the ex-Mist ninja Uchiku Sarashina. The new Wave village was a close ally of Kiri, though it had remained neutral in the political struggle between the Confederacy and the United Countries. _I wonder why… could they be looking to Konoha for support?_

Temari did not seem pleased. "I have questions for you."

Nonou's voice was brash and confident. "Free my team, then we'll talk."

Sakura did so. Nonou's teammates, Unchiku Ouji and Yasui Kabure, got up and dusted themselves off, grumbling all the while. The wave-nin girl ignored the complaints. "I wanted to talk to you at the Overlook," she told Sakura, "but I didn't get the chance. What you said at dinner—about our lives not being a game—I thought it was totally right. I admire that." She grinned. "I guess the stories Inari-kun told me about you are true."

That surprised Sakura. "You know Inari?"
"Yeah. Our village is located right in Kishimon, you know, by the bridge you protected from Zabuza the Bonebreaker. Inari loves to come over to chat, and we love to have him. He's a cute kid, right? You're part of the reason that the Unchiku clan moved to Wave to set up Namigakure. After you brought down Gatou, new leadership came to power in the Wave Country, and they decided they wanted a ninja village of their own. So we moved over here. It's not much yet, but it's something. We're bringing the country order. A lot better than what it was before."

Sakura hadn't thought about the Wave Country for a long time. That was the first real mission I ever went on. Any of us, Sasuke, Naruto. They'd met Inari and Tazuna, they'd fought Zabuza and Haku and saved the country from Gatou's oppression. We became Team 7 during that mission, truly. But that had been a lifetime ago, and Team 7 no longer existed.

"That's good," she said.

Temari broke in. "A touching reunion. However, we've more pressing matters."

"I know you want to know where the fake Locks are," said Unchiku Nonou. "Let's work together. Wave is a tiny village... we only have only four teams in the exam. You guys are the leader of the United Countries. We're no threat to you. But we can help."

"You just impersonated us," Kankuro pointed out.

Nonou smiled. "Imitation is the highest form of flattery."

Sakura said, "If you want us to trust you, tell us what you know. First."

"Amegakure's Lock is on top of the Spider Bridge, if you didn't find out already. Our village's Lock is at the far eastern end of Shinjuku Burial Ground in Onden."

Sakura looked at Temari. "They're not our enemies. If we can bring them into the UC..."

"Fine."

Sakura told Nonou all they knew, for which the wave-nins thanked her. Meanwhile, Temari pulled out the map of Iwagakure to study. They had the Lock locations from six villages now: Konoha, Iwa, Taki, Kumo, Ame, and Nami. With a few more they'd be able to triangulate an approximate location for the real Lock. With fourteen villages in the exam in total, there seemed ample opportunities.

However, some of the villages were so small they were unlikely even to run into them. There was only team from Glacier in the whole exam, for instance, and only six for Steam. Their best bet seemed to be to stick to the original plan of infiltrating Swamp and Mist, the remaining members of the Confederacy.

"I saw a bunch of mist-nins heading toward Aoyama," Nonou volunteered. "Somewhere around the Zoo, I think."

It was the best lead they had. Team Tsunade again transformed into the likenesses of Team Dayu, while Team Narumi also disguised themselves as waterfall-nins, this time Team Osamu. The six of them raced across the rooftops of Iwagakure. It was growing late; the sickle moon having already reached its zenith in the sky, beginning its inexorable descent toward dawn.

It was Kankuro who first spotted the corpses.

Three of them lay sprawled in a gutter in a stone courtyard, dismembered in a gush of blood and
guts. They were genin, sand-nins by the looks of it, their beige nylon uniforms and white cloth head-wraps drenched in steaming wet blood. Sakura bent down by the nearest corpse. Multiple holes had been bored through the boy's skull and through his mouth into his insides, as if stabbed apart with slithering tentacles.

His body was still warm to the touch.

"Damnit," said Temari, her voice a barely restrained fury. "What happened here?"

Sakura had a very bad feeling. "I think this was—"

A little boy laughed behind them, a sadistic little piercing shriek.

It was Team Dayu.

The real Team Dayu.

"Well, well." Onira Kawai cocked his head to one side, the black stitches across his pale white face making him look like a patched doll. "I wonder who these imposters could be."

The little boy Misain Sebi grinned excitedly. "After we burn up their corpses, let's find out."
"Mizuho!" shrieked Misain Sebi.

At his side, his older sister Misain Rei made a hand seal. "Water Release: Hiding in Mist!"

A cloud of fine mist materialized all around them, shrouding the courtyard in a fog of darkness.

Then the mist lit on fire.

 Fuck!

Sakura spun chakra out from her tenketsu, making a chakra field around herself, the Sand Siblings, and Team Narumi. The chakra bubble was enough to push the Mizuho mist back, barely. Beyond the bubble, it seemed the entire courtyard was afire. *Mizuho, one of the most powerful bloodlines in the world.*

"They're coming!" said Temari.

Misain Sebi appeared from the fog of fire, his entire body covered in an armor of burning water. *Burning Skin.* He leaped toward Temari, intending to burn her to death with his embrace.

Temari opened her Giant War Fan just enough that one of the three purple eyes was showing. She was still disguised as Sebi, and the sight of a little boy holding the fan was most incongruous. "Wind Release: Wind Scythe!"

A burst of cleaving wind exploded from the War Fan. Sebi was blown back violently, disappearing into the Mizuho mist. He screamed in rage.

"Careful, sister!" said Kankuro. "If we're caught fighting like this, we'll be ejected from the exam."

"Better ejected than dead."

As if to prove the truth of Temari's words, the waterfall-nin Onira Kawai now appeared, a web of black tentacles slithering from his patchwork body. Kawai cackled. "Team Tsunade, is it? Finally, an opponent worthy of my abilities."

"You killed the sand-nins," accused Sakura.

"So I did. They died screaming for mercy, just like you will."

Beside Sakura, the wave-nin Unchiku Nonou stared at Kawai's tentacles with wide eyes. "What is he?"


In truth, Onira Kawai was a bloodline. *Shokushu*, it was called. *Black Thread*. Shokushu was infamous for being the world's only known artificial bloodline, a product of genetic experimentation by the founders of the Onira clan. Shokushu users were less human than they were chimeras of surgical medicine, with hundreds of thick black threads woven throughout their flesh. This body structure made them highly resistant to physical attacks; and even, or so it was rumored, immortal.

"A monster?" asked Kawai. "Why, thank you."
A dozen tentacles shot out from Kawai's body at them.

Fast!

Kankuro used his puppets Karasu and Kuroari as mechanical shields, blocking most of the tentacles. Sakura dodged one that got through the puppet defense, and Nonou did as well.

But the other wave-nins on Team Narumi froze up. They watched the tentacles come for them helplessly, and would have died if Temari had not intervened at the final second, slicing through the tentacles with her War Fan.

"Fight, damn it!" Temari told them.

"We only know how to use water jutsu!" said Nonou. "We can't fight against Mizuho."

"Then run."

While Kawai continued to attack with his tentacles, Misain Sebi ambushed them from behind. This time his older sister Rei joined him. Rei was not as strong a ninja as Sebi, but her Mizuho bloodline was just as dangerous, and both of them knew how to use it. "Mizuho: Water Shark Missile!" they shouted.

Twin spears of burning water shaped like sharks exploded out toward the leaf-nins and wave-nins. Sakura just had time to press her hands to the ground. "Earth Release: Earth Wall!"

A wall of mud and stone shot up from the courtyard floor. The burning Mizuho missiles slammed into the wall, blowing it to pieces. Chunks of rock and waterfire rained across Sakura's head. Where the center of the courtyard had been, there was now a smoking crater, filled with blazing demon fire.

"You idiots!" Kankuro was shouting. "The chuunin examiners will see us. You'll be kicked out of the exam, too."

Misain Rei pursed her lips. "I suppose the weasel has a point."

Rei was tall where her little brother was short, thin of body and thin of face, with prominent ears, a sharp nose, and a mustache that grew on her upper lip. Her red-blue hair was wispy and brittle, her mouth stern, a voice a whip. She cracked it now, stroking her nails across Sebi's boyish cheek.

"Sweetling, what say we try some… less destructive jutsu?"

"I want them to burn!" Sebi whined.

"Now, now. Doesn't your big sister always know what's best? Besides, there are ways to kill that are… unseen. Remember?"

Evidently Sebi had forgotten. His face lit up with sadistic happiness at the thought. "The bad lady hurt me." He pointed at Temari. "I'll make her pay. I'll turn her heart into a pile of ash." His fingers were a blur of hand seals. "Mizuho: Burning Blood!"

Suddenly Temari flipped backward, clutching at her chest. "It's the same attack we saw before!" she shouted. "He's trying to use Mizuho to light our blood on fire. But he's got to aim it. If we keep on moving—"

"Easier said than done," said Onira Kawai. His head was a dozen feet high in the air, extended on black threads slithering from the rest of his body. His limbs had been detached in the same way,
encircling Sakura and her teammates from every direction. Kawai laughed. "You can't escape."

His head down dove toward Temari, tentacles spilling from his lips.

"Don't let him touch you!" Kankuro shouted. "Those black threads, there's some kind of poison on them—"

Unchiku Nonou stepped in front of Temari. The wave-nin met Kawai's attack bravely, determination and defiance in her face. "Water Release: Rising Water Slicer!"

Hundreds of blades of water flew out toward Kawai, sharp as knives. They sliced through the threads that attached his head to his neck, and then Kawai's severed head was rolling on the ground, helpless to do anything. The tentacle boy shrieked in frustration, cursing.

Temari smirked. "I thought you were going to run."

"Me? What would Inari-kun think?"

*Now's my chance*, Sakura thought. With Kawai temporarily down and Sebi distracted by Temari, that left only Rei.

She threw both of her chakra-cast kunai at the waterfall-nin girl.

Rei dodged. Her thin, proud face twisted into a sneer. "Pathetic—"

Sakura flicked the kunai in mid-air, the chakra strings she'd attached to the handles allowing her to control them from a distance. Using the kunai like whips, she swept them toward Rei again.

Rei did not dodge a second time. Fiery water flowed down her body, covering her in a protective Mizuho armor. *Burning Skin*. The flames of the Mizuho were so bright it was hard even to look at Rei directly. She caught one kunai in her burning hand. "Truly pitiful—"

Sakura cycled earth chakra through her hand and blasted as much as she could through the attached chakra string. The resulting explosion hit Rei at point-blank range, flinging her back into the fog of blazing fire.

"Rei!" Sebi's voice was shrill.

Rei emerged from the Mizuho mist in a disheveled state. Her palm was a bloody ruin, her hair sticking up like a tree. "How dare you! You ape bitch, I'll—"

Now for the finishing blow.

"Amnesia," said Sakura.

The genjutsu took Rei by surprise. Not prepared for it, her mind gave way in an instant. Sakura immediately followed with another genjutsu, Sleep, which knocked Rei unconscious. The waterfall-nin's body crumpled to the ground.

"Rei!" Sebi shrieked again. "Sister!"

The little boy forgot all about Temari now, rushing to his older sister's side. His blue eyes were lit with a wild light, his young face contorted in fury.

Onira Kawai laughed. Somehow he'd managed to reattached his head, black threads slithering across his neck to stitch the scar. "Now you've done it. You've pissed him off."
"You hurt my sister! I'll kill you!" Sebi raised his hands.

A massive tide of water appeared above his head.

"Uh oh," said Nonou.

"Mizuho: Water Dragon Bullet!"

The water turned into a dragon, all aflame and breathing fire. It flew at them, a torrent of demon fire that flooded the whole courtyard.

Temari spun her metal War Fan. "Wind Release: Storm Shield!" A funnel of wind swirled around them, keeping the Mizuho back. But the pressure of the water was too much. Rivers of flame broke through through Temari's defense, spraying out waves of Mizuho water. Each drop, a blazing flame. A shower of fire splashed Nonou's teammate Unchiku Ouji. Ouji screamed, fainting, and fell over the corpse of the Iwa ANBU that still lay in the gutter of the courtyard. It was all Sakura could do to put the fire out before it killed him.

"Let's get the hell out of here!" Kankuro shouted.

Sakura could not have agreed more.

Using Temari's Storm Shield jutsu to protect them, they waded through the sea of burning water, Nonou carrying Ouji in her arms. Then, as soon as they reached the edge, they began to run. It was only when Sakura was far away that she looked back. Sebi was still in the center of the courtyard, blasting out more Mizuho in a blind rage.

"Ah," said a wry voice. "That's a lot of property damage."

Sakura looked up. It was Shikamaru.

"It wasn't us!" Kankuro protested. "That little pyromanic is nuts. You need to kick him out of the exam."

Shikamaru stroked his chin. "True… but then I'd have to kick you out as well. A battle has two sides, after all. Now, did you have to disguise yourselves as Team Dayu? Didn't I tell you to watch out for them?"

Temari poked Shikamaru in the chest. "Seems both of us have a talent for cross-dressing."

"Right, well." He coughed.

Meanwhile, Sakura was using Mystical Palm to examine the injured Unchiku Ouji. "His burns are superficial," she told Nonou. "I can heal most of it now… he'll be okay."

"Can Ouji still fight?"

"If he wakes up in time."

Nonou looked at her other teammate Kabure. "We won't slow you down, then. Go."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Another fight against those freaks in Team Dayu, and we'll be deadweight." The wave-nin smiled, freckled face tired but friendly. "I'll take Ouji someplace safe until he recovers. Still got a whole day to finish the exam, right?"
Sakura nodded. "Take care, then."

"Thanks, Sakura. For all your help."

"So," said Kankuro, "what's the plan now? We were gonna look for the mist-nins, right?"

Shikamaru grinned. "Team Gai already took care of that. They tried to kidnap a mist-nin genin, who turned out to be chuunin examiner in disguise… suffice to say, misadventures followed. Neji says their Lock is outside Mannen House in the Sakaicho district."

Kankuro relayed this information to Team Asuma and Team Ranka through their radio transmitters. Team Asuma was *also* attempting to kidnap somebody, but had not yet succeeded. Team Ranka had joined with Team Wekku of Sand. The sand-nin's fake Lock was located in Shitamachi, in an alleyway behind the Street of Beggars.

"That's eight," said Sakura.

She pulled out the map of Iwagakure. *Eight coordinates.* Plotting each of the fake Locks upon the map like a grid, she could triangulate a central common point. It would be child's play with all fifteen different variables, but with only eight…

Closing her eyes, Sakura tried to visualize the whole of Iwa as she'd seen it before. The village was an island shaped like an eyeball, the Yellow River to the north and the White River to the south. In between were the four districts of Kuramae, Shitamachi, Aoyama, and Onden. The real Lock was somewhere on the main island, that was clear. But where? There were so many missing variables. *No, I need to find the pattern.*

"Do you see?" the smoky voice of Sougon Sosano whispered in her head. Then Sakura remembered. *Like an earth garden.* Iwa was a garden, each part of it pregnant with symbolism. Kuramae, like an open courtyard. Shitamachi, a bamboo grove. Aoyama, a shadowed house, and Onden a prayer pond. *The four corners of one island garden, as the four organs of the body, as the four seasons.*

Then she saw.

"There." Sakura pointed at the map, her finger tracing the grid of coordinates. "Haghira Tower."

*The Tower of Ghosts.*

Biding goodbye to the wave-nins, they started across the rooftops of Aoyama to Haghira Tower. The journey was remarkably uneventful. Soon the tower loomed above them, a huge thing of crumbling gray stone, rising over the surrounding buildings.

Haghira Tower was more a castle than a tower, in truth. A relic of the Age of Chaos, when different clans had fought for control of Iwa. The Sougon clan seized the Overlook, while other clans like the Haghira clan had dominated different parts of the island. On a hill in Aoyama, near the Yellow River, the ancestors of Haghira Doi had build this stronghold to defend themselves. The walls and ramparts of the castle were covered in stone gargoyles, eroded badly from age. Sakura spied lions and deer, bats and spiders, even Shiva gods, a thousand chimeras of fantastical imagination.

Team Asuma was waiting for them at the base of Haghira Tower.

"What took you?" Ino cried out. "Team Ranka abandoned us for Neji and Rock Lee, of all people, did you know that?"
Beside her, Shimura Anake sighed theatrically. "So, Sakura? Where's the Lock?"

"Inside."

Haghira Tower was even bigger from the inside than it had seemed without. Half of the great entrance hall had collapsed, revealing the night sky beyond. The stars were covered by clouds, but Sakura could just make out the shrouded light of the crescent moon. It was very low on the horizon. *The night is almost over.* It was so dark that they had to use flashlights in order to see. Debris littered the floor, and fallen gargoyles as well: broken, ghostly creatures of misshapen stone.

"Is it just me, or is this place creepy?" said Ino.

Sakura stepped over the remains of a gargoyle with thirteen arms. "The patriarch of the Haghira clan went insane from living here, or so the story goes."

"You cactus, how do you know?"

"I read it in a book."

"Figures."

"This was hundreds of years ago," Sakura continued, "when the castle was still occupied by the Haghira clan. Except one day, the clan patriarch began to see ghosts. Which maybe isn't surprising, considering Haghira Tower is built over the Catacombs—"

"What?" asked Ino.

"The Catacombs. You know, ancient burial chambers and stuff. There's a whole network under Iwa. Earth-kin used to worship their ancestors as guardian spirits, so they'd build these big expensive shrines underground to honor them. Anyway, so one day the patriarch saw a ghost walk up from the Catacombs into Haghira Tower. It's said the ghost was his own father, and that the patriarch murdered him in order to take over the clan. The father's head hung off his neck and leaked rivers of ghost blood from the hole, cold as ice. The next day the patriarch sealed up the entrance to the Catacombs, but the ghost came back anyway. And it came back every night until everyone in the castle, from the patriarch to the lowest servant, went insane and killed themselves. That's why Haghira Tower is considered haunted, and why nobody lives in it, even to this day."

Ino shuddered. "No wonder Director Doi always looks so depressed."

"There it is," said Anake.

Sakura thought he meant the Lock, but when she followed Anake's flashlight, he was pointing at a big graven door at the rear of Haghira Tower. Stone gargoyles flanked the passageway, hulking sphinx-like beasts with mouths long as swords. The door was broken open, and a flight of stairs led downward into the earth, so deep that no light could penetrate it.

The entrance to the Catacombs.

"Where's the Lock?" Chouji asked, confused. "We walked all the way to the back of the castle."

Ino frowned. "It's hidden somewhere?"

"Or we got the wrong place," pointed out Anake.

"No," said Sakura slowly. "No, it's here. I'm sure of it."
"Maybe the other villages tricked us."

"Look up," said Temari softly.

For a moment Sakura did not see anything. Then she saw the three shadows perched high atop the ruins of Haghira Tower. *Chuunin examiners*. Temari had found the confirmation they needed. There was no reason for the examiners to be staking out the castle unless it was an important location.

"But where's the Lock?" asked Chouji again.

Suddenly Kankuro started to laugh.

"Sweet brother, are you having a seizure?" asked Temari.

"No, I finally get it. That cock-bastard Haghira Doi has a sense of humor after all." Kankuro pointed down. "We're supposed to look beneath the surface, he said. Get it? *Beneath the surface.*"

Sakura looked down, too. At the stone floor. And then below it.

Far, far, below it.

The Catacombs.

Anake sighed. "Why, you all look like you just stepped in a pile of shit. I can't imagine why, myself. The dead are such peaceful company compared to the lot of you."
The First Trial: Beneath the Surface

No one spoke as they descended into the earth below Iwa. Anake tried, once or twice, but Ino told him to shut up and he did.

Everything was completely black. At first they used their handheld flashlights; then Kankuro rejiggered his puppet Kuroari to emit a bright light from a lamp lashed to the top of the puppet's head.

The Catacombs were a maze of dusty, cobwebbed tunnels, infested with rat dung and a soft, dark material that Kankuro cheerfully informed Sakura were bat droppings. Sakura heard the bats before she saw them. A low, high-pitched screeching came from the ceilings. Kankuro shined his light there and Sakura beheld the specter of a flock of black bats flapping wildly from the direction of Haghira Tower. Night was almost over, and the bats were coming home.

More and more bats appeared as they moved lower into the Catacombs. There must have been multiple entrances into the Catacombs, if so many bats were roosting down here. But Sakura could not see any of them.

In fact, she was pretty sure they were lost.

"No wonder Haghira Doi gave us an entire day to finish the Trial," grumbled Chouji.

Shimura Anake was oddly silent. He looked like he was going to be sick, and kept on glancing up at the ceilings, as if he was afraid the bats were going to attack him. Ino giggled when she noticed.


Soon enough they came to a large burial chamber, with three different tunnels boring down in opposite directions. A crossroads. The stone walls were recessed with row upon row of mass graves. Some of the graves had broken apart with age, and when Kankuro flashed his light over the cracks, Sakura could see piles of yellowed bones inside.

"Which way?" Kankuro asked.

"This one," said Temari, picking a tunnel at random.

"Oh, sure. Lead the way, sister. I'll mark down the way back. You know, just in case."

They had only taken a few steps when they discovered the tunnel had already been marked. The boy lay in a pool of blood, facedown. "It's a leaf-nin," said Sakura. Koharu Okazaki, she recognized, from Anake's class. His stomach was split open, guts hanging out. Someone had urinated on the United Countries symbol on his back. "He was cut open with a kunai."

Chouji looked sick. "Where's his teammates?"

"Probably ran away," said Anake dryly, as if he approved.

"The boy died slowly," Temari said. "He was still alive when whoever killed him pissed on his back. He crawled to this place—trying to get out of the tunnel, I think. His killer wanted to humiliate him."

Ino was leaning over the body. "Hey. His chunnin exam key is gone."

Sakura saw that it was true. The key had been ripped off the necklace that Koharu Okazaki had worn around his throat. Why would his killer want that? A trophy?
They left the dead genin there, where he lay on the ground. There was not much they could do. The chunnin examiners would be there later to clean the body up. And so they kept going, walking deeper and deeper into the earth, far beneath the surface. The Catacombs were a silent empty maze, twisting and turning. They met no one but a string of other dead genin, many killed in a similar manner. These genin were keyless, as well. Why? This is the place of ghosts, a voice whispered inside her, soft as smoke, sharp as a blade's edge.

That was when she heard the sound.

It was the faint sound of screaming.

"What the hell is that?" Ino whispered.

"You said it," Anake whispered back. "Let's not go that way, eh?" He jerked a thumb in the opposite direction.

Temari ignored him, stalking forward to follow the sound. She gripped her fan weapon in readiness, eyes intent. Kankuro shut his light. In the darkness Sakura could make out a dim glow ahead of her, far down the tunnel in some kind of open crypt. The sound was coming from that light. Closer they moved, closer. Shadows stretched around the corner of the crypt. Then Sakura understood what was happening. There was a young girl inside there, screaming. Accompanying this came the grunts of a young man, strained with excitement. A third voice was complaining in a bored tone. "Won't you hurry up, Fue? I'm still waiting."

Fue had his blood up. "This cloud-nin bitch has a cunt so tight it's sucking me in. Goddamn, she loves it. You had your turn. If you don't want to wait, you can rape the dead one."

Sakura realized with a chill that these were the people responsible for the deaths of all the genin they'd just come across. Fue, the other voice had called him. That must be Hiroshi Fue, a genin from Mist. And his team must be Team Keel.

"Rapists," Temari hissed. "Let's kill them."

"Wait—" Sakura started, but it was already too late. Temari rushed forward, rounding the corner. There was no choice but for the rest of them to follow. They discovered Hiroshi Fue lying on top of the cloud-nin girl, the pants of his blue mist-nin uniform pulled down around his ankles, thrusting into the screaming girl with a smile. When he heard them coming, the boy tried to sit up, but Temari sliced Hiroshi Fue in half with the edge of her War Fan.

"Shit!" said Fue's teammate, slouching against the Catacomb wall with a flashlight. Houzuki Suigetsu, Sakura knew. The short white-haired boy attacked her with a sword. Sakura blocked the strike with one glittering chakra-cast kunai, and then stabbed at his head with the other. Half of Suigetsu's face blew away, exploding in a spray of water.

"That was easy," said Chouji, eyes round as spinning plates.

"No," said Sakura, her heart pounding, "no, this is Team Keel. There's still—"

"—me," finished a voice, stepping out from the shadows deeper in the crypt. Hoshigaki Makera's laughter was as rough as a saw on stone. Samekaijin, his bloodline was called. Shark Monster. A glance was enough to explain why. The mist-nin was half again as tall as Sakura, lean and predatory, and his body was covered not with skin but with scales like a shark; like barbed sandpaper, sharp enough to draw blood with a touch. Dead black eyes stared out from a face made of nightmares.

According to Chief Inoichi's databook, this was the most dangerous genin in the entire exam.
When Hoshigaki Makera smiled, a thousand sharp teeth glinted between his gray cold lips.

"Die, you bastards," said Temari, and threw a hurricane wind at him.

Makera ran through the wind as if it was a soothing breeze. In an instant he had crossed the distance to Temari, lunging down on her with his teeth. Temari tried to blocked with her metal War Fan; it broke into pieces and Temari was knocked hard to the ground. *Insane strength*, thought Sakura.

"Bitch!" said Hiroshi Fue. He lay on the floor where Temari had cut him in half, blood pouring out his torso from both ends. Yet he seemed none the worse for it. "I was about to climax, damnit." He brought his hands together and shot a Water Shark Missile at them, which Anake countered with his Vacuum Wave. Fue took this window of opportunity to put his body back together. He stood up grinning, good as new.

Beside Fue, Houzuki Suigetsu was also rising from the dead. Water poured back into the missing half of his skull and reformed it.

"What the hell!" Ino screamed.

"All of them have bloodlines!" Sakura shouted back. "They're unkillable."

Kankuro was helping his sister fight Makera. Unfortunately, the Sand Siblings were losing. Kankuro sent his puppet Karasu at Makera, blades whirling from its wooden body. Makera crushed the puppet in his bare hands and then roared. A hundred shark teeth exploded out of the mist-nin's mouth. Kankuro threw himself to the ground as the teeth whizzed past and slammed into the stone wall behind him. Meanwhile Sakura and Anake fought off Fue and Suigetsu.

"Team Asuma!" Anake pleaded. "Please, for the sweet love you bear me, do something."

Ino flashed hand seals. "Well, when you put it like that. Mind Body Switch!"

Sakura had Suigetsu pinned up against a wall, and Ino's jutsu connected. Taking control of Suigetsu's body, Ino turned on Fue and attacked him with a wave of water. Chouji followed up, slamming against Fue with his spinning Human Bullet Tank. Fue's body regenerated very fast, but not that fast. He fell back, battered in a dozen places.

"Makera!" Fue shouted. "We're outnumbered! We got to retreat."

Makera laughed. The laugh was as cold and hollow as if it had come from the bottom of a deep well, and it chilled Sakura through to the bone. *He's not afraid of anything*, she realized. *Not death, not killing, not pain, not mercy. He's the perfect predator.* Makera laughed and laughed, and then black water poured from his throat. A massive surge of water, flooding the cave.

Sakura recognized the jutsu. *Water Release: Exploding Darkness Wave!* She had seen it once before, on the roof of the Asylum, when the Akatsuki missing-nin Kakuzu had used it to clear away all resistance. Sakura had been swept away and would have died if Maito Gai had not rescued her.

"Earth Release: Earth Wall!" she shouted, pressing her palms against the floor. A thick stone wall shot up between them and the enemy Team Keel. The wall held for only a few seconds, cracking. Then it exploded under the pressure, and thick black water blew them out of the crypt.

For a moment Sakura thought she was going to drown. Then the black water rushed past her and began to drain away, flowing out into the rest of the Catacombs. Wet bat droppings stuck to the stone walls like moss. Sakura groaned as she collapsed to the floor. Bruises studded her body in a dozen places, and her uniform was completely soaked. But at least she was alive. The rest of them were
alive, too, and conscious. Ino lay against a wall, muttering obscenities; evidently she had jumped back into her body in time.

Team Keel was gone, escaped through the back entrance of the crypt.

Temari was curled up on the floor in a fetal position. "Temari!" Kankuro cried out. But then Temari stretched out, and Sakura saw that the sand-nin was cradling the cloud-nin girl. **Temari protected her from Makera's attack.** The girl was naked, and badly injured, covered in blood from a thousand cuts and gashes all over her pale skin. The mist-nins had torn her ninja uniform away and then took turns gang-raping her. She was still awake, trembling and crying. Team Keel must have taken special care to keep her awake. She could not have been older than twelve.

"God save us," Ino whispered, when she saw.

Sakura went to the girl, wanting to examine her wounds. The girl would not let Sakura touch her. She shook in Temari's arms, asking after her teammates, asking after her sensei, asking for her uncle, hysterical with terror. Her eyes were dark and wide. She would have been a very pretty girl, with long silver hair, Sakura thought, if not for the blood that obscured her features. It's Juukan Dee, she realized with a start, finally recognizing the girl from her photo in the datebook. Dee was a genin on Team Kaiza.

**And the Raikage's niece.**

"It's all right," Temari whispered to Dee, her voice as soft as silk. Sakura had never heard Temari use a voice like that. "It's all right. You're safe. Shhh, now. It's over. They're gone. They're gone. Don't worry." Temari said the words over and over, like a lullaby, and soon enough Dee calmed down, drifting off into an exhausted sleep.

Temari stared at Sakura, her eyes hard. "Take care of her."

"I will."

Sakura gently examined Dee's wounds. The cloud-nin girl wasn't as badly hurt as she had feared. Oh, there was plenty of damage, especially around her vaginal cavity. But her insides were more or less intact. **The worst wound is in her mind, not her body.** Sakura healed Dee as best she could. To cover the girl's nakedness, she scrounged around the crypt for the pieces of Dee's cloud-nin genin uniform. The silver bodysuit was tattered and ripped to shreds, but it was better than nothing. Temari added her own United Country jacket, two sizes too big.

The others found Dee's teammates.

Both of them were sprawled dead in pools of black water. Two cloud-nin boys, no older than Sakura. **Komatsu Kanke and Saburai Ise,** she remembered. They were naked. Cold blood leaked from between their thighs, and deep gashes crisscrossed their limp bodies, exposing bones and organs beneath the peeled skin. The torture had been done very methodically.

"The boys were raped, too," said Kankuro. "The mist-nin shrimps fucked them in the ass. Look."

Their rectums looked like someone had driven a truck covered in spikes through them, over and over again.

"And I thought I had a big dick," Anake tried to joke.

Temari rounded on him. "If you talk again, I'll rip out your tongue and nail it to your eyes."
Anake swallowed, and did not talk again.

"It was that shark-thing," whispered Ino. "Makera. His skin was made of scales. Like sandpaper on human flesh. When he was doing it... he must have..."

"No," said Sakura, seeing the signs. "He raped them after they were dead. That's what Makera was doing when we attacked. That's why we didn't hear the boys scream."

Chouji finally threw up.

The moment had been building all evening, and now it finally came. Waves of yellow puke tumbled against the wet stones of the crypt. Everyone else looked like they wanted to vomit, too.

"Hoshigaki Makera," Temari said. "I've heard the stories... but this." She clutched the sleeping Juukan Dee close against her chest. "He's not human. He's an animal that needs to be put down."

Her face was a mask of cold fury. "I'll put him down."

"What... what are gonna do with the girl?" Ino asked. "We can't leave her here."

The chunin examiners will be here eventually, thought Sakura. We can't afford to take Dee, she's dead weight. She could get us killed. Better to abandon Dee now. Even if she does wake up later, terrified, alone, surrounded by the corpses of her teammates.

She thought that, but Sakura could not bring herself to say it.

"I'll carry her," said Temari, in a tone that brooked no argument. She strode out of the crypt forcefully, heading deeper into the Catacombs. "Let's go."

They didn't look back.

Next: THE FIRST TRIAL: "Tears of Life"
The First Trial: Tears of Life

For a while, the only sound was the echo of their own footsteps. Deeper and deeper they went into the maze of twisting Catacombs, each one so black it seemed to Sakura that she was no longer in the living world. Many of the burial tombs on this level of the Catacombs had outright collapsed, spilling fleshless bones out across the floor. The gathered dead of all those who had lived before in Iwagakure.

This is an old place, she thought.

Kankuro had slung another lamp around his head, and was now fiddling with his crushed puppet Karasu like a doctor examining a patient. Sakura was not sure how the sand-nin boy managed to carry so many tools and spare parts on his own person, but he was a veritable mechanic shop. And a good thing, too, because the monster Hoshigaki Makera had ripped his puppet near in half, and torn Temari's metal War Fan into pieces.

"Temari?" he asked.

"What is it, brother?" Temari seemed to be distracted. She held the unconscious mist-nin girl Juukan Dee gently in her arms, as if Dee would break if she dropped her, and scarcely seemed to notice anything else.

"I fixed your War Fan. And, um… well, we took a wrong turn somewhere. This is a dead end."

Sakura saw that it was true. The tunnel they had been walking down ended abruptly in a stone ossuary, skulls and other skeleton pieces arranged artfully along its walls. Strange sculptures were carved into the pillars and all along the floor and ceiling. There was no other entrance except the one by which they had entered.

"A wrong turn somewhere?" asked Ino. "How many turns did we take?"

Anake shrugged. "A lot."

"Wait," said Temari. "This is a Shiva shrine."

Sakura frowned. Shiva was the old pagan religion of the Earth Country. She knew very little about it, except that it emphasized the practice of ancestor worship. "How does that help us?"

"Look at the kami. In Shiva theology, kami are the spirits inherent in all nature. Many clans would have special guardian kami, often their own ancestors. This place is one such ancestral shrine. Do you see that mural beneath us?"

The mural set in the floor was one of a strange, demonic-like creature, with fierce glowing eyes and a serpent mouth and wings like a dragon.

"It's a bat," said Ino. "I think."

"Yes. One of the Six Sacred Animals of Iwa. And the solution to our problem, I'll wager. Kami are guardians of places as well as families. And Shiva ancestral shrines would be built in specific holy places." She handed Dee gently into her brother's safekeeping. "Stand back."

Then Temari unfurled her war fan and blew up the floor.
The center of the stone ossuary collapsed downward, revealing a large cave beneath them. When Sakura bent over the hole to take a look, a gigantic swarm of bats rushed out. Anake shrieked as a storm of wings beat at his face. "Fucking bats!"

The bats were shrieking too, so loud that Sakura almost missed the other sound.

A soft whistle.

Sakura dodged backwards. The senbon shot past her face; a second slower and the long sharp needle would have impaled her in throat. The others scattered before the attack too, except for Chouji. He fell backwards, a senbon needle sticking straight out from his forehead.

"Chouji!" Ino cried.

Sakura rushed over to him, expecting the worst. But then she saw that Chouji's forehead protector had taken the brunt of the attack. The senbon had only just barely pierced through the metal headband, the tip making a small red welt in Chouji's skin.

Temari was shouting into the hole. "Stand down! We're UC!"

"Oops," responded a familiar voice.

Kankuro made the light on his puppet brighter, shining it down into the cave. It was Team Tosuken of Rain.

"What the hell!" Ino shouted. "You killed Chouji!"

"Chouji?" Mukai Aumono seemed disappointed. "I was hoping for the bushy-eyebrow idiot, truth be told."

At Aumono's side, the frog-faced boy Junichiro Tenshe coughed. "Is he really dead?"

*At least he has the grace to look guilty about it.* "No," said Sakura. "Your senbon only grazed Chouji. But…"

"Poison," observed Kankuro, who was no stranger to such tactics.

It was the same Kokaeo neurotoxin that had almost killed Tenten in the Battle of the Asylum. The poison was already circulating through Chouji's nervous system, and would soon stop his heart.

"Do you have the antidote?" Sakura demanded of the rain-nins.

"Like I said." Aumono spread his hands. "Oops."

Ino exploded at him. "You slimy little worm—"

"—I've got the antidote," interrupted Shimura Anake.

Sakura turned in disbelief. "You?"

"Oh, I'm full of surprises." The boy smirked insolently, twirling a vial of white liquid across his fingers. "Here, go save the fatass, for all the good it'll do. We're all like to die terribly before the night is done. Why, a heart attack is a luckier end by far."

"Ever the optimist, Anake, aren't you?"
"You're welcome."

The antidote worked quickly. Soon enough Chouji was back on his feet, and well enough to shoot dagger looks at the rain-nins. "Sorry," said Tenshe, but Aumono shrugged, and the girl Kyoroku Erima only licked her strange black blade. Chouji kept on rubbing his forehead, as if to make sure that he was still alive.

Meanwhile, the rest of them jumped down through the hole in the Shiva shrine. The cave beneath was very large, and cold. Stalactites and stalagmites curved out from the walls like great sharp teeth, wild and twisting. Thousands of bats roosted in the deeper recesses of the cave, so enormous that when Kankuro shined his light into the darkness they could not see the end of it.

It was nothing like the dusty Catacombs that they had left behind. Everything was dripping wet. Trickles of water ran down the limestone walls, and there was even a small stream that gurgled in the center of the cavern. To her surprise, Sakura found her breath frosting in a chill wind. This water has leech all the warmth from the earth.

"What is this place?" asked Ino.

"The Weeping Caverns," said Temari.

Sakura knew the name. Iwa was built on a bedrock of limestone deposits, which over eons had been carved out into a series of caves by the Dreamstone River. Underground water flowed through the Weeping Caverns still. It is said that the walls weep with the tears of all the ghosts who have come and gone. The caves extended not only under Iwa but under the rest of the Dreamstone River Valley too, well into the Scar. She ought have suspected that the Catacombs would connect to the Weeping Caverns, once they'd gone deep enough.

"Well, now what?" asked Kankuro.

"We keep on going," said his sister. "The Lock must be somewhere in these caves."

"That's reassuring."

"Do you have a map?" Temari asked the rain-nins.

Aumono shrugged. "Nope."

Erima was more helpful. The short, waif-like girl pointed with her knife at the water flowing beneath their feet. "There. The river, see? Water always flows deeper. Beneath the surface, the Director said. The river will bring us to what we seek."

It was as good as theory as any. The three genin teams—Team Tsunade, Team Asuma, and Team Tosuken—followed the river together. In the vastness of the cavern the sounds echoed queerly, so that their footsteps became a murmuring whisper, soft as the water dripping from the stalactites overhead. "Did I hear you scream?" Ino asks Anake as they walked. "When the bats came out?"

Anake threw up his hands. "Okay, so I'm afraid of bats."

"Then you'll love this place," said Aumono.

They followed the small stream deeper and deeper into the Weeping Caverns. One face of gray limestone rock passed into another, then yet again. Sakura could not have said for how long they walked. Once they came to a cave so cold that the stalactites were covered in ice, the air as cold as if in a freezer. The beams of their flashlights refracted off the long hanging fangs of ice, making the
cave glitter with rainbow light. It was one of the most beautiful sights that Sakura had ever seen.

Yet in the next moment the ice cavern was gone, and a limestone tunnel descended into the earth before them, spiraling like some great staircase. Here water gushed in torrents and streams, rushing over the rocks in a roar. There was much life in the river. Little schools of blind whitefish darted there, and slugs and water snakes as well. Once Erima thrust her black knife into the water and came out with a huge translucent shrimp skewered on the end of it. She smiled.

"Fucking Sawar, how big is this place?" complained Chouji.

Unbidden, the Hokage's words on Deathtrap Mountain came to Sakura. *It is a place unlike anything you have seen before. It is a place so old that the stones speak of the scars of a thousand ages... so untamed the wild beasts cry in the night before rushing rivers in the black caves.*

"Big enough to hide anything you wanted to," said Sakura.

She thought of the Annihilation Device, a metal machine shrieking in a cave filled with ice, and the exploding heart within.

A chill went through her.

"Look," said Ino.

Ahead, the underground river had begun to turn red.

It was blood.

Dozens of corpses floated in the water. Dead genin, Sakura saw. They were from all different villages, both United Countries and Confederacy, and neutral villages as well. Sakura turned over a familiar looking corpse. It was Hyuuga Nyuka, one of Neji's cousins on Team Genma. *Younger even than me.* Someone had disemboweled Nyuka's torso, his intestines floating like red noodles like in the cold water. He had died painfully.

"A battle," said Tenshe.

Temari's hard dark eyes roved over the dead genin, then toward the cave tunnel in front of them. "We're close."

"Why do they have to fight?" Chouji's voice was almost a wail. "Why can't they leave us alone?"

A laugh burst from Anake's lips. "Because we're ninjas."

Sakura frowned. *No, it's more than that.* "Look at the corpses. They're all missing their chuunin exam keys. Maybe... maybe someone's taking trophies. But I don't think so. And... and I think there's too much blood. More blood than there is people."

She would've said more, but just then there was a noise.

The faint echo of footsteps.

All of them unsheathed their weapons, tensing. But when the other group of ninjas emerged into the light, Sakura saw that it was led by a boy in a ridiculous green jumpsuit.

"Sakura-chan!" cried Rock Lee happily.

Team Gai was leading a large group of genin. There was several United Countries teams, including
Team Ranka of the Leaf, Team Wekku of Sand, and Team Pou of Rain. And Team Narumi of Wave, Sakura was surprised to see. The injured wave-nin Uchiku Ouji leaned on his teammate Nonou's shoulder, clutching his side. Nonou grinned when she saw Sakura.

Rock Lee was babbling at her. "Sakura-chan! Are you all right? What… what happened?"

Sakura looked around at the sea of floating corpses. "I don't know. We found them like this."

"An ambush," said Hyuuga Neji. His robes were somehow a spotless white, as as if he'd just stepped out from the laundry. As white as his eyes. Neji had activated his Byakugan, veins bulging. He was staring at his dead cousin. "I can guess what happened with the Byakugan. The Confederacy ambushed a party of UC genin here. We fought back… almost everyone died in the ensuing battle."

"Almost everyone," said one of the genin who'd come with Team Gai.

It was a young boy, a leaf-nin. Sakura thought the boy looked very familiar. Then she realized she had seen him only hours ago, lying stiff in a dark tunnel, his stomach split open. It's Koharu Okazaki.

"But you're dead," whispered Ino.

The genin chuckled. "Not yet."

*It's a disguise.* This was not Koharu Okazaki at all, but someone who had used the Transformation Technique to take on Okazaki's form. Okazaki was dead. And this boy… who could it be? Was it another spy?

Then the boy flicked a cigarette into his mouth, taking a long deep drag, and she knew.

"Asuma-sama?"

"Don't say it too loud, now, or Director Doi will hear." Asuma gave a boyish grin. "If Director Doi finds out there are infiltrators in his exam, he'll try arrest us."

"Then why are you here?" asked Ino.

"That's classified. Suffice to say, the Tsuchikage is up to no good beneath the Weeping Caverns of Iwa. Our mission is unrelated to the First Trial." Asuma blew out smoke between his teeth. "Though now that I'm here… looks like you could use my help."

Neji nodded. "The Confederacy may have infiltrators as well. It's safest to stick together."

And so they did.

They walked past the pool of floating corpses, working their way through the endless tunnels of the Weeping Caverns. Neji guided the group with his Byakugan eyes, though Rock Lee insisted on walking point, too dumb to be afraid. They were so deep into the caves now that the river had dried almost to a trickle. The passages became tight as well. Sakura had to crawl through some on her hands and knees, stalactites brushing her head like the teeth of a stone mouth.

Then Neji said, "Ahead. We're here."

The passage suddenly opened up into a cavernous space. It was the largest cave Sakura had ever seen. A gigantic limestone pillar lay in the center of it, soaring up to brace the ceiling. Meanwhile curtains of water trickled slowly down the walls, flooding the floor of the cave. A reflecting pool. The mirrored water of the pool was so smooth, so perfectly reflective, that for a moment it seemed to
Sakura as if she were walking on air, and looking down on a pillar which descended forever into the earth. But it was only an illusion, she knew, a trick of the light.


He pointed to the inscription that had been carved halfway up the pillar: a poem of graven words, a name. *From the sky, tears of life. From weeping walls, immortal salvation.*

Ino made a face. "Pillar of Hell, more like. We're buried halfway under the earth."

"Yes," said Temari. Her voice was oddly warm. "Yet the dripping water which created this pillar does not. It comes from the Dreamstone River, which in turn springs from the Dreamstone Glacier in the Scar, and which ultimately is rain from the sky. It means that the power of heaven reaches even here, to this place."

The Lock lay at the base of the Pillar of Heaven.

The real one.

Sakura walked across the pool toward it, her footsteps making ripples in the mirror-like surface. Somehow she was reminded of Deathtrap Mountain. A white slab rising from a lake, a lonely light in a vast darkness. But the memorial stone had been white marble, and on it had been carved the names of all the people who had died. *For the Last Battle of the Last War, it had said.*

The Lock had nothing except two keyholes.

Two?

Sakura put her chuunin exam key in the Lock and tried to turn it, but could not.

"What's wrong?" asked Ino.

"One key isn't enough."

"Another fake?" asked Rock Lee, deflated.

But it was Hyuuga Neji who understood. He ran a hand down the smooth glowing metal, its surface pulsing with energy. "Two keyholes, for two keys. The Lock won't turn with just one. Two keys, for one person."

"But we only have one key," protested Lee.

Kyoroku Erima of Rain grinned. "I have three." She reached into a waist pouch and pulled out two other chuunin exam keys. Dead keys, cold and dark. If a genin lost contact with his key for more than ten seconds, the key would go dead and his team would fail the exam. Sakura knew that Erima had taken the dead keys from the genin she'd killed.

*Trophies,* she had thought. But they were not just trophies.

Neji stared at the Lock with his Byakugan eyes. "The live key goes in the top keyhole. The dead key in the bottom hole, and then you turn them together. I am certain you can only use the dead key once."

Everyone absorbed the significance of that statement for a long moment.

"Uh," said Kankuro, "so did anyone pick up keys off the dead people?"
They counted.

It was not nearly enough.

A voice came from the other side of the Pillar of Heaven. "We don't have enough keys, either." A boy's voice, smoky and graceful. Sakura knew him at once. Sougon Sosano stepped from the far shadows into the cavern, eyes slitted in amusement. "I see you."

Sosano was not alone.

Dozens of genin followed behind him, a group just as large as Sakura's own. Bakura Orajuchi and Haghira Geigin of Team Sawar. Team Jidaei, Team Chegga, and Team Shonagon of Iwa, among other stone-nins. Team Kikuko of Mist, led by the lesbian ice girl Touin Yukari. Fukki Numazu and Team Yorai of Swamp. And perhaps most frightening of all, the three inhuman sadists of Team Dayu of Waterfall. When Onira Kawai grinned, his face cracked open along the stitches, revealing a morass of black thread underneath. Misain Rei stood tall, a wild light in her wide blue eyes. And the little boy Misain Sebi stared at Sakura with hunger... a yearning to burn them all where they stood.

The bright young things of the Confederacy.

*Our enemies.*

"You cockroaches," said Kankuro. "Go crawling back to whatever hole you came from."

"I could say the same to you, weasel," said Haghira Geigin, rolling a dead key across his knuckles. "But you got something we need."

Anake shrugged. "Hey. Why don't we just draw straws or something."

Sosano's eyes were very dark. "An intriguing suggestion." He turned to the Confederacy genin behind him. "What do you think?"

"I want them to burn!" The boy Misain Sebi raised his hands above his head, and Mizuho flowed down his body, covering him in an armor of burning water. "I wanted them to burn now!" And then they were drawing not straw but blades, all of them, the sound of steel echoing across the Pillar of Heaven.

"So be it," said Sougon Sosano. A sad keening sound came from his throat, a noise so heavy it seemed to be weighed down. It was a moment before Sakura identified the noise as laughter. "Fate goes ever as fate must. The battle is joined." The stone-nin boy stared straight at Sakura. "And all men must die."
"Mizuho: Water Dragon Bullet!" screamed Misain Sebi.

A huge wave of burning water rushed at the genin of the United Countries. A dragon of blazing death, bathing the whole cavern in light.

"Kaiten!"

Neji went into a spin of whirling chakra. The Mizuho wave burst apart when it hit the Kaiten, scattering all over the cavern. But where the sparks of Mizuho fell on the water, the water lit on fire. The damp, weeping cavern was filled with it. Fire consumed the reflecting pool at the center of the cave and shot up the Pillar of Heaven itself. The pillar looked like a candle in a roaring inferno. And still the Mizuho spread.

"Get to higher ground!" Neji shouted. "Out of the water, now!"

Ninjas scattered to every direction, avoiding the waterfire. Everyone on both sides jumped onto the walls of the cavern and starting running up the sides. But the Mizuho fire followed them upwards. Sakura ran up toward the roof, dodging the flames. Down below, Misain Sebi was still shouting and throwing Mizuho around indiscriminately, going crazy. Sakura leaped from one side of the roof to the other just in time to avoid incineration by a very large fireball.

"We need to take Sebi out!" Sakura shouted. "The Mizuho is going to kill us all!"

At her side, the dead genin who was really Asuma nodded. "We'll take care of it. Stay safe!"

Asuma disappeared quickly into the chaos of battle. Several other genin following him, no doubt also Konoha jounin or ANBU in disguise. Sakura had no time to observe the progress of their mission; she was too busy fighting for her life. The battle was pure madness, more insane even than the Battle of the Asylum had been. In the Asylum Sakura at least had a mission. In the Asylum at least there was a bad guy, Akatsuki, that needed to be stopped.

But here she did not even know what she was fighting for. Everyone just seemed to want to kill each other.

A stone-nin attacked Sakura from behind. "Earth Release: Fangs of Wrath!"

Sakura was upside down, using chakra projected from her feet to hang on the cave roof. Hundreds of spikes erupted from the roof in a line, curving toward her like a jaw being shut. It was obviously intended for her, but an unfortunate leaf-nin boy was in the way, and the spikes impaled the boy from his foot all the way through the top of his skull.

Sakura countered with an attack of her own. She flowed earth chakra through her chakra-cast kunai and threw it at the onrushing wave of spikes. The chakra flow gave the kunai greatly multiplied force and mass. It was as if she had thrown a wrecking ball. The kunai hit the spikes and shattered them into pieces.

She was not done; now Sakura pulled her kunai back. When she'd thrown the kunai she had attached a chakra string to it from her palm, maintaining continuous contact. Using the chakra string, she could manipulate her kunai from a distance, almost like a puppet. Sakura flicked it back a little way and then threw it out again, this time to the side. The kunai swept across the line of spikes, destroying the Fangs of Wrath.
The stone-nin pressed the attack when he saw Sakura had survived. *Hamaguchi Zeze*, she recognized from his databook picture. A B-rank genin on Team Chegga, who specialized in offensive and defensive earth jutsu.

"Earth Release: Fangs of Wrath!" he said again.

Sakura tried to counter the attack the same way, but then another stone-nin joined him. Iwanu Gende, Zeze's teammate. Gende used yet more earth jutsu, like Sinister Spikes and Bedrock Coffin, to effectively distract Sakura.

But her teammates were there.

Kankuro expertly controlled his puppets to block the brunt of Zeze's attack. Temari held the unconscious Juukan Dee under one arm, leaving only one arm to fight. The one arm was enough; with a single swing of her War Fan she broke Gende's Sinister Spikes and hit him full with the face with a blast of wind. Gende shrieked as blood came out of his ears.

Sakura did not want the Sand Siblings to have all the fun. "Amnesia!" The genjutsu hit the distracted Zeze and Gende at full force. Zeze blinked, unable even to remember his own name.

Yet no sooner did they defeat one enemy that another appeared. With Team Chegga vanquished, more stone-nins rushed in to press the attack. "Earth Release: Quicksand!" shouted one stone-nin girl.

The cave roof under Sakura's feet turned to mud. The quicksand clung to her legs, trying to suck her down. Kankuro expertly controlled his puppet Karasu, sharp knives springing from the puppet's four detachable arms. With a twitch of his fingers he sent the puppet forth and impaled the stone-nin girl in the chest.

More stone-nins came at them, and swamp-nins as well. Fukki Numazu of Team Yorai wielded a whirling bamboo staff. Temari cut the staff in half with her War Fan, but when she tried to cut off Numazu's head, his neck bent instead of breaking. The swamp-nin had turned his body into reeds, sharp and flexible. "Die, you weasel apes!" he shrieked.

Mizuho was still blazing up the walls of the cave. Red flames danced from curtains of trickling water, bathing the world in unholy light. Sakura could see the entire battle raging around her, below her. Kunai and shuriken flew through the air like a swarm of locusts. A gigantic shuriken the size of a house hurtled into the roof, impaling multiple people under it. "Tenten!" Sakura heard Neji scream distantly. Explosions went off all across the cavern. One explosion hit the Pillar of Heaven itself. The burning Pillar broke in two, its upper half falling to the floor with a thunderous crash.

*Madness*, Sakura thought again. But there was no time for reflection. More enemies came at them, clones now, swamp-nins made of mud and chakra. The Sand Siblings destroyed them by the score, but the Earth Shadow Clones only reformed and continued the attack. "What's it take to kill these things?" Kankuro shouted.

Sakura had the answer. Concentrating hard, Sakura projected a chakra field from her hands, using the field to scoop up a nearby cascade of Mizuho. Then she flung the waterfire at the clones in a wide arc. Mud was as much water as it was earth, and the clones caught fire, igniting from the inside out.

Some fodder mist-nin tried to aim a jutsu at Temari's back. Sakura scooped up a fistful of Mizuho and threw it at the ambusher. The mist-nin screamed as the demon fire splattered across his face and began to burn him alive. Sakura finished the job by slitting his throat with a kunai. *Just some kid*. She
felt nothing.

Another mist-nin charged toward her, screaming bloody vengeance for his dead comrade. Sakura thought about flinging Mizuho at him, too, but that took a lot of chakra, and she was running low. Nor did she want to open the Chakra Gates unless absolutely necessary. Instead Sakura used her simplest jutsu.

"Blackout!"

A genjutsu that blocked sensory signals from reaching the brain. Blinded, the mist-nin tripped over a stalactite and fell off the roof. It was quite a long fall. Just before he hit the burning water and died, however, a mirror of ice appeared underneath him. The mist-nin fell into the ice mirror and vanished in the blink of an eye.

Hyoton! Sakura knew. Ice Release.

The bloodline of the A-rank mist-nin Touin Yukari, leader of Team Kikuko.

Another ice mirror opened in front of Sakura. Yukari poked her head out of the mirror, her scrawny face white as an egg. "That was badass."

"What?"

"How you made the poor boy fall off the roof, just like that." Yukari folded her arms. "I'm impressed."

Kankuro twisted around halfway, the other part of him still occupied with fighting swamp-nins. "Pleased we could entertain you. Now will you stop trying to kill us?"

"You stupid. The Confederacy's trying to kill you. I'm on your side."

Sakura frowned. "You're a mist-nin."

"So?" Yukari glared at her. "Are all leaf-nins the same as Uchiha Itachi? Don't lump me in with Team Keel and their ilk. I hate Team Keel. Grandma Kikuko says if you crossed a fish with a puddle of vomit, you would get Hoshigaki Makera and his two flunkies. I don't give a hairy cunt about the chuunin exam. I want to keep my head on my shoulders, me and my water-sisters. Leave us alone, and I'll pin a chuunin medallion on you myself."

"It's true."

Sakura turned to see Team Narumi. Unchiku Nonou's freckled face was covered in sweat, her uniform torn where someone had cut through the dark mesh. Yet her pale green eyes glittered with excitement. She's just like me, Sakura thought. Just like I was, on my first mission to the Wave Country. Sakura had been so eager to prove herself; so desperate to be recognized.

She had been so young.

"I grew up in Kirigakure," Nonou continued, "so I know all the mist-nins. My cousin Onome is even on Team Kikuko. Team Kikuko was always… different."

"Because they're a bunch of dykes?" guessed Kankuro.

"Because they're not corrupt." Nonou ran a hand through her frazzled red hair. "Team Keel is a bunch of monsters. They ought to be locked up, but the Mizukage lets them have the run of the place
instead. A lot of mist-nins are like that, either blind or evil. I guess that's why the Unchiku clan left to found Namigakure, 'cuz we wanted to make a new start. Yukari is the same way. You can trust her."

Without warning the cavern plunged into darkness. For an instant Sakura thought she'd been blinded by a genjutsu, before she realized that the Mizuho had gone out. *Asuma must have defeated Sebi.* Where the cave had been covered in flames, now there was only cold black water. It was so dark that Sakura could scarcely see Temari standing five feet away. Below her, all around her, brief flashes of light from jutsu filled the cavern. A thousand fireflies, fighting each other to the death.

Within her mirror of ice, the shadow of Touin Yukari twisted. "Behind you, Sakura!"

Sakura ducked.

A giant vampire bat swooped out of the darkness, its claws nearly grazing the top of Sakura's head. Then it hit Yukari's ice mirror and shattered it. The sheer size and wake of the bat's flapping wings sent Sakura rolling along the roof, and she almost fell off entirely, grabbing a stalactite at the last moment.

"They're coming!" Temari shouted.

Sakura knew exactly who she meant.

Team Sawar.

The strongest genin team in the whole world.

The vampire bat wheeled around in midair, shrieking in hunger. Riding at the head of the bat was a boy that seemed half-bat himself: the stone-nin Bakura Orajuchi. Orajuchi's face had a leathery, spindly appearance, with long pointed ears and a long black snout, his eyes black and huge. It was the physical manifestation of Orajuchi's bloodline, Koumori, *or Bat Transformation.* Koumori users had enhanced senses, reflexes, and the ability to control bats. It was a powerful bloodline, yet his teammates' jutsu were no less dangerous.

Haghira Geigin, Doi's only son, was a skilled user of the famous clan jutsu called Gravity Wave.

Geigin used it now. The Gravity Wave hit them suddenly, greatly increasing the gravity around them. Sakura felt five times heavier than she normally did. It was all she could do to hold on to the roof, much less move. Orajuchi opened his snout and let out a piercing sonic burst, knocking his enemies off balance. "Drop down!" shouted Temari.

Sakura let go, free-falling in the air. The Sand Siblings and Team Narumi fell with her. But the Gravity Wave followed them down. Temari twisted around, using her War Fan to knock back Orajuchi's bat. And then the the cavern floor was upon them, pitch black and littered with debris. Kankuro threw out a dozen chakra strings to break their fall. Sakura hit the ground hard anyway, rolling like a boulder, the stone debris scraping her skin raw and bloody. The Gravity Wave pressing down on her body made it hard even to stand. "We've got to spread out!" she yelled. "Geigin can't hit us all."

With the Mizuho fire extinguished, the battle had spread out all over the cavern. Sakura stumbled to her hands and knees, trying to make sense of the heavy fighting. Orajuchi's giant vampire bat was flapping in circles around her head, and Sakura spotted the Sarutobi twins, the red-assed gorilla Ranma roaring between them. Team Asuma was in a corner, hard pressed by the attacks of Team Shonagon of Iwa. Neji appeared like a white blur, his palm going right through the chest of an unfortunate mist-nin. The swamp-nin Fukki Numazu fought the sand-nin Sajuko Bokuin of Team
Wekku. Geigin was still trying to target Sakura with his Gravity Wave, but the Sand Siblings rushed him, forcing Geigin to focus on them instead.

In the center of the fighting lay what remained of the Pillar of Heaven.

The great limestone column had shattered into a dozen pieces. Only the stump still remained, smoking from where the Mizuho had burned its surface. Broken stone fragments spilled from the stump, ghostly pale in the dark.

Darkness, and a pair of burning eyes.

Sougon Sosano was right there, in front of her.

He smiled wickedly. "Sakura. Are you all right?"
He smiled wickedly. "Sakura. Are you all right?"

Sakura used her most powerful genjutsu, throwing it at Sosano with all her strength. "Amnesia!"

It didn't work.

Sosano raised one eyebrow.

"I'm fine, thanks for asking." Sakura rose to her feet. "Now are you gonna fight me, or what?"

"Ah. If you insist."

He swung his sword down on her head.

Sakura brought up her chakra-cast kunai to deflect the blow. The blade of the katana met the edges of her kunai with a jarring ring, the sheer physical strength of Sosano's swing forcing her to skid backward. But the attack did not stop with the sword. In the next moment a curtain of heat exploded outward from the tip of the blade, like a furnace, right into Sakura's face. Gagging she tripped and fell. It was all she could do to dodge Sosano's next swing, a stabbing cut straight for her chest.

Rolling on the ground she stumbled into a low defensive stance. Her face was singed by the sudden blast of fire. Hot white spots crawling across her vision.

Sosano's sword was blazing now, a candle of deadly white. He brought it sideways against her in a long sweeping arc. There was an opening for a counterattack, and Sakura threw one of her kunai right at Sosano's throat, charging it with earth chakra-flow. If the kunai had connected it would have burst open his head, but instead a shield of cold unfolded before Sosano, draining the kinetic energy out of the kunai.

Sakura pulled the kunai back with an attached chakra string, whipping it around to parry Sosano's sword cut. She expected the extra blast of heat, and was ready for it. But instead of heat Sakura felt a sudden wave of cold behind her. The blast of freezing air almost froze her movements as she tried to retreat through it. She tripped again, this time on her stomach. She heard Sosano's katana whistling down to cut her in two. Blindly she threw both of her chakra-cast kunai behind her and managed by sheer luck to turn aside the attack. Sakura somersaulted forward onto her feet.

Sosano was laughing, his sword glowing red on one side and ice cold on the other, curtains of heat and cold whirling around him like a storm.

*This is Fire and Ice taijutsu!* Sakura had seen it twice before: first during the attack on Honjo Laboratory, and then again in the Battle of Red Rock Cliff. Sougon Charasu had used it to easily defeat the ANBU Captain Yamato, one of Konoha's strongest ninjas. Sosano was just as fast as his uncle Charasu… fast enough to kill Sakura thrice over. *He's exactly like his Uncle Charasu, in fact.* There was something wrong there, but Sakura had no time to think about it-did not want to think about it. Sosano was a blur of ice and fire. The sword itself was almost irrelevant to his attacks. With one slash of Sosano's sword, there came a wave of burning heat, going beyond the reach of his sword, behind it, in front of it, perpendicular to it. And with another slash, a wave of absolute chilling cold. Curtains of alternating heat and cold came at her, on and on, impossible to react to.

Half a dozen times she slipped or fell, but Sosano always stopped before the killing blow. Giving her just a little space to recover, to dodge. Sakura knew he was toying with her. *He can kill me whenever he wants.* The realization gnawed at her stomach. But she could do nothing else but fight on. He
hacked at her, driving her in any direction he chose, pushing her backward. Reducing Sakura's room to maneuver. Eventually she found herself backed up against the cavern wall itself. There was nowhere to run.

Sougon Sosano held his katana out in front of him, the blade parallel to his chest. His Enshogan eyes were torches of burning gold. She knew Sosano could easily blow her to bits with Bakudan. Would he kill her now?

What did he want?

They stared at each other for a long moment. In the corner of her eye Sakura could see Temari and Kankuro ganging up on Geigin, and Aumono fighting the stone-nin Bakura Orajuchi. Neji and Erima ran after Team Shonagon of Stone. Nonou fought the depraved mist-nin Onira Kawai, black threads enveloping her like a shroud. Which side was winning? Were they both losing? Ancient stalactites fell from the roof to shatter on the ground. Somewhere, in the distance, a girl shrieked loudly in pain. What was the point of it all, this battle? Why did they have to destroy each other?

"Not bad," Sosano told her. "Not quite good enough." His voice was light with amusement. "I liked the trick with the chakra strings. That might've killed me, a few years ago. Any more jutsu, Sakura?"

Sakura brought her hands together, flashing hand seals, and attacked him with as many genjutsu at him as she could. She used all the ones she knew, Binding, Sleep, Blackout, Mirage, Amnesia. She used them together. Sosano easily countered every one, all of them in combination. Sakura added chakra-flow to every genjutsu, spamming them. Sosano raised an eyebrow again.

He did not expect her physical attack.

He was too close, far closer than he should have been. Sakura saw Sosano's eyes widen. A shield of freezing air formed between them, but Sakura did not intend to aim for his body. She bent down and punched the ground under them with her gloved leather fist. The whole time she had been cycling earth chakra through her hands; and now she cycled it rapidly through her entire body, building up a massive charge of earth chakra-flow. Sakura could feel the power of it within her, rising exponentially, threatening to tear her body apart. Like if your body is a metal shuriken, Tsunade-sensei had told her. The principle behind Chakra Enhanced Strength. She touched her fist to the ground and released that power all at once.

The ground exploded. It shattered into a deep crater, a storm of dust and obliterated rock. Sosano tried to jump, but he was too slow. Sakura's punch flung him backward into a thicket of limestone stalagmites. The stone-nin boy went through the stalagmites and landed indecorously on his butt.

Sakura was breathing hard. She had released a tremendous amount of concentrated chakra in an instant. It was like throwing fifty earth chakra-flow kunai simultaneously. Sakura stood in the center of the crater she had made, all alone. She had forced Sosano back. She raised her gloved fist before her in defiance.

"Just that one," said Sakura.

"Ah." Sosano rose to his feet, dusting off his gray robes. "You're full of surprises. I like that in a woman."

"Stop flirting with me."

He laughed. "Why?"

"Is this some game to you? People are dying."
"All the more reason to live while we still can."

Sakura rushed at Sosano, trying to punch him again, but Sosano was wise to her tricks now. He danced back nimbly, using curtains of freezing ice to keep her back at a safe distance. Instead Sakura's first punch went through a large stalagmite pillar, then her second punch slammed into the cavern wall. Sosano emerged from the cloud of dust with an amused smile.

He seemed more interested in bantering with her than fighting, in any case.

"Tell me," he said. "What is Sarutobi Asuma up to?"

"What?"

"Oh, I saw your leaf-nin friend. He knocked out Misain Sebi, and then he ran out of the Pillar of Heaven deeper into the Weeping Caverns. Most curious. Tsunade the Betrayer sent him on some kind of mission, I expect."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Perhaps you don't." His eyes burned, sparked, like candles blowing in the wind. "Do you have any idea what is hidden beneath your very feet, Sakura?"

*This is going very badly,* she thought.

Then it got even worse.

Without warning the ground began to shake. The entire cavern around the Pillar of Heaven shook, vibrating. A sort of grotesque motion undulated across the cave, like a ripple on a lake, though the walls were solid stone, and the cave shrieked at every instant of it, a sound as Sakura had never heard before in her life.

"What the hell—" Sakura started.

The ground shook a second time. More violent, deafening, buckling like an angry stallion. Sakura looked down at her feet, and great cracks were splitting the floor from one end of the cavern to the other. The earth came to nightmarish life all around them. It was like she had punched the ground with her enhanced strength a thousand times over. It was as if some monster was waking up from its slumber beneath the world, but Sakura knew it for what it was. *A tremor, it's a tremor.* The kind that just came before a massive—

"Earthquake!" Sosano shouted. "Prepare yourselves!"

And then the world blew up.
The First Trial: Epicenter, Part 3

Sakura fell into the roaring darkness for what seemed like forever, but could only have been an instant. An instant of life and death, of action or inaction. In that instant she blasted as much chakra from her tenketsu as she possibly could, creating a shield around herself, and when she landed far below, and a thousand tons of stone rained upon her from above, somehow, she had survived.

Barely.

Rocks pinned down her entire body. She could not move. She could not even really breathe. It felt like all of the Weeping Caverns were buried on top of her. Maito Gai might have been able to break through with his sheer strength, or Lee. Sakura had never been known for her physical prowess, but this time she was not helpless, either. There is more way than one to break a stone.

She concentrated, pooling chakra into her right fist, making it spin in a dense loop. The chakra flow became faster and faster, more and more powerful. Just before she lost control, she added earth nature manipulation to it and released it all in a single burst. There was a very satisfying crack in the rock above her. She repeated the procedure. Again. Again. Rocks cracked and shattered and broke before the blows of her Chakra Enhanced Strength. At last the massive rock pining her down exploded, collapsing in a cloud of dust.

Sakura emerged from the hole where it had been.

Screaming greeted her in welcome. It was quite loud, and would have been even louder were it not muffled by layers of rubble. All around her, genin buried in the earthquake were calling out at the top of their lungs. Some people screamed in agony. Most shouted for help. Sakura tried to oblige them; but she took a step forward and fell on her face. A sharp pain stabbed up her right leg. She felt at it, with Mystical Palm. It was broken in three places, and her ankle was fractured too.

"I can't walk."

There was no way to heal the damage on the battlefield. And her chakra was almost all gone. She could see nothing. The Lock was gone, buried by the collapse.

All was in darkness, except for a pair of glowing eyes.

"Sosa," she whispered.

"I see you," replied Sougon Sosano.

He seemed unhurt. With an open hand he offered to help her stand. Sakura accepted, taking his hand. His palm was calloused and warm. She let him pull her up, pull her close; close enough to feel the icy cold of his Enshogan eyes. Sosano stared at her. "Your leg. Are you all right?"

"I'm alive."

"Yes." The gray-robed boy smiled sadly. "I can see them, you know. Each one of the ninjas trapped in the rubble. The heat from their bodies. The hot blood that rushes through their hearts. I can see them die."

He looked up, almost as an afterthought. The darkness stretched upward to a point that could not seen. The original cavern must have been hundreds of meters above them. But there was a huge limestone spar jutting up from the ground nearby. A fragment of the Pillar of Heaven, Sakura recognized. Sosano looked at it with his eyes, and the spar began to glow. Like a furnace; like a lamp. The heated stone shed a dull red light across the cavern.
Finally, Sakura saw.

A few other genin were out. Mukai Aumono was there. So was Bakura Orajuchi, of Team Sawar, the stone-nin who looked like a bat. The stone-nin Iwanu Gende of Team Chegga was holding another person in his arms. Six of them in total; all who had made it out of the rubble by themselves.

Sakura miscounted. As Gende walked closer, Sakura realized that the person he was holding in his arms was dead. The head and upper body of the corpse had been crushed by rocks. It was entirely unrecognizable. She could not even tell if it was a man or a woman.

"Zukaka Wamiko," Gende said in a hoarse voice. His teammate. Sakura had only ever really seen her face in the chuunin exam databook, a grainy graduation photo. According to the databook, Zukaka Wamiko was a taijutsu specialist, with lightning chakra affinity and a caring, loyal personality. She had been fourteen.

"I'm sorry," said Sakura.

The words were completely hollow. Both of them knew that a few minutes ago they had been trying to kill each other. But Gende nodded his head, anyway.

The rest of the genin ignored the exchange, the same way they ignored their friends still screaming for help. "What the hell happened?" asked the bat boy, Orajuchi. "Iwa doesn't have earthquakes. There's never been an earthquake here."

Sosano nodded. "This was no natural earthquake."

"You mean…"

"Yes, the Annihilation Heart. It's currently in a laboratory below the Weeping Caverns. There must have been some kind of accident. A fraction of its power leaked out, causing the earthquake." Sosano shrugged. "We were right above the epicenter."

Sakura could scarcely breathe. That was the Annihilation Heart? Its power was unimaginable, far beyond any S-rank jutsu. And if that was only a fraction of its true strength…

Finally, she understood why Asuma and his team had infiltrated the First Trial. They were looking for the Annihilation Heart.

They'd found it.

"Rotten luck tonight," Orajuchi muttered.

"Luck is random," Aumono gave back. "Getting burned when playing with fire is predictable."

"Especially for a rain-nin, yes? We never finished the fight we started."

Aumono hefted a senbon. "You have a bold tongue, for a roach. I already broke your little vampire bat, this time I'll break your mouth."

"No," Sakura said. Her voice came out as a whisper, drowned by the shouts of those who were still trapped beneath the collapsed rocks. "No. A truce. There's no use fighting. There are more than enough dead keys here for all of us. And we need to rescue our friends."

"I agree," said Sosano.

"What?" Orajuchi was surprised. "The apes can barely even walk—"
"I said no."

Bakura Orajuchi did not dare to contradict his teammate again.

Sosano was scanning the rubble. He pointed to a spot in a far corner. "Let's dig there. Sabaku Temari is ten meters below the surface."

The two of them went to work. Sosano used his Enshogan-heated katana to cut clean through the rock, and she worked on her stomach, clearing away the pieces with chakra-enhanced strength. Soon enough they had cleared a path through the rubble. The first thing they saw was Temari's fan weapon. Exhausted and injured, Sakura feared the worst. But she need not have worried. Temari emerged from underneath the fan, cradling a girl in her arms. Juukan Dee, the Raikage's young niece. Both were unhurt. Sakura understood that Temari had grabbed Dee as they fell, using her own body to protect the unconscious cloud-nin. Temari had been pinned between rocks on one side and Dee on the other. That was why she had been unable to get out.

Temari took in the sight of Sakura and Sosano working together without comment. "Kankuro?" she asked.

"I don't know," said Sosano. "The Weeping Caverns collapsed. There are a whole series of tunnels beneath the Pillar of Heaven. We happened to fall into this pocket. Your brother may be in another one. He could be very far away from here."

She nodded. "Fine. Then we'll help the survivors here first."

Which is exactly what they did. They worked in small teams, using muffled shouts as well as Sosano's Enshogan to find the survivors. Digging them out was more complicated. Aumono summoned a green salamander, which wrapped up rocks in its tongue and swallowed them whole. Bakura Orajuchi shrieked, sending ultrasonic bursts from his mouth to shatter rocks. And Temari used her Giant War Fan to create miniature whirlwinds. Within an hour they had uncovered all the people they could find. As they were freed, able-bodied genin joined the search. The badly injured were laid on one side of the glowing limestone pillar; the dead, on the other side.

A whole row of corpses was there to pay Zukaka Wamiko company. The sand-nin boy Sajuko Bokuin of Team Wekku had died in the battle before the earthquake, his throat sliced open by a sword. Likewise for his teammate Fuwa Uzume, whose stomach had been blown apart by one of Chuzuru Jibachi's clay animal bombs. The stone-nin Kasukutsei Gyusen of Team Shonagon had died from a poisoned senbon through his pinkie toe.

The others had been crushed by the earthquake. Some bodies were so broken up they were impossible to identify. Sakura was, however, able to identify the wave-nins Uchiku Ouji and Yasui Kabure of Team Narumi. They had died together, smashed between limestone walls, like a trash compactor.

In vain Sakura looked for the corpses of the three rapists of Team Keel, and the three psychopaths of Team Dayu, but they were not to be found.

As a medic-nin, Sakura's services were in high demand. Almost everyone had injuries of one kind or another, but she had time only for the dying. Unable to walk, she was forced to limp around on one leg, or even crawl around on the ground, to heal patients. Soon she had run out of chakra as well. That was a problem, since she was the only medic-nin. But later the mist-nin Tsunaga Kuina of Team Kikuko, Yukari's teammate on Team Kikuko, was dug out of the rubble. Kuina was a medic-nin, too, and she proved to be quite competent.
Yamanaka Ino was a different story.

"Yes, Sakura, I do have some medical training!" Ino protested. Her face was covered in dust, and her ponytail had come undone, so that her long blond hair hung all over. But otherwise she was perfectly fine. Aumono had found her banging loudly against the rock above her, shouting curses.

"Ino, this is not a joke. If you make a mistake, you'll just make the patient worse."

"My dad taught me first aid. Like, basic spy training stuff."

"And he supervised you every step of the way."

"So supervise me, you cactus!"

Sakura admitted defeat. She put Ino to work as a nurse, staunching patient's wounds and using rudimentary Mystical Palm to help stabilize their circulatory systems. Sakura and Kuina did the heavy lifting of actually fixing problems.

There were many diverse kinds of them. Sarutobi Hiraru had inhaled so much dust he could only breathe in coughing gasps; not to mention his kidneys were also hemorrhaging blood. Sakura flushed out Hiraru's lungs with a chakra field, then cauterized his kidneys with chakra scalpels.

She used even more chakra on the rain-nins Kazuraki Matsudake and Ajiro Yanagi of Team Pou. Matsudake had been poisoned, apparently by his own weapons, which had sliced into him during the earthquake impact. Sakura used the Poison Extraction jutsu to strain the poison out of the infected tissue.

Yanagi had a broken spine; a fixable injury, if Sakura acted fast enough. Using chakra flow to enhance the strength of her Mystical Palm, she placed her hands on Yanagi's back and poured chakra into the breakage, healing the damage. Ajiro Yanagi would live to fight another day.

"Sakura," Sosano called.

Sakura looked up. Sosano was holding an unconscious boy in his arms. The boy was plainly dying; his entire right side had been crumpled like a piece of used paper. Sosano laid the boy down by the glowing pillar and Sakura hobbled over, leaning on Ino's shoulder for support.

It was a stone-nin. Sakura recognized him as the same boy who had been trying to impale Sakura with a spear, earlier that evening. *Hamaguchi Zeze, of Team Chegga*. Gende's teammate. Gende himself was standing nearby, unexpected tears rolling down his face. "Save him," Gende said to Sakura. "Please. I'll owe you my life."

"Medic-nins are bound by oath to heal all those who need our help."

It was a glib reply. The truth was, Sakura had no confidence in healing Hamaguchi Zeze. The poor boy had been crushed by a giant boulder. Some of what remained was salvageable, like his lung, but most of it had to be accounted a loss, like Zeze's arm, and half his liver, and a good chunk of his digestive system. Kuina was not qualified to do surgery of this magnitude. Sakura herself could only perform the most emergency triage.

The worst thing was that Sakura had run of chakra. She'd drained herself to the last drop, and there was no more left. She could not heal anybody without chakra. Only if… if she opened the Chakra Gates, that would let her access life energy itself. Chakra would flood out from every cell in her body. And damage all her cells too, yes, which was why it was a kinjutsu. *I have no choice,* she thought. *I've got to open the Gates, or this boy will die.*
"Sakura," said Sosano. "Do you need chakra?"

Sakura looked at him. He was clearly exhausted, worn down from constant Enshogan use. "You're in no condition to offer me that."

"You're in even less condition to refuse."

Sosano extended his hand once more. Sakura hesitated, but only for a moment. Then she took it and began to draw away Sosano's chakra into her own body. The jutsu was easy enough to perform; it was called Chakra Drain. She stretched a chakra field over the tenketsu in his hand and looped it with chakra flow so that the circulation of Sosano's chakra was diverted back into her. Sosano's chakra was incredibly dense and strong—though, as she suspected, he did not have much of it left. I need just enough. A minute passed, two minutes. Both of them gasped with the strain. Finally she broke the connection.

Sosano had turned off his Enshogan. "Is that enough?"

"Yes."

Iwanu Gende was yammering on in the background. "Can you heal Zeze? Can you heal him? Please, Sakura. He's dying."

"I know that!" she snapped.

She directed Ino to remove Gende to another location, while she concentrated on Zeze's surgery. She poured Sosano's chakra into the dying stone-nin. The chakra had a different texture from her own. Less malleable, but more capable of piercing power. It sufficed for the task of brute triage surgery. Despite her exhaustion Sakura felt a kind of sick pleasure come over her. Slicing up limbs and organs was nasty work, but oddly exhilarating. The power of the healer, Tsunade-sensei had told her once, is the power of life and death. Sakura used that power now. She willed Hamaguchi Zeze to live, with her chakra scalpels, with her skill, with her hands covered in fresh blood. She was not helpless. She was in control. Zeze would never fight again, it was true, but he would survive. He would wake up again. Sakura wanted the boy to wake up, this stranger, this enemy, so Sakura could tell him that he owed her his life.

The cloud-nin Juukan Dee woke up shrieking.

It was a very distracting sound. One moment, Dee had been sleeping peacefully under the glowing stone pillar. The next, she had gone into a full blown meltdown.

Just like a scared little girl, Sakura thought, even though Dee was supposed to be a ninja. And the niece of the Raikage, no less. Dee did not seem to care about her reputation. She shrieked at the top of her little lungs, an earsplitting tantrum. Orajuchi covered his huge, pointed bat ears. Sosano raised an eyebrow. Ino went over to try to calm Dee down.

Unfortunately, Ino failed miserably. Sakura knew she would've done no better. Sakura had seen her own little sister cry like Dee, sometimes, after waking up from a nightmare. Kyoki had cried and cried, and neither Sakura nor her mother could do anything about it. And that had only been a childish nightmare, easily forgotten. Juukan Dee's nightmare was real, a memory of horror burned forever into her psyche. The merciless depredations of Team Keel, the torture and murder and rape of her teammates. Sakura would've cried if that had happened to her, too, but at the moment she had no time for Dee's heartbeat, she was in the middle of reconstructing Zeze's chest and any number of other urgent medical crises. "Damnit, Ino, knock her out," Sakura said. "I can't deal with this right now."
"Now you see why I don't want kids," said Ino. She reached over to press the pressure point in Dee's neck. But a hand grabbed Ino's arm before she could finish.

It was Temari.

"No." Temari's face was all rough lines, like the edges of a broken sandstone. Yet when she looked at Dee, her expression gentled. The sandstone eroded away into soft sand. "Not like that. The girl needs love, not more violence. She needs a mother. Come here, Dee. Yes, it's all right. I'll take care of you. It's all right. You're safe, now. I'll never let them hurt you anymore, I promise. I'll kill them all."

Temari's methods worked. The young cloud-nin was still crying, but more quietly now, throwing herself into Temari's arms, sobbing into her bosom. Temari stroked the girl's hair slowly. She seemed to know exactly what to do, what to say, in order to help Juukan Dee pull herself back together.

Sakura had never seen Temari like this before. It was a bewildering change; that is, until Sakura realized that Temari must've had a lot of practice in the past. Her mother had died giving birth to Gaara. That meant that Temari had been responsible for raising Kankuro and Gaara from when they were little kids. Temari had been a mother to them in all but name.

Ino sidled up alongside Sakura. "Sweet Sage of Six Paths, does she, like, read you bedtime stories every night?"

"She prays."

"Oh."

"Will you take a look at Sarutobi Hiraru? He's moaning. Give him some water. Or a soldier pill, if he needs it." Sakura was still busy saving Hamaguchi Zeze's life, and had no time for the other patients. Ino was there, though. Ino got water from someplace, Sakura had no idea where, and dripped it into Hiraru's mouth. The disheveled, dust covered kunoichi was like a whirlwind, circling around the limestone pillar, flitting from patient to patient in an astonishingly efficient, effective manner. Sakura was astonished to discover that Ino made a pretty good nurse. Ino saw Sakura looking at her, in a moment of brief respite. Ino winked and blew her a kiss.

There was a commotion on the other side of the cavern. Someone was lifting a rock, someone was shouting. Then the Kiri medic-nin Tsunaga Kuina was running back to fetch Sakura. "Sakura. Let me take over here. We found another patient. You must go to her, now."

"Who is it?"

"A wave-nin, and my teammate's cousin. Uchiku Nonou."

Nonou? Sakura had the been the one to find the corpses of her teammates, Uchiku Ouji and Yasui Kabure. Two members of Team Narumi were already dead. And now the final member was dying as well, according to Kuina. Sakura was almost finished with the surgery on Zeze. Kuina was more than capable of finishing the task. Yet Sakura did not understand. What medical condition of Nonou's could have so frightened Kuina that she had come running to Sakura?

"All right," she said.

Iwanu Gende had already returned from temporary exile. "Zeze, will he—"

"He'll live."
Sakura could not say the same for Unchiku Nonou, when she limped over to the scene of the crime. Nonou was bleeding.

She was bleeding everywhere.

From her lips, from her eyes and her ears and nostrils. From under her fingernails. From between her legs. From every pore in her body. Rivulets of bright red liquid flowed down Nonou's sides, pooled under her in a bed of her own blood. Sakura had never seen anything like it before in her life. At first she thought Nonou had been crushed by the rock which had fallen atop her. But her physical body appeared relatively undamaged; the rocks had not touched Nonou, only trapped her in a coffin of stone. It had not been the earthquake. No, something was wrong with Nonou at a more fundamental level.

Her wounds, Sakura realized. Her wounds were not clotting.

The girl was still awake. "Sakura," she whispered, faint as a breath.

"Nonou. Are you a hemophiliac?"

"Nope." Nonou laughed weakly. "No, it was a jutsu. The tentacle boy. Kawai of Waterfall. You know?"

"I know."

"He cut me. He… he infected me. My blood."

There was a shallow cut across Nonou's chest, below her breasts. The wound should have closed long ago, but it was still bleeding. Sakura knelt down and hovered her hand over the wound. Blood seeped slowly out from underneath the skin, drenching the wave-nin's blue mesh uniform. There was an incredible amount of blood. Even now it amazed Sakura how much blood could be contained in a human body. She didn't dare to touch it. She felt at the wound with Mystical Palm, trying to find out what poison Kawai had used. Try to figure out the antidote.

"My god," she whispered.

Nonou laughed again, blood bubbling from inside her mouth. "It's bad, yeah?"

It was worse than bad. Sakura had expected to find poison, something she could fight using Poison Extraction, or something she could bypass with an infusion of chakra, like she'd done to save Tenten's life during the Battle of the Asylum. But there was no poison. Instead Nonou's blood had been… changed. Blood was full of plasma and cells and any number of clotting factors. But the red liquid that was coming out of Nonou's skin was thin as oil. Its biochemistry had been altered, somehow. It was being gradually repelled out of the body. In a fundamental way, the blood was no longer blood. Sakura did not understand how it had happened. And she had no how idea how to return Nonou's blood to the way it was.

Soon it would all be gone.

Nonou's face was covered in red; the greasy crimson of blood, the faint auburn of her limp frazzled hair. The only thing that was still clean was her forehead protector. The symbol of Namigakure was still visible on it: a crashing wave that ended in a sharp point. The wave-nin girl grimaced, coughing. Blood welled from beneath her wide green eyes. A shuddering noise came within her throat. She tried to raise her hand, but she could not, too faint from blood loss.

Nonou must have been lying like this for over an hour. Whatever Kawai had done to her was
intentionally methodical. The opposite of a hemorrhage, where the blood came rushing out from an open wound and the patient died in minutes. No, this jutsu had been designed to be as slow and terrifying as possible. A sadist's jutsu, thought Sakura.

The infamous poison called Death and Decay.

"It hurts," whispered Nonou. "God, it hurts."

"Where?"

"Everywhere." She trembled. "I'm brave, though. Just like you, Sakura."

"Like me?"

"Inari-kun said so. He told me about all sorts of stories about you. He... he said you were the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen. You know... until he met me." So much blood had pooled under her body it looked like Nonou was sinking into it. Sakura had to bend down to hear her voice. "He said you were kind of scary. Especially if somebody woke you early. And he said you were very brave. On the bridge... against Zabuza the Bonebreaker. Like you weren't afraid of anything."

"I was afraid," said Sakura. "I was so afraid of Zabuza I could hardly move. It's okay to feel afraid. That's the only time we can be brave."

"Tell me, Sakura. Am I going to die?"

All men must die. "A full blood transfusion... maybe..."

"We're in a cave. Not a hospital."

Sakura had no reply to that.

"Thank you. For trying. My teammates... Ouji and Kabure. Can you... tell them? About me."

Sakura wanted to cry, or maybe to laugh. It had been Sakura who had found Unchiku Ouji and Yasui Kabure in the rubble. Their mangled bodies had been crushed in the fall when the cavern had collapsed. Nonou's teammates had died instantly. There was no one left to tell.

Perhaps it did not matter. Perhaps there was only one way to answer the wish of a dying girl.

Sakura opened her mouth to speak, but Unchiku Nonou of Namigakure did not hear her. Her eyes were closed; her chest was motionless and silent. The only sound was the blood that trickled from her dead corpse. Sakura did not even have the chance to tell the lie.
Eventually, after everyone who could be healed had been healed, and everyone who was going to
die had died, the surviving genin turned their attention to other matters.

It began when Sosano blew up a wall.

Dust and chips of stone rained down on the rest of them. "What the hell?" Aumono shouted.

"We have guests. It's only polite to open the door."

The door was a large hole in the solid limestone rock. The edges of it were still glowing red from the
Bakudan explosion which had created it. From the other side of the hole emerged a trio of grinning
cloud-nins.

Sakura recognized them. *Team Darui, the three strongest genin from Kumo.*

"Kazuno-san! Raiki-san! Jouda-san!"

It was Juukan Dee, jumping to her feet from Temari's lap. She ran over to hug the tallest of the
cloud-nins.

The boy Fukunaga Kazuno was so large he had to kneel on one knee just to accept the hug. His skin
was the color of bronze, his close-cropped hair as chiseled and stiff as the rest of him. He did not
really look like a typical cloud-nin at all, except for his formal uniform, a silver bodysuit with a white
vest, and the symbol carved on his forehead protector: three rounded ellipses, in the shape of floating
clouds.

Kazuno smiled broadly when he saw Dee, then frowned. The girl's silver hair was all bloody, her
face covered in bruises. As she ran toward her fellow cloud-nins the blanket covering her slipped,
exposing the torn rags of her genin uniform.

"Dee-chan?" His voice was as deep as the rumble of thunder. "What happened?"

"Kazuno-san… we… we were attacked. Temari-chan rescued me. She took care of me."

Sabaku Temari stood up. Her blue eyes glittered in the cavern's dull red glow. "It was Team Keel of
Mist, led by Hoshigaki Makera. They ambushed Dee in the Catacombs."

"Dee's teammates—"

"We could only save her."

Kazuno hugged Dee tight to his chest. Dee was crying again. Another of the cloud-nins, Imidori
Jouda, danced around them. He was the opposite of Kazuno; so short and small that for an instant
Sakura thought he was younger than Dee. But Jouda's bearded face betrayed the fact otherwise. *He's
a Hoka,* she remembered, *a member of the pygmy race of the Crescent Country.*

Jouda reached behind Dee's ear and pulled out a beautiful flower, golden petals shining. Dee gasped,
her tears forgotten. Then Jouda reached behind her other ear and pulled out a tiny, gift-wrapped box.
Jouda whistled, and the gift wrap fell away, revealing a tiny, origami crane. "For you, dear princess."

Dee laughed, and swung an arm out to hug Jouda, too. Temari joined them, kneeling to whisper in
Kazuno's ear.
The third member of Team Darui moved toward Sakura and Sosano. The albino boy, Kirazu Raiki. Sakura had seen him earlier that night, during dinner atop Sougon Castle. He was inhumanely beautiful, as pale as a ghost, and dressed even less modestly. Near transparent wisps of white silk clung to the boy's body. Just as well, for Raiki clearly wanted to show off his bloodline power Hitodenchi, Human Battery. Electricity flashed through his body like a lightning bolt every so often, making him a walking X-ray, lighting up his bones. The only thing that was not white about him was his black painted fingernails, and his black painted teeth, and his sharp red eyes.

On the Overlook, those eyes had radiated seduction. But now they were very angry.

"Hoshigaki Makera," said Raiki. His breathy lisp was charged with threat. "Is he still alive?"

"Team Keel got away," said Sakura.

"Good. I'll fry them all into crisps." His body lit up again with electricity. Sakura could see every bone in the albino's body. She could see the bones in Raiki's fingers, as they curled upon the copper chakrams at his sides, and lifted them in a crackle of lightning. "I'll slice their dicks into little pieces, in payment."

The stone-nin Tenka Himoro laughed. "Will you, now? An albino faggot in a dress, is that what the Lightning Country has come to? No wonder they call cloud-nins fairies."

"Why, thank you," Raiki tittered. "What do you call the things you find when you turn over a stone? Better to be a fairy than a roach."

Sakura interrupted the pointless duel. "What's the situation like, outside?"

Raiki shrugged. "We were in the Catacombs when the earthquake happened. The way we came down collapsed, and the shockwave was still going up, too. I don't think the surface of the village will look real pretty."

"No," said Sosano. "That would true for a natural earthquake... but not this one. The epicenter of the shockwave was deep underground, and its range was limited. It's unlikely to have reached the surface."

Sakura remembered the images she had seen in Tsunade-sensei's memories, during the Torment genjutsu. The underground base within Deathtrap Mountain had collapsed, ripped apart by the power of the Annihilation Device, but the lake above it had barely been touched. Sakura knew that Sosano was right. So it didn't blow up Iwa after all, it only blew up the caves.

"It is good to know that there is a place for us to return to." It was Kazuno, joining them. He had a long metallic bow slung his back, and a quiver of copper arrows. The tall boy's voice was clipped and very plain; Sakura suspected he had never told a lie in his life. "I am a gentleman of science, and no philistine, but all experiments must have restraints. You almost killed us all, neh?"

"A feature, not a bug," declared Kirazu Raiki.

"I do not deny it," replied Sosano, strangely amused. "When we return to the Overlook, you may lodge a complaint with the proper authorities."

"How do we get back there?" Sakura asked. "If the Catacombs collapsed, and the way we came down isn't there anymore?"

"We'll have to make a new tunnel."
"The Lock," said Kazuno, stiffly. There was little he did not say stiffly. "We must activate our keys in the Lock as well, or we'll be disqualified from the chuunin exam. How one might find such a thing in all this wreckage, I cannot say."

Raiki grinned. The albino's eyes were red as blood. "You're pouting, Kazzy."

"I do not pout."

"Like I said. Ya're kind of sexy when you do that, neh?" Raiki touched Kazuno's face suggestively, his black painted fingernails trailing down Kazuno's dark, tanned face. Then Raiki reached on his tiptoes to give the taller boy a kiss on the lips.

Sosano raised an eyebrow. Sakura had heard the rumors, of course, of the homosexual couple, and the open ways of the cloud-nins. But this was beyond all ninja codes. Homosexuality was not unknown in the shinobi world, which had been and still was dominated by men, but it was rarely acknowledged openly.

"Must we do this in public, Raiki?" asked Kazuno.

"We must. As long as ya keep on turnin' me on." Raiki's face was lit up by a lightning bolt that flashed across his skull and down his spine.

Kazuno coughed. "I apologize, sirs, for my teammate's distracting libido. Our situation is perilous."

"Not really. I can sense metal, with my bloodline. The Lock is over there." Raiki pointed with a manicured black fingernail. "Just some rocks in the way. Nothin' we can't handle, right, Kazzy?"

Casually, Raiki reached down with his hand and stroked between Kazuno's legs.

Kazuno turned red in the face. Through the silver bodysuit, Sakura could clearly see that the tall boy's package was stirring.

"Only a fairy handles a rock by making it grow harder," laughed the stone-nin Tenka Himoro. "That may work in Kumo, but not in the Earth Country."

"In the Earth Country, you just blow yourselves up, neh?" said Raiki.

"Stop it, both of you," Sakura interrupted. "We need to work together, if we're ever going to get out of here."

Sosano smiled, dark eyes slanting into arches. "Sometimes I fear women have far too much common sense to be shinobi." Then his eyes began to glow with golden light. His sword, too, as he unsheathed the blade from the scabbard and ran its edge along the surface of the wall where Raiki had pointed. Sakura saw that Sosano was using his katana as a focusing tool to guide the energy of his Enshogan. The rock melted wherever the sword touched it, running down to the cavern floor in a hot molten stream. Soon an opening appeared in the wall; a tunnel. "Follow me."

They followed.

They all followed, every genin who could walk, and even those who could not, carried on the backs of their comrades. Everyone was eager to finally reach the Lock. They did not want to waste any time. Or perhaps they were just afraid of being left behind; abandoned for dead, back in that huge buried cavern where the only source of light was a single heated pillar, a faint red torch that grew fainter with each minute that passed.

Sosano strode in front, tunneling through the rock steadily with his Enshogan. Jibachi followed, and
then Team Darui of Kumo: Raiki and Kazuno arguing like an old married couple, the bearded pygmy boy Imidori Jouda holding Dee tight against his arms. Temari hovered over Jouda and Dee like some kind of guardian, her War Fan open, hard eyes roving for any threat. Mukai Aumono joined the lead group as well, using his green rock-eating salamander to increase the speed of the tunneling, and the stone-nin Tenka Himoro ran up with a fistful of dead chunin exam keys.

Sakura found it difficult to travel any distance, on her broken leg. *Damnit*, she thought, stumbling to her hands and knees. *I still can't walk.* The pain was almost blinding. Maybe she could open a Chakra Gate—the resulting flood of energy through her body would be more than enough to mask the damage in her foot. *No, I won't. Not unless I have to.*

And then Ino was there.

"Having foot trouble, cactus?" her best friend asked, smiling. Ino's face was covered in dust and badly scratched, her uniform splattered with blood from the wounded she had cared for. She did not seem to notice. "I *told* you to buy better shoes."

"Didn't you want me to buy heels?"

"That's not the point. Get it. *Point?"*

"Very funny."

"Speaking of bad puns… can't you heal your leg?"

"The bone's broken. It takes a lot of time to heal bones."

"Too bad." Ino put her hands on her hips. "Oh, well. You saved me before, now I suppose it's my turn to save you. Come on!" She laughed, bubbly as a soapy bath, and pulled Sakura up, swinging an arm around her. Sakura leaned on Ino, grateful for the other girl's help.

"Thanks."

"Can't just leave you here to rot into a mummy, could I? Who would be my rival?"

The two of them moved forward into the tunnel, Sakura limping on her one good leg and supported by Ino all the while. The walls of the tunnel glowed with heat where a hole had been cut in the solid rock; rivulets of hissing lava dripped slowly down its sides. *The Enshogan*, Sakura thought. Its power was extraordinary. Even though Sosano was almost out of chakra, he could still do something like this.

And then, just like that, it was done.

"We're here," announced Sosano.

They emerged into a small cavern, its floor littered with broken stalagmites. The stalagmites had been crushed when the roof the cave had fallen in during the earthquake. Huge boulders were strewn everywhere, and at the back of the cave, leaning against the wall, was the glowing white light of the Lock. It had fallen down hundreds of feet right to this place.

Kirazu Raiki ran his hands softly over the surface of the Lock. It appeared undamaged; a soft hum rose from the smooth white metal, the same color as the chuunin exam key which hung against Sakura's chest. "I think it still works," said the albino boy. His pale skin lit up with a bolt of electricity, flying with sparks.
"So?" asked Orajuchi. "Who does the honors?"

Sosano came forward.

Two keyholes were etched into the center of the Lock, halfway down the long rectangular slab. The top hole for a genin's live chuunin exam key, and the bottom for another dead key, to allow the first to turn. Two keys, to allow one person to activate their live key, and to pass the First Trial. Two keys, which meant that at most only 50% of the genin in the First Trial could move onto the second. But the percentage is so much lower than that, isn't it? All three people in a genin team had to activate their keys.

And so very many genin were dead.

Sosano inserted a dead key and his own live key into the two keyhole slots on the Lock, turning them together. There was a audible click as the keys snapped into place, opening the Lock. A brief flash of red light pulsed from its metal surface, indicating a successful activation. Immediately the dead key on the bottom began to melt. Usable only once, as Sakura had known it must be. Liquid metal drained out of the keyhole like cold silver water.

Sosano removed his live key.

The key had begun to glow red. The sight of it made Sakura giddy with relief. She felt lightheaded and very tired. It's done, all we have to do is turn our keys in the Lock, and then we can blast our way back to the Overlook and finish this damn trial, once and for all. She wanted to say so, but then she saw Sosano's face. The stone-nin boy was frowning, his brow furrowed in puzzlement.

"Oh," he said. "I did not expect that."

"What?" demanded Sakura.

"The activated key. It's draining my chakra. Quite rapidly."

Sakura understood with a rising horror. It's a ticking clock, she realized. It'll only stop when we complete the First Trial. It meant anyone who activated the key needed to return to the Overlook as soon as possible, before the key drained all their chakra and killed them… or else throw the key away and fail the exam.

Jibachi laughed. "Sosa. How long can you last?"

"Most of my chakra is gone. Half an hour, at best. The rest of you will do little better."

Half an hour. It would have been a tall order in any case, even running back to the surface by the same path along which they had come. But the chuunin exam had at least been designed to make such a dash back to the Overlook possible. An earthquake destroying the Weeping Caverns and everything in them had not been factored into that design.

Sakura said the only words that came to mind. "That's bullshit."

"Always to the heart of the matter, dear Sakura." Sosano's smile was a flash of white in the dark, and very sharp. "Welcome to Iwa."
"Hurry up!" shouted Sabaku Temari. "Get your asses moving, damnit, you useless fuckers, before we all die."

Temari's request was not unreasonable. She was carrying on her back the unconscious rain-nin Kazuraki Matsudake. The chuunin exam key around her neck was glowing red, and no doubt draining chakra from her body at an alarming rate. Temari's face was pale and haggard from the strain.

"What she said," Sakura concurred.

Sakura had just blown up the wall in front of them. She'd blasted it apart with her chakra-enhanced fist in a single punch, and now leaned exhausted against Ino, who was carrying Sakura on her back. Sakura's leg was still broken. She could not keep up with the pace of the others by hobbling around, so Ino had offered to carry her. It galled Sakura to be so helpless. But at least she made herself useful by clearing a path toward the surface.

Her chakra was disappearing fast. She'd opened one Chakra Gate long ago, right after she had activated her chuunin exam key in the Lock, and was soon going to be forced to open another. The burst of energy that had come when she first opened the Chakra Gate had faded. Partly she'd used the chakra blowing apart rocks, but most of it was stolen by the activated key. The activated key worked on the basic principles of Chakra Drain. It would keep sucking away her chakra until it was turned off.

Thus, their urgency to return to the Overlook as quickly as possible. Thus, Temari's cursing.

"My dear Temari-chan," said Fukunaga Kazuno, "that is no way to talk like a lady." Stiff and proper to the last, the tall cloud-nin made a chivalrous bow. "Your point, however, is most noted, neh? Raiki, would you be so kind as to fully charge my arrow?" Kazuno took out a cooper arrow and notched it in his longbow.

Next to him, the albino Kirazu Raiki tittered. "Sometimes I think you got a dirtier mind than I do." He stroked the copper arrow with his Human Battery bloodline power until the surface began to sparkle with electric charge. The third cloud-nin on Team Darui, the pygmy Imidori Jouda, chipped in a jutsu of his own, which Sakura recognized as some kind of wind chakra-flow.

Kazuno released the arrow. It shot into the hole Sakura had made, flying upward into another cave, and exploded through a wall on the far side. Exploded through quite a few walls, judging from the noise.

"Good work," said Sosano, climbing up through the hole. "My turn next."

The genin had pooled their resources to clear a path to the surface. All their mass devastation jutsu had come out. There was quite an arsenal of them: Temari's wind scythe attack, Aumono's giant rock-eating salamander, Orajuchi's ultrasonic pulses, Kuina's water shark missiles, Sakura's chakra-enhanced punches. Even taking turns, it was extraordinarily exhausting work.

The three cloud-nins were doing better than most, since they had not participated in the battle around the Pillar of Heaven, nor had they been crushed by falling rocks in the subsequent earthquake. The rest of them were half dead, literally in some cases, spiritually in all of them.

Even Sosano looked completely exhausted. Sakura was not even sure how he was still standing. In
addition to the drain of his activated key, Sosano was also using his Enshogan continuously. He had to, because without his eyes they did not know what path to take through the solid rock. The Enshogan was not nearly as useful in this situation as Neji's Byakugan, which had the ability to see through walls outright. But Neji was not with them. Sosano was at least able to detect subtle temperature differences, indications, he said, of hotter air flowing toward the surface.

It was the best idea they had, and they followed him, upward, carrying the injured with them. The dead they had no choice but to leave behind.

Time passed, minute by minute. They were still far underground.

One by one, the survivors began to collapse.

The leaf-nin Aburame Auni, of Team Ranka, was the first to go. Only a "D rank" ninja according to the chuunin exam databook, she had been carrying her unconscious teammate Sarutobi Hiraru. Auni tripped over a boulder and could not get back up again.

Sakura examined her. The problem was that Auni simply did not have any chakra left, and barely any life energy; the activated key had drained nearly all of it. Sakura supposed she could try to pump some chakra into Auni, but that would only delay the inevitable. Thus Sakura had no alternative except to rip the key from Auni's neck and toss it away into the darkness. Per design, a live key had to be kept in contact with the user's skin at all times. If it was removed for more than ten seconds, the key would go dead.

That meant the key would stop draining chakra from Auni. It also meant that Auni and both her teammates, the twins Sarutobi Hiraru and Sarutobi Kanetsu, had just failed out of the chuunin exam.

But at least she would live.

Some of the genin had failed out a long time ago. The stone-nin Iwanu Gende of Team Chegga, for example. Gende had not even bothered to activate his chuunin exam key in the Lock. All three members of a team needed to do so in order to pass the First Trial, and that was impossible in Gende's case, since his critically injured teammate Hamaguchi Zeze could never survive the chakra drain. So there was no point in doing so himself.

This was also true for the sole surviving member of Team Wekku, the sand-nin Murakami Jueti. Her teammates Sajuko Bokuin and Fuwa Uzume had been killed in the battle around the Pillar of Heaven. The stone-nin Tenka Himoro's teammate Kasuketsei Gyusen had died as well. Like Gende, neither Jueti nor Himoro bothered to activate their keys.

And Dee, of course.

As for the rest of them, the journey to the surface was a race against time. Having come this far, no one was willing to remove their activated keys unless absolutely necessary. Sakura herself had no idea where Kankuro was, or what had happened to him. If he was dead, the whole Trial was pointless. But she could not discount the possibility that he, too, would make back to the Overlook. She had to keep on going.

Ino was the next person to collapse.

"Sakura," she said. "I can't."

"You can," Sakura told her.

"Maybe if you ate less donuts." Ino gulped down gasps of breath in the damp, cold air of the
Weeping Caverns. Sweat streamed down her face and dripped onto the glowing red key around her neck. The activated chuunin exam key pulsed rhythmically, its metal surface hot to the touch. "You're as heavy as a goddamn horse."

"Sorry. I'll find someone else to carry me. Kuina, maybe…"

"I can't," the other girl repeated. "I… I don't where Chouji and Anake are. Or even Asuma-sensei. I… I can't."

"Ino! Don't give up." Sakura used Mystical Palm to quickly scan the condition of Ino's body. She was in very bad shape indeed. *All her chakra's gone, leeched away by the activated key.* Ino was running on fumes, and surviving only on life energy. That was hardly good. Still, Ino's life energy would probably suffice to get her back to the Overlook, if she didn't exert herself too much. "Not now. You can finish the First Trial, I know it. We've already come so far. Please."

Ino smiled. "Sakura… you…"

"What?"

"You're embarrassing me. Pah!" With a great effort Ino pulled herself to her feet. "Didn't I say I would kick your ass?"

"You did."

"WoulDN't be right, to hit a crippled girl. Let's get the hell out of here, so you can fix your leg and I can beat you properly."

It ended up that Ino carried Sakura after all. The gangly mist-nin Tsunaga Kuina was hardly in better shape, and needed to help carry the unconscious Aburame Auni besides. The haggard group of genin continued to climb upward, taking turns using mass-devastation jutsu to blast open the rocks in their way. The air began to grow drier and drier.

*We're leaving the Weeping Caverns, Sakura thought,* and returning to the Catacombs. From the Catacombs, it would not be that long to the surface.

At last Sosano used Bakudan to blow open a hole in the ceiling of the cave above them, and piles of old yellowed bones tumbled out. A ragged cheer came from the other genin.

They leaped up into the hole, a stone-walled crypt filled with the remains of long dead earth-kin, and emerged back into the maze of long dark tunnels that made up Catacombs. "Follow me," said Sosano, taking off at a run. Other tunnels branched off at every crossroad, black rectangular mouths that whirlered past in a blur, one after the other. But Sosano seemed to know exactly where he was going. Soon the floor began to slope upward, and when they shined their flashlights in front of them the ceilings were covered in sleeping bats. Sakura vaguely recognized their surroundings. *We've got to be close to the surface.*

"Look," said Ino, pointing.

Sakura looked. There was a dead boy splayed out at the mouth of a large burial chamber. The leaf-nin Koharu Okazaki, she remembered. Finding his corpse had been the first hint of the danger which lurked in the Catacombs, the sadistic savagery of Team Keel. Later, in the Weeping Caverns, they had seen Koharu Okazaki again, and Sakura realized that it was Asuma-sama in disguise, come to help them. But Asuma had disappeared during the battle around the Pillar of Heaven. That had been just before the earthquake.

She wondered where Asuma was now, and whether or not he had survived.
"There she is," whispered a voice from the darkness, almost lazily. "I never forget the scent of a victim's blood."

Sakura recognized the voice with a chill.

Hoshigaki Makera stood in the burial chamber beyond, blocking their way forward. The shark boy grinned languidly, showing a thousand sharp teeth.

Next to Makera, a slew of other shinobi unslung their weapons. The other members of Team Keel: Hiroshi Fue, and Houzuki Suigetsu. A dozen other mist-nin genin in mesh armor and light blue uniforms. Team Osamu of Waterfall, led by the bug-eyed girl Rokusho Fuu. Team Jidaei of Stone, led by Noatari Chusei and Chuzuru Jibachi.

The Confederacy, Sakura thought. It's the Confederacy.

The albino cloud-nin Kirazu Raiki strode forward, cooper chakrams whirling in his hands. Electric flashes lit up the bones inside his body, as if in a thunderstorm. "Never," he said in a cold fury. "I'll fry you into shark soup, for what you did to Dee. I'll make you beg."

"Evil shall face justice," agreed Fukunaga Kazuno, joining his teammate and lover.

"What are you doing, Sosano?" the stone-nin Noatari Chusei demanded. "Why are you helping them?"

Sosano's hand went to the hilt of his sheathed katana. "The earthquake. We could not have made it out without the cooperation of the United Countries."

"They said you were strong, Sougon Sosano." Hoshigaki Makera looked at them all with flat dead eyes. His voice was soft as a whisper, and rough as sandpaper. "They lied."

Tsunaga Kuina shook her fist at him. "Makera, you stupid! We all need to get back to the Overlook before our chakra runs out. We don't have time for this."

Makera only grinned.

"Sosano!" Noatari Chusei said again. "You don't need their help anymore. They're our enemies."

"Yes." Sosano unsheathed his sword, and held it in front of his shining golden eyes. His voice was sad. "And so are you, Chusei, if you dare to block my path back to the Overlook. Now get out of the way."

Makera opened his jaws and screamed.

A thousand teeth exploded out of his mouth.

Sharp fangs came stabbing through the air in a huge spray, right for them. Sakura made to dodge, but Sosano only twisted his sword and the teeth stopped in midair, as if hitting an invisible wall, and then clattered harmlessly to the stone floor of the crypt. The Enshogan, Sakura thought, remembering the battle in Red Rock Cliff. Sosano had used his control of heat to drain all the kinetic energy from the attack.

Makera was not done, though, nor were his Confederacy companions.

"Water Release: Great Waterfall!" cried Hiroshi Fue. A river of water appeared above them, like a gigantic waterfall. And then Houzuki Suigetsu suddenly jumped into the waterfall, and merged with
it, greatly enhancing the attack’s power and speed. Suigetsu's bloodline, called Suika or *Hydration Transformation*, allowed him to turn his body into water and then manipulate it with water elemental jutsu.

This time Sosano could not stop the attack. It crashed down on them, flooding the stone crypt. The genin were forced to scatter in order to avoid being swept away. Sakura grabbed Ino and leaped onto the roof of a branching tunnel. Red pain lanced through her right leg where she had put pressure on the broken bones.

>*No choice*, she thought. *I can't fight like this.* She had to open more Chakra Gates. Sakura could open at least four, but if she did she would be a cripple for the rest of her life. The Hokage had told her that, and she knew her sensei was right.

"Damnit!" Ino was saying next to her. "Damnit, why won't it end?"

Most of the genin on their side had survived Team Keel's attack, though quite the worse for it. Team Darui of Kiri emerged from the crashing waves in a storm of lightning. All three of the cloud-nins glowed with aura of electric power, charged with energy from Raiki's Human Battery bloodline. Kazuno let fly with a copper arrow so fast Sakura could hardly see it, impaling an enemy mist-nin right through the stomach and sending him clear through a wall. Jouda threw out spinning cooper wire shuriken. Somehow the girl Dee had been transferred from Jouda's arms into Temari's. Temari, protecting a little girl she scarcely knew, a girl from a village not even allied to her own. Sakura saw Temari open her metal Giant War Fan to its full extent, three purple eyes showing, and use it to block a Water Shark Missile. Sakura saw Sosano's teammate Bakura Orajuchi use his Echo Attack jutsu on the enemy mist-nins, only to himself fall to his hands and knees a moment later, exhausted from all the chakra he'd already used. She saw Mukai Aumono attack the stone-nin Chuzuru Jibachi, only for Jibachi to raise his hands, sculptures of explosive clay bursting outward from his palms. Sakura saw it all, she saw it as if in a single frozen moment. Chaos everywhere, wild screaming, ninja children killing each other in the Catacombs underneath Iwagakure even as the stone walls crumbled with the force of their battle. A dead leaf-nin floated in a puddle of water, her neck half severed where some shark monster had bitten through it with his teeth. The dead person was Aburame Auni. Sakura had saved Auni from death only minutes ago, but that had done Auni no good, none at all.

"No, Ino, it won't end."

Sakura wanted to laugh, or cry, but she only gripped the chakra-cast kunai in her hands more tightly. *Of course it won't end.* She had hoped to reach the surface without further incident. She had hoped the First Trial was almost over, but of course it wasn't. Of course there had to be one last challenge. Even now, even after all that happened this night, after everything, there had to be one last battle. *All men must die*, she thought, and the words gave her a strange comfort, in that single frozen moment of her life.

And then everything exploded into motion.

"Earth Release: Fangs of Wrath!" the stone-nin Noatari Chusei shouted.

Spears of earth erupted from the roof of the crypt in a circle around Sakura and Ino, closing down on them like the jaws of a trap. Sakura opened another Chakra Gate and punched the spears with her chakra-enhanced strength. They shattered in a cloud of dust, and then Sakura leaped at Chusei, screaming. She could feel the power of two gates flood her body, and a sharp gasping pain as well. But there was no time to think about the pain, no time to think about her still broken leg. The chakra-cast kunai in her hands were burning hot, absorbing all the excess chakra that poured through her body. Their folded mirror surfaces glowed in the darkness of the Catacombs like white torches.
She stabbed at Chusei's face with the kunai. The points of the kunai bounced off with a clang. Something was odd about Chusei's face, about his entire body. It looked like he was a statue carved from granite. *Stone Form*, Sakura realized. Chusei had used a jutsu to turn his body into stone.

The stone form moved, though not very fast. Sakura dodged backward as Chusei attacked with his fists. He was trying to back her into a corner, where he could use his own physical invulnerability to his advantage, but Sakura did not intend to let it get that far. "Amnesia!" she called, targeting the memory circuits in Chusei's brain. Chusei pushed back her genjutsu with his own chakra field, but Sakura followed the genjutsu with another, again and again, her chakra fields powered up by two Chakra Gates. "Binding! Sleep! Blackout! Amnesia!"

Chusei stopped in mid-attack and looked around, utterly confused. *Got him.*

And then she didn't.

A foreign chakra field came rushing in and broke the Amnesia chakra-flow loop she'd set up in Chusei's mind. Cursing, Sakura looked for the source of the field. It was a mist-nin boy, leaping from behind Chusei, and the mist-nin was aiming a frog spear at her head.

Sakura met the blow with her chakra-cast kunai; the impact of the clashing weapons jarred her body and she almost slipped. The spear carrier was quite a formidable opponent, and did not hesitate to press the attack. Falling back, Sakura punched the ground with chakra-enhanced strength, blowing a crater in the stone crypt which the mist-nin was forced to dodge. She had a little bit of breathing space then, which was fortunate, because Noatari Chusei was attacking her from behind with hammers of stone that grew from his hands. "Die, ape!" Chusei shouted.

When Sakura turned to meet him, the mist-nin boy flanked her from another side. She shouted in frustration. She tried to throw genjutsu at Chusei and the mist-nin, but the mist-nin's spear stopped every one. Then they were pushing her back, and then the spear cut deeply into her brow above her right eye, and Sakura stumbled, and Chusei hit her square in the chest with a stone hammer. The force of the blow flung Sakura through the wall of the crypt and out the other side, into another tunnel. She cried out in agony, too stunned to do anything but roll onto her back. Blood ran down the right side of her face like a red waterfall. It bubbled out of her lips with every breath she took, and she knew her ribs were broken.

The mist-nin genin stood above her, his face as cold and merciless as ice. Without a word he stabbed down with his spear. *No time,* Sakura thought incredulously, watching the steel point come for her throat. *No time, I'm dead.*

And then Yamanaka Ino was there.

Ino, who had no chakra left. Ino who was drawing on what remained of her own life energy in order to fight. Ino, her best friend. Ino was there, and Ino had a large sharp rock in her hand, and Ino rose silently behind the mist-nin boy, and she drove the point of the rock down on the mist-nin's head.

The top of the mist-nins' skull cracked apart like an egg, and the gooey brain matter which came pouring out was gray and soft as rotten yolk.

He fell to the ground, dead.

"Ino," Sakura said, stunned.

"So that's what it feels like," said Ino. The rock she held in her hand was smeared with blood and brains.
"Damn you!" the stone-nin boy Noatari Chusei shouted. "Fucking apes, I'll kill you both!"

He swung his hammers at Ino, who dodged. Chusei's carved granite face was twisted in a expression of rage. With only a rock at her disposal, Ino had no way to attack Chusei's invulnerable Stone Form. At the same time, Chusei was too slow to land a blow. Stone exploded from the tunnel walls the every time Chusei swung at Ino and missed.

"Sakura!" Ino shouted. "He's going after you."

Of course he was. Sakura was a stationary target, and still lying on her back on the floor. Chusei had maneuvered himself into a position where he could now hit her with his hammers. Unfortunately for him, Ino's delaying tactics had allowed Sakura to gather her wits again. You fucking roach, Sakura thought, this is your fault. Why couldn't you just leave us alone, like Sosa told you to?

Chusei swung both of his hammers down on her.

Sakura opened the third Chakra Gate.

It was the most she'd ever opened before. A flood of pure glowing energy burst from her body. Each Gate was exponentially more powerful than the one before, and opening the third gate gave her more chakra than the first two combined. As long as this Gate lasted, even the drain of the activated chuunin exam key around her neck was only a pinprick.

It's my turn now!

Sakura brought up her fist and punched Chusei's hammers as they came down. The Chakra Enhanced blow was of such strength that Chusei's entire body was blown upward in the air, hitting the roof of the tunnel and then coming back down in a shower of rubble. He stumbled to his feet, eyes wide with surprise. One of the hammers that extended from his Stone Form body had broken off, and a long crack extended all the way down the arm.

Sakura laughed crazily. Chakra sloughed off her body in waves, making her eyes and mouth glow with pure white energy. "Stupid roach," she said. "You're not invulnerable after all. You're just an ugly sculpture that breaks."

She fell on the stone-nin, a blur of speed. Chusei was too slow to respond. He retreated before her pummeling, his stone body cracking where she hit it. She punched him in the stomach, and a piece of it broke off, thudding to the floor. She roundhouse kicked him in the face, and his nose shattered, exploding into a thousand fragments. "Die!" Sakura screamed. "Die, die, die!" She felt insanely strong. She felt like she had felt during the Battle of Red Rock Cliff, when she'd wrapped a glass-coated wire around Sougon Nachi's neck and pulled. She felt like she had during the Battle of the Asylum, when she'd fought with an Akatsuki terrorist in a pool of burning water, and she'd bared her teeth and she'd bit down on the man's throat. The taste of hot, roaring blood was in her mouth. Kill him! Blood! Kill, cut his throat, break him into little pieces! Kill! She imagined all her enemies screaming, faces twisted in a grotesque expression of hell, mouths gaping wide open, but no sound would come out.

"Stop," the boy Noatari Chusei gasped. Little fragments of granite ran down his face, like stone tears. "Stop, you're killing me."

A laugh burst from Sakura's lips. "I know!"

"Please, I surrender. Please, stop—"

Sakura did not hear him. How could she? Her blood was singing. She punched him over and over,
each blow more vicious than the last. All she wanted was to break this little boy. All she wanted was to be strong. She hated him, she hated them all, and she would have her vengeance. She shrieked in triumph, feeling gloriously alive. She punched Chusei into the ground, his limp stone body shattering under her fists. The boy cried out in agony, which only excited Sakura all the more. She grabbed the stone-nin by the head and used all her strength to bite into his granite throat. Where's the blood? she wondered. She wanted to taste his hot blood in her mouth. She wanted the blood so much. Twisting off the head did not seem to help. Desperately she used her fists to smash in the rest of the body, searching for that sweet hot red substance.

"Sakura!" a voice called to her, as if from very far away. "Sakura! Stop, he's dead!"

It was Ino, whispering right in her ear.

Ino, holding her.

"Look!" Ino told her. "Look, Sakura, he's dead! It's over."

Then Sakura saw it was so.

The boy who had been Noatari Chusei was a jumble of stone fragments. The pieces were scattered all over the floor. Half a hand there, a toe here, a broken lower jaw. Sakura had even destroyed Chusei's forehead protector. It lay in jagged metal shards in the rubble which had once been Chusei's head. A rock carved against a rock, she remembered. That was the symbol of Iwa.

The sight of it shook Sakura out of her spell of temporary insanity. Suddenly she felt numb. Blood was gushing down her face from where the mist-nin spear carrier had cut it above her right eye, a waterfall of red. Her leg was still broken, and her ribs, and who knows what else besides, but Sakura barely felt any of it. Chakra coursed through her body like a narcotic, dulling the pain. Too many Gates. She'd opened too many Gates, and it was hard even to think.

She opened her mouth, and spat out the little stone fragments that were on her tongue.

"Sakura, are you okay?" Ino was asking.

"I'm fine."

Sakura looked up. There were some others in the tunnel with them now. The stone-nin bat boy, Bakura Orajuchi, staring at her with his huge black eyes. Mukai Aumono, riding a salamander and grinning insolently.

And Sosano.

"What happened?" she asked.

Blood ran down Sosano's cheek and blossomed from beneath his gray robe like crimson flowers. He was so exhausted he'd even turned off his Enshogan. "Team Keel is—"

The ceiling of the tunnel exploded.
The ceiling of the tunnel exploded.

Black water poured out on top of them, a storm of water flooding the tunnel. Hoshigaki Makera appeared at the center of the storm of the water, some kind of strange liquid armor protecting his body. At the same time a lightning bolt shot out and zapped Makera square in the chest. But it dissipated harmlessly against the armor. "Fuck!" shouted the albino cloud-nin Kirazu Raiki, falling into the water with the rest of Team Darui from a side tunnel. Makera grinned, and made a hand seal. Dozens of sharks materialized in the black water out of Makera's chakra, hungry for prey.

"Team Keel is... that," finished Sosano.

_Damn_, thought Sakura._Now what?_

There were only the three of them now: Sakura, Ino, and Sosano. Sakura had used a chakra field to make a bubble of air in the now flooded tunnel, and they had been the only two close enough to enter it. It was hard to see anything in the black water, to tell what was happening. Nor did the blood running down Sakura's face improve her vision. A dim shape that looked like Aumono's salamander was swimming in the distance, and another shape that looked like a bat flapped its drowned wings.

Mostly there were sharks. Dozens of chakra sharks, circling in the water. One of them tried to swim into the air bubble to tear off Sakura's head, but she punched the shark straight on the nose and it dissolved into strands of shimmering chakra.

"Can't you beat that shark monster?" Ino demanded, waving a finger in Sosano's face. "Aren't you, like, the world's strongest genin or something?"

"I am." Sosano flashed them an amused smile. "I'm also out of chakra."

"We all are." Sakura tried to think like she usually did, though it hurt something fierce. "Team Keel must've got to the Lock before us, before the earthquake. They're too rested, too strong. It's no use fighting." A storm of lightning flashed through the black water, followed by a crackle of static electricity. "Well, Team Darui can try. Let them fight it out, cloud-nin and mist-nin. We've got to get out of here."

"A most sensible proposal, as always," agreed Sosano. Yet there was something ironic in his tone, and when his dark eyes glanced at the rubble of Noatari Chusei at her feet, Sakura knew that he had seen everything. "I have an idea. But I need your chakra."

"What, you can't open Chakra Gates too?" asked Ino.

"Not as many as your talented friend."

"How much chakra do you need?" asked Sakura.

"All of it. I mean to use Blast Wave."

The very mention of the jutsu gave her a chill. She remembered the Blast Wave she had seen in Red Rock Cliff, when Sosano's uncle Charasu had used it to obliterate the entire battlefield. She only barely survived the explosion herself. Yet she also saw the need for it now. _The Blast Wave will turn all this black water into steam._ It was the perfect opportunity to escape from the Catacombs unseen.
Sakura took Sosano's hand, beginning the chakra transfer. "It'll take a few minutes."

Ino pointed up suddenly. "Uh… guys…"

Hoshigaki Makera plunged into Sakura's air bubble and landed right next to them.


He attacked Sosano, mouth bared to show his teeth.

"Shit!" said Sakura.

Sosano swung at Makera with his sword. Makera dodged, and kept on coming, relentless as an onrushing train. "Don't break the connection!" Sosano said to Sakura. "Not yet." He spun, using the momentum of their attached hands to spin Sakura as well. Sakura raised her gloved leather fist and tried to punch Makera. Makera dodged the punch easily, but then Sosano was there, from the other direction, katana slashing down. Makera retreated a step, baring rows of sharp teeth.

"Ino, stay back!" said Sakura. "We'll handle this."

Sosano and Sakura attacked the shark boy together. Holding hands like that, it was natural enough to coordinate their movements. First Sosano would attack with his sword, whirling in a circle, and Sakura would follow his lead and use her chakra-cast kunai to attack whatever place Makera dodged, or block whatever counterattack he came up with. It felt like dancing, with sharp changes of direction, and constant whirling movement. It felt like Sosano's Fire and Ice taijutsu style. Sakura saw the power and beauty of that style now from the inside. A perfect balance of attack and defense. Makera had no opportunity to gain any advantage. Her blood sang with the exhilaration of it, tired and injured as she was. *We don't have to win, we just have to stall long enough so Sosa can charge up his Blast Wave.* The stone-nin boy's hand was very hot, and she gripped it tightly.

"Earth Release: Quicksand!" Sosano called, making a hand-seal on the pommel of his sword even as he slashed at Makera's neck. For a brief instant the stone floor under the shark boy's feet turned to mud.

Now, Sakura thought. And she spun around and she kicked the monster Hoshigaki Makera right in the balls.

She put all her Chakra Enhanced Strength into it; a kick that would have made a crater. Makera only took a few steps backward, grinning.

"Damnit," Ino said behind them. "What's with this guy?"

"He's tough," said a voice. The voice came from Makera's body, but it was not Makera. "He's a hard shell to crack, that one." A head emerged from the strange liquid armor around Makera's body. The head of a boy made of water, leering at them. "And I'm tough, too."

Oh god, so that's what Makera's armor is, thought Sakura. *It's Suigetsu.*

"Thought we were outnumbered, huh?" Suigetsu's hands appeared out of the liquid armor to join his head. "Best learn how to count!"

"Why are you doing this?" Ino demanded in a haggard voice. She had already went to one knee, unable even to stand upright. With a chill Sakura realized that her best friend was dying. "Why do you have to be so horrible?"
Suigetsu laughed. "But it's so fun to kick a man when he's down."

Then he made a hand seal.

"Hydration Transformation: Water Explosion!"

The liquid armor that was Suigetsu's body exploded outward in all directions. The explosion was so violent and fast that it turned him into superheated vapor; a bomb of scalding heat. Sakura could not even try to dodge it.

But Sosano was there.

He held out the palms of his hands, using his Enshogan to absorb the energy of the explosion before it reached them. *Kinetic Transfer*, the same jutsu he'd used at the beginning of the battle. But the attack had gone off too close, and he couldn't quite manage to drain all of the heat in time. A wave of propulsive water blew them backwards. Sakura was knocked hard against the far tunnel wall, and a moment later felt herself submerged in water. Her air bubble had collapsed the moment she'd lost the concentration to keep the chakra field going.

*This is bad!* she thought, floating upside down in the water.

Makera was swimming right at her, jaws yawning open to reveal rows of sharp teeth. The shark boy was even faster now than he was on land. Desperately Sakura cycled earth-flow chakra through her foot and tried to kick Makera as he came in. She missed, but the sudden release of chakra from her foot was enough to create a shockwave in the water, knocking Makera momentarily off course.

Sakura was also knocked away. It was as if she'd set off a rocket pack under herself, and the force of it sent her spinning wildly through the flooded tunnel. Black water was everywhere, and she couldn't tell one direction from another. When she tried to swim, agonizing pain lanced up her broken ribs and down her broken leg. *Damnit, this is really bad.* The pain meant almost all of the chakra she had gained from opening the Gates was now gone.

Strong arms caught her suddenly.

For a moment Sakura thought that Makera had captured her. But the hands that held her were warm and gentle, and they were in a bubble of air, and she looked up into eyes that burned bright as the sun.

"Sosa," she whispered.

"I see you, Sakura." Sougon Sosano smiled. "Are you all right?"

For the first time, she noticed he was no longer holding her hand. Blood still ran down his cheek, but there was a life to his face that was not there before. *I'm out of chakra. Did you get enough?*

"Oh, indeed. I ought to thank Houzuki Suigetsu. That little explosion gave me was just what I needed."

"Makera's coming again," Sakura warned, spying the shark thing hurtling toward them.

Sosano flicked his hand, almost casually. *Blast Wave,* he whispered.

An enormous wave of molten heat rippled outward from Sosano's air bubble. The Blast Wave met the black water and instantly turned it into billowing white steam. Then the Blast Wave kept on going. Sakura heard the wave hit Makera, which judging by his angry screams was a very painful
experience. Then she heard the wave hit the walls of the stone tunnel and destroy them. And the Blast Wave kept on going, covering the whole battlefield, tunnel after tunnel, sparing nothing. All the water and stone around them turned into steam and charred lava.

"That was... big," stammered Sakura. A thought occurred to her. "Did you—I mean, Ino—"

"I didn't hit her. I can see everyone with my Enshogan, you remember. I protected all your friends from the Blast Wave using Kinetic Transfer, creating little pockets of zero heat." Sosano looked around in the fog of billowing steam. "Hold on, Sakura. We're getting out of here."

Their escape was almost anticlimactic. Sosano made a quick hand seal, and four mud clones popped up out of the ground around him. The clones began to run in all directions, gathering the scattered survivors and leading them out of the warren of Catacombs. Sosano himself carried Sakura in his arms as he went to find Ino and Orajuchi. The Blast Wave and the resulting fog of superheated steam had so confused the enemy that they encountered no resistance. But the steam was easy enough for Sosano's Enshogan to see through. Soon enough they were running up a tunnel toward the surface, leaving Team Keel and the other enemy ninja behind them. Sakura recognized the ghostly stone gargoyles that appeared at the far end of the tunnel. This is Haghira Tower, the place by which they'd originally descended into the Catacombs. She had finally made it back to the surface.

They emerged into the blinding afternoon sun.

*Has it been that long?* Sakura thought. The First Trial had been the longest night of her life; she hadn't realized it was already day.

"Our time's almost up," Ino gasped. "Twenty four hours, right? It'll be sunset soon."

"The others will be here in a few minutes," said Sosano. "I gathered everyone except for the cloud-nins. They said they'd catch up later; unfinished business with Team Keel. I suggest you wait for them, while I find out what's happened on the surface." He gestured to a group of chuunin examiners crouching atop one of the ruined spires of Haghira Tower, watching them.

Ino collapsed against a crumbling gargoyle in the shape of a roaring lion, half its head missing. Sakura set herself down next to her. Sakura did not quite understand how Ino was still conscious. She didn't understand how she, Sakura, was still conscious. The chuunin exam key around her neck was glowing red, still draining whatever chakra she had left.

Sakura felt a shadow darken her own.

She turned, and saw that it was Bakura Orajuchi. The bat boy was standing behind her.

Orajuchi was staring at her. "You killed him," he said softly.

"What?"

"Chusei. You killed him. I saw it happen."

Sakura remembered. She remembered a desperate fight in an underground crypt, and Chusei trying to bash her skull in with a hammer. She remembered opening Three Gates and pummeling Chusei until he had crumbled into little stone pieces. "What was he to you?"

"Nobody." The bat boy shook his head. "My comrade. A shinobi of Iwagakure, like me. You killed him."

"It happens."
"You could've stopped him with a genjutsu. I thought... after what you did after the earthquake, saving Zeze's life. I thought you wanted to save people, instead of kill them. The way you did it... you tore off Chusei's throat with your teeth. You tried to drink his blood... I didn't know you were that kind of person, Sakura. You're... you're crazy."

Stop, Chusei had whispered to her. *Stop, you're killing me.*

All of a sudden Sakura felt more tired than she ever had in her life. Perhaps it was the effect of the Chakra Gates wearing off.

But Ino was there, shaking her fist at Orajuchi. "You shut your ugly face," she said. "Chusei started it, he was the one who attacked us. Sakura was defending herself. You don't know anything about her."

"That is most true," observed Sosano. Sakura had not heard him return. He smiled, eyes closing into arches. "I talked to the examiners. The earthquake didn't do much harm to the village, though there was some damage to a few old buildings. Director Doi survived. He's at the Overlook supervising the returning genin. There's a black Lock there. We must insert our keys into the Lock, and then we'll pass the First Trial. Ah." He turned to look at the entrance to the Catacombs. "The others are here."

And so they were.

Temari, carrying both Dee and rain-nin Kazuraki Matsudake on her back. Aumono, grimacing at a red gash all down his right side. The stone-nin Tenka Himoro, a stark white bone jutting from his upper arm where it had broken in half. The gangly mist-nin Tsunaga Kuina, holding something that looked like a lump of red coal. Sakura looked closer, and saw the lump was all that remained of the sand-nin Murakami Jueti.

*How many had died?* Sakura thought. *How many more would die?*

The Hokage's voice came to her again, as if in a dream, though it had not even been one day. "He's let his guard down. Let him do it." Sakura felt the chill in her sensei's voice. And then, she asked the Hokage. And then? The Hokage's dark eyes flashed. "And then? Sakura, you poor sweet fool, then you kill him."

*No*, she thought. *No more killing.*

No more killing, at least for this one day, or she might not ever sleep again.

The journey back to the Overlook was so easy that Sakura kept on expecting to be ambushed. But the ambush never came. Within minutes, they had returned to the white plaza called Uzaemo Square. There were crowds of people everywhere: spectators, chuunin examiners, medical personnel, other genin. At the center of it all was a metal Lock the color of ink, just like Sosano had said. Sakura turned her key in the Lock, and the red glow went out of it, and she felt the chakra drain stop.

"Congratulations, Haruno Sakura," said Director Haghira Doi. "You have passed the First Trial."

"Sister!" a voice called.

It was Kankuro.

The paint was smeared all over his face, and bruises and blood welled beneath. But elsewise he did not appear seriously hurt. Temari ran over to her little brother and hugged him so hard that she picked him right off his feet.
Sosano's teammate Haghira Geigin was there, too. Chouji, his round face ashen, was there. Anake was there. Erima and Tenshe of Team Tosuken. Neji and Rock Lee. All still alive.

Rock Lee was clutching at her arm, pleading with her. His dark eyes were wet with tears. "Sakura! Sakura, please."

"What is it?"

"Sakura, please… can you—or can the Hokage…"

At first she did not understand. Then she turned around, and saw them.

Shikamaru's face was drenched in blood, his hair a disheveled tangle of bloody knots. There were two shrouded bodies at his feet.

"Tenten… Asuma-sensei….. they're…"

Sakura knew what she would see, even before she peeled back the shrouds. Why couldn't Shikamaru say it? Tenten and Asuma-sama were dead. They were dead, and the First Trial was finally at an end. Sakura felt nothing except relief.
None Must Deny

The drizzle was neither warm nor cold. It fell over the gathered mourners, seeping into their uniforms, muffling the summer heat. Washing away the stink of disinfected death that rose from the coffins they'd come to see.

Sakura raised her face to the sky, and let the rain replace her tears.

It was early morning. The First Trial had ended three days ago; three days of numbness and exhaustion. Sakura could hardly remember what she had done. She had done a lot of sleeping in Kindness Hospital, for one thing. Honjo Micho, Konoha's Chief of Medicine, had told her that she'd nearly died. "I suppose that makes me luckier than some," Sakura replied.

Over fifty Konoha shinobi had died in the First Trial. Mostly genin, of course, but not all. Asuma and several other jounin had lost their lives, killed by the earthquake. The Hokage had sent them on a mission to infiltrate the First Trial, and they had returned as corpses.

One of the first things Sakura had done, when she'd woken up in the hospital, was to read the list of the names of the dead. She did not know most of them well. She'd chatted a little bit during the Embassy with Hyuuga Nyuka, Neji's younger cousin. She'd treated the twenty seven year old genin Hatsutori Yashi for a bruised ribcage. Once she'd went to Koharu Okazaki's father to borrow money. And Sakura had saved Akimichi Auni’s life, briefly, before the mist-nin monster Hoshigaki Makera murdered her in a cold black crypt. Sakura had barely ever said a word to the other people who had died.

Two of them, she knew far too well.

Imagawa Tenten's coffin was just like all the others. A rectangular black box, draped over with the green flag of Konoha. Rain fell down on the coffin from a gray sky. Drops of water pattered on the flag and slowly dripped down to the pavement. Sakura knew that everything that had been Tenten, everything that Tenten had ever said and done and dreamed, was now contained in that box. Sakura knew that, but she could not understand it. *Three days ago Tenten was alive. She was fighting with me over Rock Lee. What was Tenten, now?*

Maybe they were all wrong. Maybe Tenten had escaped, somehow, and maybe the coffin was really empty. A joke in very poor taste. Sakura wanted to rip open the lid of the coffin, find out what was really inside, but of course she could not.

Only Neji could. The boy stood next to Sakura, his blank eyes pulsing with the power of the Byakugan. The power to see through walls. He was looking right at Tenten's coffin.

Sakura wondered what he saw.

Not too far away from Tenten's coffin was another one. It looked identical, but Sakura knew it contained the corpse of Sarutobi Asuma. Asuma, the firstborn son of the Third Hokage. The sensei of Team Asuma. And the man who had saved her life, it seemed, so very long ago, in a forest that burned with Enshogan fire.

Ino was crying. She leaned on Shikamaru's shoulder as she did so. Shikamaru hugged her back tightly. Chouji had sunk to his knees, pounding his fists on the wet stone floor. Shimura Anake stood a little bit apart from the rest, staring into space. For once, even he seemed at a loss for words.

They were in the courtyard of the villa the Hokage had rented near Tsukai Gardens, where all the
non-genin members of the Konoha delegation lived. Dozens of flag-draped coffins lay in rows in the middle of the courtyard. Ordinarily, if this had been Konoha, there would have been a funeral ceremony, and the coffins would been interred in Madara military cemetery. But this was not Konoha. And so they were loading the bodies of the dead onto wagons, to bring them back to Konoha for a proper burial. Yamanaka Inoichi had volunteered to lead the caravan back. Sakura knew that Inoichi and Asuma had been close friends.

All of a sudden she felt very tired. Sakura closed her eyes.

"Sakura-chan," Rock Lee said to her then. "Sakura-chan, don't cry. It's not your fault. I know you couldn't save Tenten. It was my fault."

"Lee. Your fault?"

Lee's dark eyes were rimmed in red. He tried to smile, but could not quite bring himself to do it. "I shouldn't have left her. We were fighting, down in the cave, after the Mizuho fire started. A bunch of stone-nin were attacking us. We fought them off and they fled. I chased them. That was the last time I saw Tenten alive." His voice was as soft and gentle as the drizzle that fell down his face. "Later we found her crushed by a big rock. I couldn't... couldn't believe it. I never thought Tenten would die.... I thought that I would always be there for her. It was my fault."

Neji's voice was colder than Sakura had ever heard it. Cold as a frozen river... and beneath the ice, boiling anguish. Burning anger. "We both failed. We promised to protect each other, and we weren't strong enough. I wasn't strong enough."

"It's their fault," Chouji whispered. "The damn roaches. They did this. Asuma-sensei wouldn't have... I mean, they killed him. Even the earthquake was their fault. I... I hate Iwa. You know? I goddamn hate this fucking place. I wish they had died. The roaches should've died, instead of us."

"None of us should have died," said Ino. "All those kids, dead. All those people, dead. Dead in some stupid fucking test. For what?"

"For their country," a voice rang out.

They turned to look. It was the Fifth Hokage.

She strode up in their midst on a white horse. The rain was getting heavier now, soaking her clothing. The white Hokage dress uniform had become wraith-like; leached of color until it was pale and almost transparent. Yet Senju Tsunade's dark brown eyes had not lost any of their power. They flashed; they seemed to dance, and pierce through all who saw them.

"For their country," said the Hokage again. "For their village. For their duty as they understood it."

She was looking at Ino. Looking at all of them. A honor guard came trailing after the Hokage, also on horseback. The Hokage wheeled her stallion to the front of the gathered leaf-nins, before the wagons of the caravan piled up by the gates of the courtyard, before the coffins laid out in rows. Tsunade-sensei was surrounded by the dead.

"I would like to say a few words to you now. Three days ago, fifty seven of our comrades died during the First Trial of the Iwa chuunin exam. Among them were many of the most precious people to us. Our friends. Our teachers. Our brothers and sisters. Our sons and daughters. In such circumstances, it is altogether fitting and proper that we would ask hard questions of ourselves. We ask why these men and women died, and for what cause. What it is that we are fighting for, here, in Iwa? What is worth the loss of such precious life?"
"As for myself, I bear the burden of doubt as strongly as any of you. It was I who authorized the entry of these shinobi into the chūnin exam. It is who I ordered them on these missions. I did so in the terrible knowledge that some would not survive. If you must curse someone for their deaths, blame me. As the leader of Konoha I must take ultimate responsibility.

"And yet… and yet I believe that our fallen comrades knew exactly what they fought for. Perhaps they could have not have articulated the cause, if we had asked. Perhaps they would have doubted, as we do. Yet the truth of their death transcends all else. They fought for Konoha. They fought because we had asked them to fight, for the greater good of the village, and they could not betray us in good conscience. They fought because it was their duty.

"This is what we mean by the Will of Fire. This is the sacred covenant that we have made, each one of us. To fight for our friends. To fight for our family. To protect the village that is our home. Camaraderie, loyalty, and mutual sacrifice have always been the the way of the shinobi, and no honorable man or woman can repudiate this duty and accept from others help which they are not prepared to render in return. If the battle comes, great numbers may be relieved of their duty by death, but none must deny it as long as they live.

"I shall not whitewash this burden. There is a heavy price. The question for all of you, especially you young people who are the future of this village, is whether you are willing to pay that price. That is a question you must answer for yourselves. As your fallen comrades have, this day, for which we honor them. As heroes."

No one spoke. But Ino knelt, then, in the wet courtyard of this strange village in a faraway land. She knelt, and bowed her head, in submission and in mourning.

All of them knelt.

The honor guard began to load up the coffins onto the caravan wagons. Among them were the most eminent members of the United Countries Embassy: Hyuuga Hiashi, a member of the Konoha High Council. Dr. Honjo Micho, Konoha's Chief of Medicine and another member of the High Council. Sarutobi Inishu, Asuma's uncle and Field Commander of the Embassy. Akimichi Chouza, Chouji's father. And Yamanaka Inoichi, who was leading the military caravan back home. The leaders of the great clans of Konoha, paying homage to the dead.

After it was done, Senju Tsunade turned to Inoichi. "Return at all possible speed, Inoichi. We have need of you."

Ino's father bowed low. "I shall."

"Then open the gates."

The gates to the courtyard were made of solid steel and reinforced with seals to keep out noise and eavesdroppers; no doubt one of the main reasons the Hokage had chosen this location to reside in Iwa. Even so, there was a low murmuring coming from the other side of the gate. Sakura did not know what the murmuring was about, but it must have been very loud, to be able to leak through the closed gate.

When they opened the gates, a mob of protesters was screaming.

There were hundreds of them. They lined up against the walls, along the road that led out into the main avenues of Iwa. The villa gates were surrounded by angry, chanting crowds. Earth-kin, Sakura saw. Iwa villagers.
"Death to the Betrayer!" they shouted. "Death to the Betrayer! Death to the Fire Country! Death to the Fire Country!"

Iwa policemen in riot gear were out in the streets. They held back the mob, but only barely, especially when the mob caught sight of the leaf-nins inside the gates. The crowd surged forward, shouting curses, throwing trash and empty bottles and rocks. Incoherent rage disfigured their faces.

Sakura was bewildered. She did not understand where the mob had come from, or why it was here. An old Iwa woman in rags screamed of her dead son, killed in the Third Ninja War. A younger man abused the Hokage as a devil from the seventh hell, the earthquake of three days ago a sign of her demonic intent. Small children clambered atop each other, shouting "Death to Konoha! Death to Konoha! Death to all the apes! Death to the Betrayer! Death to the Betrayer!" The mob was a sea of human hatred, their shouts as loud as a thunderstorm. The horses of the caravan neighed in fear, unwilling to ride through the gates. The guards struggled to keep the wagons from overturning. Flag-draped coffins jostled and fell against each other in the uproar.

The Fifth Hokage made no more to intervene. Her Mass Binding genjutsu would've paralyzed the crowd in an instant, but she did nothing. Instead she only watched, silent on her white stallion. Her face was as pale as the limp wet hair that clung to the sides of her robes.

Yet there came another sound.

The sound was very familiar. It came from all around Sakura, like the most beautiful music.

What else?

It was the sound of bells.

The honor guard raised large silver bells in their hands, ringing them over and over. The funeral dirge tolled out across the distance. The sound was long and wailing and very deep. The music of the bells was so loud that it drowned out even the roar of the mob.

Yamanaka Inoichi raised his arm and thrust it forward.

The military caravan began to move out of the gates of the courtyard.

The funeral bells drained the energy out of the gathered protesters, though they did not disperse. The policeman pushed them back, clearing a narrow path for the wagons of the caravan. The caravan seemed like a small fleet of boats plowing through a roiling sea. Like a funeral procession through hell. The dirge of the silver bells had seen the procession safely off, but beyond the courtyard was nothing but hostile territory. A long journey lay ahead of them. Tenten and Asuma-sama and all their other comrades were dead, but they could not rest, not yet, not until they had traveled back to Konoha, to be buried in their native soil.

The last journey, thought Sakura. How many more of us will make it?

Sakura could just catch a glimpse of the back of the last wagon as it rolled out; the wagon, she knew, that contained the remains of Imagawa Tenten, proud kunoichi of Team Gai. Almost instantly it was surrounded by a swarm of still screaming protesters, cutting off the caravan from view. Only Hyuuga Neji could see it now. But Neji had already closed his eyes.

The guards wasted no time in locking shut the gates.

All was silence in the courtyard once again. There was only the sound of falling rain.
"None must deny," whispered Senju Tsunade, as if it were a prayer, and turned her horse away. Her next words were so quiet that Sakura scarcely heard them. "Not even me."
Most of the ninjas left the Hokage's villa as soon as the ceremony was over, dispersing back to their own lives, but not Sakura. Instead she found herself wandering in the rain. Garden paths wound through the heart of the villa. It was an expansive manse, covering over a hectare of Tsukai Garden's most desirable real estate, and there were endless nooks and crannies to get lost in. After a while she came to the small private courtyard where the Hokage had taught her how to use Amnesia. That had been less than a week ago, though it felt like much longer.

The First Trial had been the longest night of her life.

In the center of the grassy courtyard was the cherry tree, flush with the bright green leaves of the summer. A few withered cherry blossoms from the spring flowering still clung to the wet soil beneath. Sakura walked toward the tree, looking for the cuckoo that had been there, that the Hokage had whispered to as if they were old friends. But the small gray bird had flown away and never returned.

Sakura sat down under the cherry tree and let the rain drizzle slowly onto her face.

Yamanaka Ino found her there, in the nestle of the tree.

Ino's eyes were red and puffy, but there was a smile on her face, and a hint of familiar mischief on her lips. "Hey," she said. "Hey, are you pouting?"

"Ino." Sakura didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry."

"I know."

It was expected that they would hug, so they did. Sakura did not expect how warmly she would return Ino's embrace. Everything about the other girl was familiar: her touch, her mannerisms, her scent. She reminded Sakura of so many memories; of her childhood, the two of them growing up in Konoha together. For a moment, a long moment, she did not want to let go.

"Hey," said Ino. "Hey, you cactus, you're crushing my windpipe."

Sakura laughed. "Just so you'll stop gossiping about everything, once in a while."

"You know you love my gossip."

Sakura let go, suddenly guilty. "Ino," she started. "You're my best friend. You've... you've been good to me. Ever since we were little girls, you know? At the academy. After my dad died... you helped us so much. I know I haven't been the friend I should have been. I'm sorry I pushed you away. You were always there for me."

"Not always. Remember when we were fighting over Sasuke?"

Ino giggled, and Sakura could not help but laugh as well. It seemed so completely absurd now. For the good part of a year they'd quarreled like cats over who ought to get Sasuke. But of course Sakura had been assigned to Team 7, and they'd become a couple, and that had been the end of it. The end of it, in more ways than one.

"By the way... you're kind of cute together."
"What?"

"You and that stone-nin boy. You know, the one with the long ponytail and the magic sword and the glowing eyes? He's like, super hot. Even though he's a roach. Sougon Sosano… even his name is kind of dreamy, don'tcha think?"

"Ino!"

"Don't deny it, you cactus. I can see you blushing."

Sakura denied it hotly. "Look, we just met, okay? If you want him, you can have him."

"No, I can't." Ino smiled sadly then. The rain made a soft patter on the grass all around them, a strange ghostly sound. She pulled at her ponytail. "Sakura. I came to say goodbye."

Sakura was not as surprised as she might have been. "You're leaving. You're going back to Konoha, with the caravan."

"Chouji, too. Technically we're still part the exam, so we still have to quit. But I made my decision, this morning." She fingered her chuunin exam key; then, as Sakura watched, snapped it from her neck, and put it in Sakura's palm. For ten seconds they watched the key. For ten seconds it glowed a soft silver, still infused with Ino's chakra. And then it went dead and blank.

It was done. Yamanaka Ino was out of the chuunin exam.

You came all this way for nothing, Sakura thought. But that wasn't right, was it? Ino was returning to Konoha with the corpses of their fallen dead.

"Some of the other genin are thinking about quitting, too. My dad says we can catch up to him near Hiroshiki."

"What about Anake?"

"Anake wants to keep on going. Director Doi said it was okay, because of the earthquake which messed up the First Trial. Team Gai, you know… since Tenten died, they're missing a third member. Doi said Anake could fill in Tenten's spot."

Sakura nodded. "So they'll be in the Second Trial, too. Lee, and Neji. I guess they would be. Can I ask you a question?"

"You want to know why, right? Why I'm quitting the exam?"

"Yeah. Chouji… I mean, we know how Chouji is. I don't think he ever wanted to come to Iwa. Not really. But you're different, Ino. You didn't give up, even when all your chakra was gone. You made it. You were strong."

Soft rain dripped down Ino's face as she sat beneath the cherry tree in the Hokage's courtyard. "I was." Ino shook her head, wistful. "I think I proved something to myself, that night. I proved that I could do it, you know? I could be a kunoichi." She looked down at the grass. "And I think I discovered something, too. I discovered… I didn't really want to, Sakura. I didn't want to kill anybody."

Sakura remembered standing with Ino by a window in a hospital in Sunagakure, after the Battle of Red Rock Cliff. Ino's blue eyes had sparkled with curiosity. So tell me, you cactus, she'd asked. What does it feel like to kill a man? Now Ino knew. Ino had learned it during their final battle in the
Catacombs, she'd learned it when she took a rock and split open the mist-nin's head with it, saving Sakura's life. The top of the mist-nin's skull had cracked apart like an egg, and gooey gray brains came out of the hole like yolk.

Sakura looked away. "No one should be a ninja unless they want to."

"You don't think I'm weak? You don't think I'm a loser?"

"No." Against all expectations, to her surprise, Sakura realized that she was telling the truth. "I'll miss you."

"Hey, we made a pretty good team. Didn't we?"

"Yeah. You saved a lot of people down there, Ino. After the earthquake… I couldn't have done it without you."

"I always thought medicine was for people that weren't cut out to be in the field. You know. Well, maybe you didn't know. Since I just told you. But I was wrong. You've got be strong."

"It takes a different kind of strength." Sakura grasped Ino's meaning now. "It's not about swinging a kunai. It's about making decisions, over and over again, that will result in someone living or dying. I don't think Shikamaru can do it. Even though he's a genius. Even though he was a chuunin before any of us. Because Shikamaru likes to make plans, right? To manipulate people to get what he wants. He can't accept that there are some things you can't manipulate. That human bodies are what they are. That some people will always die. It's hard, to accept that."

"I talked to Dr. Micho-sama." Ino paused, fingering her ponytail. "Micho-sensei, maybe I should call him. He said I could become a doctor. But I don't have to be in the field, like him. I can earn my chuunin commission another way. I don't know."

A doctor. Sakura could only smile at the idea. "You would make a damn good doctor, Ino."

"I'll kick your ass." Ino's blue eyes were washed pale by the rain, as if behind a veil of mist. Her voice was plaintive. "I'll be a better medic-nin than you ever were. We're still rivals, aren't we?"

"Yeah."

"And best friends forever?"

"Forever."

Yamanaka Ino began to cry.

The sobs took her like she was possessed. Sakura could only open her arms, hold Ino as she cried, Ino's whole body wracked with grief. "It's not fair," the other girl whispered. "It's not fair, Sakura. Why did he have to die? It could've been anyone. Why Asuma-sensei? He… he was supposed to be there for us. We were gonna grow old together. Me and Shikamaru and Chouji and Asuma-sensei and maybe even Anake. It was all planned out. I was gonna set him up with Kurenai-sama, and Kurenai-sama would make him give up smoking because it was bad for his health. And then they'd get married, right? I was gonna dangle their baby girl on my knee and make her laugh, and teach her all her daddy's secrets. That was supposed to be our life. He wasn't supposed to die, Sakura. Not… not like this. Not ever like this, dying in some stupid earthquake. Why, Sakura. Why him?"

Sakura thought of Asuma, lying helpless and one-eyed in a storm of sand, the battle of Red Rock Cliff raging around them. She thought of Tenten. Tenten, her limp body floating in a pool of burning
Mizuho fire, daggers billowing through the water for her throat. *I saved both their lives.* But what was the point? What did it matter, when they had still ended up dead?

"I don't know," Sakura said.

They didn't say anything for a while, after that. Gradually the rain stopped. The sun came out from behind a cloud, flooding the world in brilliant summer light. A gentle wind blew from the White River to the north and rustled the branches of the cherry tree under which they sat. Little droplets of water fell from the wet leaves with a soft tinkling sound. Sakura thought it sounded a little like music.

"I hate it here," Ino said then. "Chouji was right. Those damn roaches. It's their fault, everything. I hate it here. I… I want to go home."

"Me too."

"But you're not, are you?" Ino hugged her so fiercely it hurt. "I'll miss you, Sakura. I'm so proud of you. Look at you, look how far you've come. You go win the chunnin exam, right? You cactus. You go kick everyone's ass."

"I will."

"Do you remember? Why I started calling you cactus?"

Sakura remembered. They had been learning how to grow plants with the other girls. The Ninja Academy often separated girls from boys, for separate training. Iruka-sensei had taken the boys to train with explosive tags, but the girls were doing housekeeping. Kunoichi had to learn how to be women, as well, their teachers insisted. Ino and her had been assigned to choose a plant to put on display. Sakura had suggested a cactus. She had a little cactus plant in her house, which her father had brought back from a mission. "Cactus, you're just like a cactus, so damn prickly and dry," Ino had cried out, giggling. "Let's do it!" They'd ended up painting the cactus yellow and giving it a pink hairdo. When the boys saw it, their eyes had almost fallen out. Naruto told Sakura it looked just like her, which had made her mad for days. Shikamaru scratched his head and coughed. Sasuke was smug. "You should be an artist, he told her, "not a ninja." "I'll be both," Sakura gave back, "don't you dare say any different, or I'll break your nose again." But Sasuke had only laughed. He'd laughed and laughed, and then he'd bought her ice cream. That had been the year her sister Kyoki was born, and that was the year that Sasuke's entire family had been slaughtered by his own brother, and Sakura had never heard him laugh like that again.

"I still have it," Sakura said. "The cactus. It's in my mom's room."

"Figures. Those things are hard to kill. I'll make sure to give it some water, when I get back to Konoha."

"Actually… maybe you should buy her flowers. Dandelions, from me."

"Of course." Ino stood up. "Well. I guess this is it."

They hugged one last time. Sakura did not hold back. "I'm sorry, about Asuma-sama. About everything. When my father died… I know how hard it is, how much the support of other people matter. I'll always be here for you, Ino. I promise."

_Fool_, a voice echoed inside her. *Don't make promises you can't keep."

"Goodbye, Sakura."
And then Ino was gone.

Sakura stayed in the courtyard for a bit longer. But the summer heat became oppressive soon enough, and the memories as well. Then she wandered out of the Hokage's villa, along the streets of Iwa, staying to the shadows to avoid confrontations with any Iwa protestors. She wandered all through the lively Shitamachi district, and then into the stately Aoyama as well. Every muscle in her body ached, the unavoidable aftereffect of opening three Chakra Gates during the First Trial. It was well past nightfall when she returned to the gated Zoo, and to her small room that stank faintly of monkey piss.

She was alone in the room, except for Tonton the pig. The Sand Siblings were not there. Perhaps to attend their own farewell to the dead, Sakura thought. Perhaps to do whatever it was that sand-nins did. A piece of her almost missed them. The events of the First Trial had changed their relationship, she realized. She did not dislike them so much, anymore. And I am no longer afraid of them. Sakura had been afraid, during the Konoha chuunin exam. She had been a scared little girl, and Temari with her hard sharp eyes, Kankuro with his painted demon face, had been trying their best to kill her. Perhaps the Sand Siblings had sensed her fear. Perhaps that was why they'd had such a rocky relationship, during the United Countries Embassy.

Or maybe they were scared of me, too.

She had never thought of it that way before. Could the Sand Siblings have been as afraid of her as she had been of them? Sakura had been a stranger to them. They didn't know her, they didn't know what she was capable of. They did not know why she had been chosen by the Hokage as the leader of the United Countries. But I am. I'm a kunoichi of Konoha, and I'm strong. I'm not going to let anyone stand in my way.

A memory seemed to come out of her, floating through the dark room like a ghost. It was so tangible she could almost touch it.

It was Sasuke.

The boy's beautiful face was pale as the moon, his breath hot mist in the winter air. He stood there, on a little wooden bridge over a frozen brook, his back half turned away, and when he looked at her, his eyes were as dark and cold as the night woods. "Don't leave," she told him. "I won't let you!"

But Sasuke had only caught her up, so gently. All she could do was cry. "Forget me, Sakura," he whispered, and then he struck the back of her neck.

Did that really happen? Sakura wondered. Was I really like that?

It seemed like it had happened so long ago. It seemed like only a distant memory.

So many memories.

They came upon her, one by one, like haunting wraiths. They came upon her all at once, blurring together in her exhausted, fevered mind. The journey into the Earth Country—stealing away from Hiroshiki in the night, to Deathtrap Mountain, to a tombstone in the middle of a starlit lake. A screaming burning crystal, the Hokage's eyes wet with tears. Entering Iwa, her family's letters, Sosano, Temari and Kankuro, the Overlook, the First Trial, hugging Ino beneath a cherry tree, Lee's face as he begged her to save Tenten's life. And then everything, everything that had happened, the Embassy, kites twisting in the blue sky of Red Rock Cliff, dawn rising over the Lighthouse, Maito Gai in the rain, demon fire burning a thousand faceless martyrs in the Asylum, dancing with Lee in a forgotten pool, the Grass Country, the River Country, the Waterfall Country, Ashwarren, a cute boy asking "Are you a ninja?", the trumpets blaring as the gates of Konoha opened to the world beyond,
Micho shouting "Get the Hokage!" as Asuma lay dying in a hospital, and a mission gone all wrong, a burning forest, cradling the bodiless head of the first man she had ever killed in her life. And then before, Sasuke holding her in his arms as they made love to each other, whispering sweet nothings, Naruto laughing, shouting, making a stupid joke, chasing her through a sunlit forest, Kakashi-sensei, Orochimaru, Gaara, the Konoha chuunin exam, the mission to the Wave Country, Zabuza, Haku in a pool of blood, graduating from the Ninja Academy, Sasuke running his fingers softly down her forehead, Ino laughing in a field of dandelions, Kyoki's bouncing pigtails, her mother's hair turning gray, and her father, her father with his pink scratchy beard, coughing and wheezing, wasting away day by day, until the end, until a gleaming funeral and a little girl who pounded on the coffin to ask for her daddy back but he did not answer, but the next time she watched a coffin go past she was not so little, and she did not cry, and she knew that Tenten and Asuma-sama would never come back, not ever. They were dead.

Who was that? she wondered. Who had done those things? And where had she gone?

Sakura felt nothing.

"You killed him," accused the bat boy Bakura Orajuchi.

"I had to," she protested. "He was trying to kill me."

"You tore off Chusei's throat with your teeth. You tried to drink his blood. You're crazy."

"No," Sakura shook her head, denying it. "No, it's not true."

"Cold," said Orajuchi, and then somehow the bat boy became Rock Lee, Rock Lee staring at her with his glassy black eyes. "You're so cold, Sakura. I was always there for you, but you threw me away like trash. You're such a bitch."

I'm not a bitch. Am I? She had never wanted to be.

Sakura had told the Hokage that, on Deathtrap Mountain. "I won't ever be like you. I promise." Fool, the Hokage said. The word echoed and echoed in the dark room. Fool. Fool. Fool.

FOOL.

Who am I? What have I become?

"It was fate that brought you here," whispered the ghost of Sougon Sosano.

"No," Sakura insisted. "No, we're enemies."

"Are we?"

Sosano's voice was a knife made from smoke, his body lean and strong and dangerous. He was only a ghost, a hallucination of memory, but she could smell him anyway, like the forest, like wet grass and ripe chestnuts and old knotted bark. When he kissed her, his lips were as warm as a summer night. How could I have fallen in love with you? Sakura wondered. And then suddenly the very thought made the feeling true. It's only been four days and he's the enemy, and I'm in love with him.

How could that be? Sakura didn't understand. She had only ever loved Sasuke. We grew up together. We were playing together before we could even walk. I knew him my whole life. But she hadn't known him, had she? Not really. She had chased Sasuke to a bridge over a frozen creek at the outskirts of Konoha, and he had told her she was a spring girl, and then he had left her. Until that moment, she had never believed that they could be apart. Would they ever see each other again?
The very question frightened her.

And then her mother was there.

Her mother, so insubstantial, so small, so pale and thin that Sakura could blow on her and she would disappear. Haruno Umeka used to be beautiful, once. Sakura had seen the pictures, she remembered. Her daddy had said that Haruno Umeka was the most beautiful woman in the world. Now she was a creature of gray hair and gaunt face, a shell of pale lips and thick glasses and drab clothes. Not a living person but a ghost. "How could you?" Sakura demanded of her. "How could you betray Daddy?" Her mother only giggled. "Your father's dead. You told me yourself, Sakura." No. Sakura shook her head. No, no. How could you do this to me? You were supposed to love my daddy, you were supposed to be a widow forever. Who the fuck is Ogata Shingo, Mom? How can he ever replace my father? Her mother laughed, bursting with girlish happiness. "Ogata Shingo was my old friend. I love him. You don't know how much I love him. Today he asked me to marry him and I said yes."

"No!" Sakura screamed. "No, no, no!"

She screamed and screamed, and then she fell to her knees and began to cry.

Tonton the pig came, waddling across the carpet to rub against Sakura's legs. Sakura held the fat pink pig tightly to her chest, grateful for any kind of company, human or otherwise. The room was dark and stuffy and full of ghosts. Once Sakura allowed the tears to flow down her face she could not stop them. She cried for Tenten. She cried for Asuma-sama. She cried for her father. She cried for everyone that had died. And she cried for who she had been, for that Sakura cried most of all.

And me, the girl I was. I'm dead, too.
The Sleeper and the Spinster

The Hokage showed up to the meeting late. Very late.

Which left the rest of them in charge of pacifying dozens of diplomats. Never an easy task, in any circumstances, and especially unpleasant today. Konoha had organized a meeting with all the Lesser Villages in the chuunin exam which had still not chosen sides, hoping to induce them to ally with the United Countries against the Confederacy. There were six participants: Dasutogakure, the hidden village of Dust. Chigakure, the hidden village of Blood. Joukigakure, the hidden village of Steam. Hyogakure, the hidden village of Glacier. Kusagakure, the hidden village of Grass. Kawagakure, the hidden village of River.

Unchiku Narumi of the hidden village of Wave had also been invited, but she had not showed up, either because the Wave Country was maintaining a policy of strict neutrality, or because Narumi was overcome with grief upon losing her entire genin team in the First Trial. Sakura thought she knew which.

Each of the other villages had sent a high-ranking delegation to this important meeting, and they were very upset that the Hokage did not properly honor them.

"Where is she?" demanded Ashuju Ikoma, the jounin representative of the hidden village of Dust. When he spoke, a soft whistling sound came out of the gaping black hole in his face where his nose should have been. Ikoma did not seem to notice. "This is an outrage!"

Hyuuga Hiashi glared at him. "Who are you to question the great Senju Tsunade, dust man?"

The head of the Hyuuga clan was one of the most powerful members of the Konoha High Council. Hiashi was not, however, known for his diplomatic tact.

"Please, let's all calm down," said Dr. Honjo Micho, the other member of the High Council in Iwagakure. His craggy, deeply lined face and gruff voice gave his words instant authority. "Perhaps you would care to eat some fruit?" There was a sumptuous platter of food arrayed before them, here in the Hokage's own private quarters, overlooking the landscaped beauty of Tsukai Gardens. "No doubt the Fifth has pressing matters to attend to."

"More pressing than me?"

"Don't take it personally," said Micho, laughing. In addition to his most considerable skills as a doctor, Micho Manslayer also moonlighted as a diplomat. "I recall when we were negotiating the Ashwarren Accords, in a meeting much like this. Tsunade was so late all the wine had been drunk before she got there, which certainly taught her a lesson, though not the one I thought." He stroked his bushy hair, smiling fondly. "The next time Tsunade was late to a meeting, she brought her own wine."

"You do have a way of instilling confidence in your leader," said Rouga Eneki the Nightingale, in pleasant musical tones. Yuu the Nightingale was a river-nin kunoichi by day, and a world-renowned singer by night.

"I am not asking you to have confidence in the Fifth. I am asking you to place your faith in the most powerful alliance in the world. You would be wise to join sooner rather than later, before we become even more powerful."

Rouga Eneki laughed lightly. A hundred tiny jade rings tinkled in her long, curled black hair. "Is that
"A threat?"

"Of course." Dr. Micho said the threat with a bright smile, so charming it felt almost like a compliment. "The United Countries charter has not yet taken effect. There is still an opportunity for each of you to become founding members, on an equal footing with the Fire Country itself. Together we will enjoy the benefits of free trade, increased economic investment, a common market for resources and technology… and a mutual defense pact, against any outside provocation. The benefits for those inside our community are limitless. Outsiders shall have nothing."

"Military protection from a power like Konoha is most agreeable," said Naemura Dakun—jounin of Joukigakure, the hidden village of Steam. "It is the other parts of this United Countries which worry me. Take this… United Council, with the power to make international law, as well as to call upon an army of peacekeepers. Would you have us give up our sovereignty?"

"Not at all. I would have you give up war. Yet if there is to be peace, an institution must exist to enforce it."

"Even so, a council with such broad powers is unacceptable," declared Ikenobo Zeami, called the Princess of Dragonflies. Zeami was the leader of the hidden village of Grass, one of the most powerful lesser villages, and her opinion would likely prove decisive in this meeting. "Strip the charter of this monstrosity, Calculator, and I will consider the rest carefully."

"The United Countries charter has already been ratified by three nations," replied Micho. "I have no authority to change its provisions. If you wish to do so, you must take it up with the Hokage herself."

"She is not here!" shouted Ashuju Ikoma, red-faced. "How dare the Queen of Torment prattle on about equality with the Lesser Villages, when she cannot even deign to meet with us?"

Dr. Honjo Micho rubbed his hands through his frazzled shock of white hair. He looked to be praying for deliverance.

A quiet voice suddenly spoke from the back of the room, so soft that everyone else strained to hear it. "It seems to me that we have all missed a step, yes?" The pale, milkglass eyes of Makoto Muro swept the room like a magnet, observing the other delegations, weighing their positions, calculating. The Warlord of Blood. Makoto Muro was the founder and leader of not only Chigakure, but the entire Blood Country itself. His words were slow and very precise. "What is the need for this… United Countries? Peace, you say. Yet the Ashwarren Accords have kept the peace for seventeen years."

"No longer." Honjo Micho looked at each of the gathered diplomats meaningfully. "Ladies and gentlemen, you must trust me when I tell you this. The Ashwarren Accords have failed. Now they must be replaced, or we shall be engulfed in a war like none the world has ever seen."

This last statement caused a stir.

Yet the Warlord of Blood did not even so much as blink. "If the Ashwarren Accords are failing, as you say, then the blame must lie at the feet of Senju Tsunade herself. It was her attempt to create the United Countries which led to the formation of the Confederacy in turn, to oppose her. Now antagonistic superpowers stretch across the world like two coiled snakes, and we lesser countries are caught in the middle. You would have us choose between one power or the other, and threaten us with destruction if we do not comply. It is an impossible choice."

Honjo Micho laughed. "A clever trick, Lord Muro. In one rhetorical flourish you conflate the United Countries with the Confederacy, damning them both. Yet the two could not be more different. When
the sheep join together to protect themselves from wolves, and the wolves join together in a pack and attack, who is the aggressor? The sheep, or the wolves?"

"The world shall always have wolves." Makoto Muro smiled, pale eyes glistening. "I should know."

Micho opened his mouth, and would have said more, but just then the door slammed open, and Senju Tsunade came walking through. The Hokage looked like she'd accidentally swallowed a beetle.

"I am sorry for my absence," she said curtly. "Konoha has another pressing matter to attend to, and I must request the presence of my two High Council members in that matter as well. As for this discussion, we shall reconvene at another time. Good day, sirs."

Cries of outrage greeted this declaration, but that was nothing new.

Then the Hokage was sweeping out of the room again, white robes billowing behind her. Honjo Micho and Hyuuga Hiashi followed closely behind, and Sakura tagged along as well. Tsunade led them into an empty conference room on the other side of the villa.

"What happened?" Dr. Honjo Micho asked.

Tsunade only looked behind her, a grimace of distaste twisting her mouth.

A very old woman limped into the room, half-bent over a wooden walking stick. Sakura knew her as Koharu Utatane, one of the members of the Konoha High Council. *The Sleeper*. She was the longest-reigning member of the Konoha High Council, and yet by far the most quiet; a potted plant ornamenting the deliberations of the men of state. It was said that Utatane had never in her life went against the vote of Shimura Danzou, and Sarutobi Hiruzen before him.

Yet when the old decrepit woman looked at her with her hard, startlingly clear eyes, Sakura felt a chill go through her.

"Utatane-san," said Micho gruffly. "What a pleasant surprise."

"You are as poor a liar as you are a hair stylist, Micho."

Hyuuga Hiashi glared at her. "I thought the Fifth banned you from the United Countries Embassy."

"She did. The High Council overruled her. I am here to oversee the Council's will."

"Chief Micho and I are already representing the Council."

"The task of overseeing Tsunade's negotiations in Iwa is too important to be left to her lickspittles."

"As you are a creature of Danzou the Termite?"

"Enough," said the Hokage brusquely. Her voice dripped with ice. "If your arrival in Iwa is a vote of no confidence in my leadership, Utatane, then say so."

"It is not. Sadly." The old woman seemed most wroth. "The Council only wishes for all parties in Konoha to be represented in these delicate negotiations. Including ROOT."

*ROOT?* Sakura was troubled. She'd heard many rumors about ROOT, the secretive shadow division of ANBU led by Shimura Danzou, but Tsunade-sensei had never much wanted to discuss that topic with her. The enmity between the Hokage and ROOT, and thus Danzou, was well known. The Hokage had even go so far as to personally ban any known ROOT operatives from the Embassy.
Tsunade-sensei doesn't trust anyone in ROOT. She doesn't want them in Iwa.

But all of that had changed, now.

Dozens of Konoha ninja filed into the conference room after Koharu Utatane. How many operatives had Utatane brought to Iwa with her? Most hid their faces behind porcelain ANBU masks, but those who did not were all known to Sakura; ninja of rank and reputation, every one. Were they all a part of ROOT? She was startled to see the scarred face of Morino Ibiki step into the room and stand at Utatane’s side.

Maybe it should not have surprised her that Ibiki was working with ROOT. Morino Ibiki was chief of the Konoha Intelligence Division, and its most skilled interrogator. Such a person would be most suited to the sort of work that ROOT was rumored to carry out.

A shadow passed across Honjo Micho's weathered face when he saw Ibiki. "You brought him?"

"You do not have to like me, Micho-sama," said Ibiki. The tall dark man grinned then, the deep scars on his face making his smile positively grotesque. "You only have to accept the information which I can provide to you. Information that you desperately need."

"You've made a complete hash of things, Tsunade," Koharu Utatane declared. "You've been in the Earth Country for weeks and accomplished absolutely nothing."

"Forcing me to cancel my summit with the Lesser Villages does not help."

"Lesser Villages? Put all those dinky dumps together and they could not fill up even one slum of Konoha. The key is the Lightning Country. We must have Kumo on our side, and soon."

"The Raikage is slow to make alliances."

"That is because you do not have anything to offer him. An offer he cannot refuse. Where is the Annihilation Device?"

"I don't know."

"The damn thing just caused an earthquake in this very village. No leads at all?"

"No."

Koharu Utatane sighed dramatically, each wrinkle on her face folding and refolding itself. "Unsurprising, when you spend so your time playing at this misguided United Countries venture. And grooming your genin pets." Utatane stared at Sakura from the corner of her eyes. They were light gray, and very cold. "These games belie the real mission. The mission that you were ordered to carry out by the High Council."

"And you'd like to help, is that it?"

The dreadful old woman smiled. "That's what Ibiki is here for."

Tsunade's jaw worked. "You're interfering into a situation with which you have no understanding."

"What understanding is required? Find the Annihilation Device. Steal it if possible, destroy it as a last resort. Above all, do not let the stone-nins get their hands on the damn bomb, or the world will end. Simple enough to me." Utatane rapped her walking stick on the conference room table with a loud smack. "But then, I do not delude myself. I don't pretend I can create peace on earth with some
pieces of paper. My men and I are here do the real work, as we have always done. Ibiki?"

Ibiki reached into the black trenchcoat he wore habitually, pulling out a scroll. "This contains all the data ROOT has currently gathered about the location of the Annihilation Device," he said. "We do have leads."

Tsunade took the scroll without comment. "Just stay out of my way, Utatane."

"And you'll stay out of ours?"

The Hokage didn't answer.

"That's what I thought." Konoha Utatane the Sleeper turned away, leaning on her stick. "Well, this meeting is at an end, I think. Oh, one last thing. My condolences for the loss of Sarutobi Asuma. Hiruzen always loved him the best of all his children, you know. Asuma died proudly in the service of Konoha." The decrepit old crone shook her head. "I only wish he'd died for a better Hokage."

"Get out!" Tsunade shouted in a fury.

They left.

Afterwards, the Hokage was too angry to speak coherently. "Damn them all to hell," she muttered. She damned Utatane then, and Morino Ibiki. She damned Danzou the Termite. She damned that incompetent one-eyed wonder Kakashi, who was supposed to keep the High Council from screwing things up back in Konoha but had obviously failed miserably at his task. She damned Hyuuga Hiashi and Honjo Micho, who had done nothing wrong except to be present for the preceding conversation.

She damned Sakura for standing there in the corner like an idiot, and then she kicked all of them out.

"Tsunade-sensei's in a bad mood," Sakura observed as they walked out of the villa.

"Aye," said Dr. Micho. The Chief of Medicine scratched at his head, an oddly endearing gesture in such a dignified man. "She ought to be. ROOT is nothing but trouble."

"Why?"

"Don't get me started. Well, first, I suppose because the appearance of a Konoha faction opposed to the United Countries can only weaken our negotiating position. And second because ROOT is… extreme in its methods."

"You mean assassination and kidnapping. And torture."

All forms of torture had been expressly outlawed by the Fifth Hokage upon her ascension to power. However, ROOT operated largely beyond the law. That was the entire point of ROOT.

"Yes." Micho frowned. "As medic-nins, we are bound by oath to heal the wounded, to care for the sick and helpless. Thus, the methods of ROOT are especially abhorrent to us."

This was not strictly true, to be sure. The most infamous torturer in history, Arakida Moritake the Confessor, had been a medic-nin, precisely because of his vast knowledge of the human body. But Sakura could not disagree with the spirit of Micho's remarks. "What's the Hokage going to do?"

"I've no idea. Probably nothing. To move against the Sleeper would be tantamount to moving against Danzou himself. She dare not do that when she is in Iwa, half a world away from Konoha. But… Tsunade is a gambler. And ROOT could very destroy all our plans here. So who knows?" The gruff
doctor smiled, his glasses gleaming in the bright noon sun. "By the way, I have a mission for you."

The abrupt change of topic left Sakura spinning. "What?"

"You remember Nobunaga Kikuko the Spinster? You met her during the dinner at the Overlook."

_The Spinster._ The old flamboyant hag had tried to hit on her, Sakura remembered. Kikuko had been perfectly ridiculous, a dirty old woman with a dirtier mouth, so ugly that Koharu Uatatane could pass for a fashion model by comparison. Even now, it was hard to believe that Kikuko could truly be one of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist and, some said, the strongest kunoichi in the world… though Tsunade would have something to say about that.

"What's the mission? Does the Hokage want me to spy on Kikuko?"

"Er… actually, the mission is from Kikuko herself. One of her students brought around a message earlier in the day. Kikuko says that she needs you to help her. Very important, top secret, et cetera."

Sakura was bewildered. "About what?"

"I've no idea." Micho's bushy white eyebrows wriggled in amusement. "But Kikuko the Spinster represents a faction of Kiri that is unaligned with the Confederacy. She may want to use you as an intermediary to Tsunade to sound out an alliance. I've had many dealings with Kikuko in the past, and I think we can trust her. Plus, this mission sounds like fun."

"Fun?"

"She seemed quite fond of you, no?"

By the time Sakura arrived at Nobunaga Kikuko's residence, she was feeling very creeped out, and wondering just how fond of her Kikuko was. The mist-nin delegation was staying in a compound by the Aoyama district, right by the southern waterfront along the sediment-rich Yellow River. Kikuko herself was staying in a large ramshackle houseboat, literally floating in the river and tethered to land only by a plank of wood. An active smokestack rose from the center of the houseboat, belching black coal smoke. Sakura could hear the sound of a steam engine burning inside, and scampering footsteps, and loud girlish voices. She knocked on the door, half-expecting some kind of ambush.

Touin Yukari poked her head out the door. "_Told you_ she'd be the first one here," the mist-nin girl shouted back into the house. "I win!" Groans erupted behind her. Yukari turned back to Sakura, squinting at her with fierce, tomcat blue eyes. Her shaved white head was like an egg. "Well? Get your butt in here."

Sakura obliged.

Two other girls dressed in the light blue mesh uniforms of mist-nin genin were lounging in the lobby of the houseboat. The other members of Team Kikuko, Sakura recognized. She greeted Tsunaga Kuina warmly. She'd worked together with Kuina during the First Trial, after the earthquake, to heal dozens of wounded genin. Kuina was a competent medic-nin and highly skilled at repairing trauma wounds. Sakura hadn't noticed much else about the girl, to be honest; both of them had been far too busy doing desperate medical triage.

Now, however, Kuina was blushing. Red ran down her entire face and across her neck. "Sa—Sakura—you're so… I—I mean…" she stammered, tripping over her words. The tall, gangly girl stared into Sakura's eyes and looked like she was going to faint.

"She means hi," said Yukari.
Sweet Sage of Six Paths, Sakura thought. It was well known that the Spinster had assembled her own team of lesbians. But Sakura hadn't expected something quite like this. Aren't there enough love triangles in the world already?

The third member of Team Kikuko was Unchiku Onome. Sakura had barely seen her before, yet she recognized her nonetheless. And not just from her databook picture.

Onome looked very much like Nonou, her cousin.

The same frazzled red hair, the same round green eyes, the same freckles. The same determined smile.

From what Sakura understood, the Unchiku clan had been an important clan in Kirigakure for generations, until it was decided that Kiri would help build a satellite village in the nearby Wave Country following the attack of Zabuza the Bonebreaker there. The head of the Unchiku clan, Uchiku Sarashina, called Sarashina Seashell, had left to found the new hidden village of Waves. Most of the clan members had went with her, but some had stayed behind in Kiri. Unchiku Onome was one of those who stayed.

"Sakura," Onome said, clasping her hand. "Kuina told me about Nonou. About how you tried to save her."

Sakura pictured Onome lying in a bed of blood, red liquid seeping out of every pore in her body in pulsing waves. Onome, dying, because her blood had been changed. Onome dying like Nonou had died before her, blood welling from beneath her wide green eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It wasn't you, it was Onira Kawai of Waterfall. I'll kill him myself."

"Sakura!" a raspy voice boomed out from further in the creaking houseboat, cackling. "My beautiful child! Come, come, join us!"

Nobunaga Kikuko the Spinster was dressed in a frilly orange gown this time, looking more like a wizened grandmother than she did one of the legendary Seven Swordsmen. In truth, she was both. Kikuko sat in a rocking chair in the central living room of the steamship turned houseboat, with a window view of the Sakaicho district across the Yellow River, and in her lap was a half-completed embroidery piece. Some kind of hat. Kikuko was deftly running a long red needle into the hat, sewing a flower pattern. Something about that needle made Sakura pause suddenly. She looked closer…

Red Needle?

Sakura's jaw dropped open. "Is… is that—"

"Oh, yes. Good eye, Sakura. This is Red Needle." She held up the long thin sewing needle, covered in red stains.

Red Needle was one of the legendary swords of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist. One of the most infamous weapons in shinobi history. When combined with razor-sharp wire string, Red Needle could pierce a hundred men through the heart at once and then stitch their corpses together with a single tug. Thus Kikuko's epithet, the Spinster. The red stains on its surface came from all the blood of the enemies that it had killed. "You—you're using it to sew a hat," Sakura stammered.

"What are you supposed to use needles for, I ask you? Can't kill people every day. Well, I suppose
you could. Be that as it may."

"Grandma's retired." Yukari explained.

"Exactly, dear." The Spinster put her embroidery piece aside, holding her hands in her lap and sitting back in her rocking chair, looking most satisfied. "Where's my pipe? I need a smoke. Would you like a taste of cinnamon cloves, beautiful Sakura? The best an old rich woman can buy."

"No thanks."

Tsunaga Kuina put in a word. "Or—or t—tea… maybe… I—I can make it…"


"Yes, Kikuko-sensei!"

Kuina scurried off, her face burning. If a person could die from embarrassment, she would have.

"Oh, my. Those teenage hormones. They cause half the world's troubles, I tell you." Kikuko sighed dramatically. "Well, Sakura? How does it feel?"

"Feel to be what?"

"To be trapped on a boat with a bunch of gorgeous dykes, of course!" Kikuko spread her arms wide, gesturing to herself, Yukari, and Onome.

"It's fine." Sakura looked at the old hag suspiciously. "This… this isn't the mission you wanted me for, is it?"

The Spinster waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, that can wait. First, we must talk about you." She rocked back and forth in her chair, the creaking sound mixing with the noise of the steam engine in the boiler room beneath them. A chimney ran straight through the center of the room, and it made the room almost uncomfortably hot. "Sweet Sakura. The rumors say you are the most beautiful girl in the world… and they are not far from the truth. Tell me. Do you like girls? In a romantic way?"

Unchiku Onome giggled, covering her mouth in an oddly feminine gesture. Touin Yukari crossed her scrawny arms under her chest that was flat as a boy, and glared impatiently.

"I… I don't think so."

"Ah. Too bad. You'll break our dear Kuina's heart."

"Her heart breaks all the time, Grandma," said Yukari. "She'll get over it."

"My granddaughter takes after her grandfather, I do believe. An uptight icicle of man, just like his frozen Hyoton bloodline. Though most skilled in the arts of love." Kikuko smiled fondly. "I have intimately known both men and women in my time, though my husband was the only man I ever loved, truly. Women are far more… complicated. And therefore much more interesting. Are you aware how many kunoichi are drawn to others of the same sex, Sakura?"

Sakura was feeling a bit uncomfortable, and not just because of the heat. "It's pretty common, isn't it? The lifestyle of the shinobi isn't exactly the most feminine."

"Feminine. A fascinating concept. What is feminine? Shopping for the perfect outfit? Giggling over gossip? Doing housekeeping? Onome over here is obsessed with all these things. Yet Onome is a
most confirmed homosexual, as well as a fine kunoichi. Now, Sakura. They say you are a genius. What is the connection between these three things, in your opinion?"

"Well… traditionally, dating back to the days of the Birthright Empire and probably back further, there were fixed gender roles for men and women. So men were supposed to, for example, go into battle to protect their country. That was considered masculine. And women were supposed to manage the household, take care of children, and so on. That was feminine. When the Sage of Six Paths came five hundred years ago and converted the world to Kiyome, a religion which preached equality among different kinds of people, those traditional gender barriers began to break down. Women were gradually accepted as warriors in their own right. Shinobi women have played an important role since the beginning of the hidden village era."

"Important, yes. But not dominant—be that as it may. What of homosexuality?"

"Homosexuality is a transgression of traditional gender roles, too. It's connected with the emergence of kunoichi in the sense that many of the pioneering women warriors were also lesbians. I suppose it's a little different today. Because kunoichi are more common now, so there's less stereotyping associated with it, and anyone can choose to be a ninja and still identify as a heterosexual, and a feminine woman. And lesbians can also choose to play traditional feminine roles, if they want to. People are more free to pick up different bits and pieces to construct their own individual lifestyles. That's not to say the old prejudices have disappeared."

"Very good, Sakura. Your intelligence is surpassed only by your beauty." Kikuko leaned gently forward to brush Sakura's cheek with her dry wrinkled hand. "Though I'd like to add one thought to your analysis. We kunoichi are attracted to other women… because women are men with the useless bits cut off!" She cackled loudly.

Just then Kuina came back with a teapot and a tray of teapots, as well as Kikuko's smoking pipe. The steaming black tea was delicious, Sakura had to admit. Sakura said so. Kuina blushed, bowing her gangly body. She looked a little bit like a crane pecking at fish in the river.

"By the way, Uzumaki Naruto has a message for you," said Kikuko casually.

"Naruto?"

"That's what I said. They recently stopped by in Kiri, you know. Naruto and that lecherous frog-eating sensei of his. Stirred up quite a lot of trouble." Kikuko's voice was made even reedier by the pipe smoke she sucked into her throat. Thick smoke floating out her nostrils and curled in the air. "Chasing some pirate lord that stole Jiraiya-kun's Icha Icha drawings, or something like that. Managed to get the whole Water Country involved in their ridiculous escapades. Hah! Two idiots in motley. I don't even know how they're still alive. What kind of shinobi wears an orange suit? Almost got the fool killed, and serves him right. Only his little boyfriend saved him."

"His boyfriend?" Sakura interrupted.

"Oh, yes. Seems the loudmouthed brat got himself into a fling with the pirate lord's teenage son. Shipwrecked in the ocean, eaten by a whale, et cetera. They were so cute together, truly. A sweet spring romance. Too bad the Mizukage booted the two apes out of the country… what's your problem, girl? Didn't you know Naruto was gay?"

"She really didn't know," Onome said, green eyes wide as saucers.

"I told you," said Yukari.
Sakura was more than a little shocked. She had always thought Naruto had a crush on her. But she hadn’t had time for him, she been in love with Sasuke… and then a disturbing thought pulled her up short. Sasuke. No, could it be? Could Naruto… could Naruto have wanted Sasuke, and not her? The idea made a kind of twisted sense. It certainly explained the boy’s obsession with bringing Sasuke back to the village. No, there was nothing overt. But looking back certain things became highly suggestive—spying on Sasuke as he slept, his bizarre flusterings whenever Sasuke touched him… if Naruto was gay, if he really liked boys, then it all fit together. All the other girls had been in love with Sasuke as well, why not Naruto?

She had never noticed. Had Sasuke realized, or Kakashi-sensei? They had never said anything. God, Naruto, you must have been jealous. Seeing Sasuke and her, together all the time, touching, kissing. They’d never bothered to hide it, why would they? Sakura wanted to giggle from the ridiculousness of it all. Naruto, I’m sorry, I didn’t know.

Sakura wondered who Naruto’s pirate boyfriend had been. She wondered where Naruto was now. She missed him.

"I… I’m happy for him," she said. "What’s the message Naruto sent me?"

"Not a very long one." Kikuko cleared her throat dramatically. "He said never touch his stuff in his apartment, or when he became Hokage he’d make you buy him a new one. And to tell him if Sasuke ever came back to the village."

Sakura facepalmed.

Why did I ever expect anything different?

There was a knock at the door.

Kikuko clapped her hands. "Ah! That must be our second guest. Please, Yukari, show him in!"

"Guest?" Sakura asked.

"You didn't forget about the mission, did you? My top secret, very important, special mission? I was waiting for the second member of the team to arrive. Right on schedule, I think!"

Sakura turned to the entrance, expecting to see some kind of badass mist-nin, or perhaps a lesbian that Kikuko was trying to set up her up with, or something.

Instead it was a stone-nin boy in gray robes.

"Sosano?"

He bowed to her. "I see you, Sakura. What an unexpected pleasure."

Sakura rounded on Kikuko, head spinning. "What's this about, Spinster?"

"Oh, it's a disaster." Nobunaga Kikuko smiled sweetly, a puff of cinnamon smoke curling between her rotten teeth. "I lost my cat. Can you two find her for me? It's such an important mission. She must be frightened out of her whiskers, the poor thing. Her name is Compass."

"Your cat?" Sakura cried out in disbelief.

Sosano only laughed. "We'd be honored to accept this mission, Kikuko-sama."
"I knew I could count on you. Now, go, both of you." The legendary kunoichi made a shooing motion with her hands, pushing them out the door of the houseboat. She cackled. "Have a good time now!"
"This is utterly ridiculous," Sakura complained.

"For a certainty," agreed Sosano, smiling.

"Kikuko lied. A cat? What's so important and top-secret about a cat?"

"That remains to be seen." Sosano was crawling under a bush in Tsukai Gardens, calling softly, hey, kitty. Here, kitty, that's a good kitty. Come out now, Compass. Where are ya, Compass? Good kitty, good kitty. There was no response from the bush, which did not seem to faze Sosano in the slightest. "Recall the lesson of the First Trial. A ninja must look beneath the surface."

"If you look any harder beneath that bush, you're going to start fertilizing it."

Sosano straightened up, brushing the dirt off his robes. "Compass is not under this bush," he declared.

It was no surprise that Nobunaga Kikuko the Spinster had named her cat after an instrument that used a needle—a tiny, very hard to find needle. They'd been searching all over Iwa for half the day, and were no closer to finding the damn cat than when they started. Sakura sighed. "This is a complete waste of time."

"Oh, I think it is not a total waste." Sosano smiled, eyes bending into slender arches. "We can get to know each other better, for instance."

No wonder the stone-nin boy was in such a good mood. That had been his goal all along, to hit on her. And mine? Sakura could not quite stop the flush that crept down her cheeks. "Did you put Kikuko up to this?" she demanded.

"I fear not. Kikuko-sama is a fine matchmaker all by herself."

Sakura threw up her hands in disgust.

Sosano's laugh was soft as smoke. "Tell me, Sakura. What do you think the Spinster intends by putting us on this mission?"

"I've no idea. The old hag has nothing better to do." Sakura remembered something Yukari had said. "She's retired."

"Is she now?" Sosano walked closer. Sakura could smell his scent, like grass after a rain. "Nobunaga Kikuko is famed the world over for the precision of her strikes. In battle, not a single wasted movement. It is said that when she decides to attack, no matter how small the target, she has never missed. Only such a person is worthy to hold the legendary sword Red Needle."

"You think she wants to sew us together."

"Yes. In more ways than one."

As allies, you mean. "Kikuko thinks that Konoha and Iwa can be friends. Or they should be, anyway."

A sly smile played on Sosano's lips. "Ah. I know what we can do."
"Tell your father to join the United Countries?"

"I meant about finding the cat." He bit his thumb to draw blood and then pressed the palm down on the grass of Tsukai Gardens. *A summoning jutsu*. There was a puff of white smoke, and then suddenly a young white-tailed deer was standing between them.

"My pet deer," Sosano explained. "Her name is Teru."

Teru was a pretty little thing, with a coat of soft brown fur dotted with white spots, long elegant ears, and inquisitive black eyes. She also had an attitude. "Who is that?" the deer demanded, looking askance at Sakura.

"This is Sakura. The most lovely girl in all the world."

"Oh, yeah? How many times did you say that before, to different girls? I lost count."

"Teru, please!"

Sakura had to giggle. "You ought to train your pet better, Sosa."

That only brought the wrath of the deer Teru down on her. "And as for you, young lady, I don't like the look of you. A leaf-nin, eh? I don't think that kind of relationship will work out long-term, in my experience. A fling, maybe? My Sosa has a sad weakness for flings." She sniffed at Sakura's hair. "You smell like monkey droppings, by the way."

Sosano patted the deer's head. "Teru likes to speak her mind," he said, fondly.

"We are not in a relationship," Sakura pointed out.

"That's what they all say," said the doe, raising her white tail archly. Teru turned back to Sosano, nuzzling at his face with her soft wet nose. "So, now that you have my seal of approval for your new girlfriend… what are you planning to do with me? Going to unsummon me back to the Scar, never to see my dear Sosa again? You never spend time with me anymore."

"Sorry. I've been busy."

"That's what they all say, too."

Sosano looked at Sakura and held his hands up in a gesture of helplessness, grinning. He cuddled the deer, stroking her flanks gently. "Let me make it up to you, Teru. I need your help."

"Oh, Sosa. You know I'll always help you."

The doe's sarcasm suddenly vanished, replaced by an almost pathetic sincerity. Sakura rolled her eyes. So who wants to be in a relationship with who, exactly?

"I need to find a cat," explained Sosano, waving around a ball of yarn he'd pilfered from Kikuko's place. "You should be able to pick the scent off this."

"A cat? Are you replacing me with a cat?"

"It's not mine."

"Oh, good. Such uncivilized creatures. Always slinking off without even the decency to let those who love them know where they've gone." Teru sniffed at the ball of yarn, gloriously disdainful. "Not even caring how much they make everybody worry. Selfish bastards, really."
Sakura suspected Teru was not just talking about cats. Sosano coughed. "Teru, this jealousy is unbecoming. What will our guest think?"

"She can think what she bloody wants. Just like you, eh?" Teru licked at Sosano's hand playfully. "I missed you."

"Me too. Why don't you stay around for a while? You can sleep in my bed, like we used to."

"I knew you liked me." Teru arched her slender neck and turned to look at Sakura significantly. If a deer could smile with great satisfaction, Teru would have. Her ears swiveled this way and that. "All right, Sosa, I found your lost cat. Left a trail of kitty piss over half the village. Follow me." She started to trot across the grass, the path taking her right past Sakura. "You be careful now, young lady," Teru declared in a little singsong deer voice, as if giving Sakura a piece of friendly advice. "You can't tell by looking at him, but my Sosa is very high maintenance."

Afterward, as Teru led them across the Shitamachi district, Sakura asked Sosano, "So how did, uh, Teru become your pet?"

"Surprised?" Sosano grinned. "Teru and I grew up together. My grandfather, Onoki of the Third Light, was very fond of deer, as was my mother. They were the family pets of the Sougon clan. Teru was given to me as a baby when we were both only a few days old. She was my pet and my friend and my sister. I can't count the number of times I'd ride her around Iwa, laughing and doing naughty things, or journey together into the Scar, to visit the other deer in the Valley of Spears. We had no secrets from each other. Later, as we got older, and after my father became the Tsuchikage, I began to go on shinobi missions, so I didn't have time for Teru like I used to. Semele—that's my little sister—she would play with Teru instead, and of course Teru loved her too, but it wasn't the same. Teru and I have a bond as strong as the Overlook itself."

"You just seem… different, is all."

"Not as different as it might appear. It is only that Teru knows me too well."

"What do you mean?"

"Teru is never afraid of me." Sougon Sosano turned his dark face toward her. The boy's pupils shone bright, like black river rocks in the sun, and his fine elegant mouth curved in amusement. "Of me, or my family."

"Are many people afraid of you?"

"It is human nature to fear what you don't understand."

Sakura remembered the Annihilation Device, a terrible shrieking womb that contained within it the power to destroy worlds. She remembered a man in a burning forest, stretching out his palm toward her, and how his eyes had turned to golden flames.

"Not me."

"No. You're curious. You seek to learn, to become stronger. That is human nature as well."

The deer Teru turned onto a broad avenue, cluttered with people and shops. This was the heart of Iwa's Shitamachi district, Sakura knew. Shitamachi was the village's main entertainment district, and the center of its distinctive Floating World culture. It was a fine place to go for a stroll, with the foaming rapids of the White River to the north, and the serene Tsukai Gardens to the south. At this time of day crowds of well-dressed people flitted from shop to shop, or sat outside restaurants, eating
fried seafood and rice cakes, buzzing with talk and careless laughter.

There was no sign that three grass-nins had been murdered here, a few nights ago. *It's as if the First Trial never happened.*

As they neared the Slug Gate, the northern entrance to Iwa across the White River, Teru slowed to sniff in front of a tall red gate, gaudily painted with pictures of scantily-clad women. Beyond the gate lay a long row of palatial estates, each one more opulent than the last. "The cat went this way," Teru announced.

Sakura giggled. "The Street of Beggars?"

The Street of Beggars was an infamous street of high-end brothels. It was said that the geishas here were so expensive that they would make even a rich man a beggar, thus the name.

"It's our most popular attraction." Sosano pointed. "Ah. There."

"Kikuko's cat?"

"Inaho's Teahouse. The finest tea in the world."

Sakura followed the direction of Sosano's hand. The teahouse was a little ramshackle shop of wood and bamboo, barely a smudge compared to the great brothels at either side of it. "A strange location for a teahouse."

"Not at all. The Street of Beggars is the very embodiment of Floating World culture. Here, we come to celebrate pleasure in all its forms, whether it be the touch of a geisha, or the masked drama of a Noh play, or a cup of fine tea. As the philosophy of the Floating World originated in the teahouses of Sawara during the last years of the Age of Blood, so it survives today in Iwa, and nowhere with more elegance than at Inaho Teahouse." Sosano smiled at her. "Come, I shall show you."

Sakura followed Sosano in, Teru trailing behind them. Sakura had read about traditional Earth tea ceremonies, and had expected something quite elaborate: a landscaped garden, highly stylized rooms with long straw mats, a complex long ritual of tea-making. But Inaho Teahouse seemed more like a coffeehouse than anything else. Sosano sat down at a table by the window, ordering a kettle of fermented dark tea called *ukiyo*, smelling strongly of camphor. Teru curled at his feet.

Sakura brought a steaming cup of ukiyo to her lips. The flavor was very rich, not like anything she had tasted before. Slightly bitter, slightly sweet, fragrant. An aftertaste that somehow reminded Sakura of a nostalgic memory; of warm spring days long past.

"It's pretty good," she admitted.

"I've traveled the world, and I tell you, even in the Tea Country, they do not make as fine a tea as they do at Inaho Teahouse. Umenia-sama, the proprietor, teaches that the essence of tea lies in its simplicity. In Iwa, we believe that the most simple thing is often the hardest."

*Often, but not always.* "In Konoha we have a saying too. If all you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail."

"A most leaf-nin philosophy." Sosano smiled. "Though perhaps we're not as different as it appears. Why, when I was in Konoha last, I had the privilege of eating at a little noodle stand called Ramen Ichiraka. The most simple ramen I ever had, yet the most exquisite as well."

Sakura was surprised. "You've been to Konoha?"
"Of course. A most fascinating place. Though not as fascinating as its people." He stared at her, dark thin eyes glittering. "And you most of all, I think."

"I'm not that interesting."

"You are too modest. Do you remember when we stood atop the Overlook? I showed you Iwagakure spread all below us, and in that moment you saw it as you never had before. Climb to a new vantage point, and a hidden world is always revealed. Inside every person is a secret world, just like that."

_A secret world._ "And what do you see in me, Sosa?"

"Youth. Idealism. Strength, a terrible thrilling strength. And…"

"And what?"

He did not answer. Instead, after a long pause, he said, "Tell me, Sakura. What do you think of my village?"

The sudden shift of subject left Sakura spinning. She had only been in Iwa for a week. _What have I learned?_ What could she say, that could encompass all her feelings?

"It's old. It's beautiful."

"What else?" he pressed.

Sakura frowned. "The villagers don't forget."

"Yes." The stone-nin boy sipped his ukiyo tea. "That is most true. You refer to the protest a few days ago, when the caravan carrying your dead left Iwa?"

"It was like a mob. Little kids were screaming at us to die. I thought maybe the Tsuchikage staged it for political reasons, and maybe he did, but that hatred was real. I could feel it. They hated Tsunade-sensei the most. They called her the Betrayer."

"She is," said Sougon Sosano.

"For something that happened three decades ago? Before either of us was born."

"You don't understand why anyone cares so much."

"I understand. I think it's dangerous. The war is over, Sosa."

"For us, perhaps." Sosano's voice was muted, yet there was an edge to it. "But not for my father. And not for your sensei."

"Tsunade-sensei doesn't think Iwa is the enemy at all. That's why she created the United Countries, so all of us can live in peace."

"On the contrary. The United Countries has everything to do with the events of three decades ago, as you put it. Tell me, Sakura. What do you know of the origins of the Third Ninja War?"

Sakura was not quite prepared to analyze the causes of that complicated world conflict. Instead she said, "I know that Tsunade-sensei lived in Iwa. For a couple of years, during the Ceasefire between the Second and Third Ninja Wars. When the war broke out, she returned to Konoha and fought against Iwa. That's why so many people in the Earth Country hate her."
"Did you know that the Hokage and my mother were best friends?"

Seurin Shadowstar? Sosano's mother had been one of the most famous and respected kunoichi in history. Of course Tsunade and Seurin must've known each other when Tsunade had lived in Iwa, but Sakura hadn't known any details about their relationship. "No," she admitted.

"She doesn't talk about that? Not even to her own apprentice?"

"No." Sakura paused. "I mean, she doesn't really talk about Iwa at all. The Ceasefire years."

"That is because it shames her. Deep down, Tsunade also knows that she is a Betrayer. Tsunade promised our family, she swore on the honor of her grandfather Senju Hashirama, that she would fight for Iwa in the Third Ninja War. But she went back to Konoha instead."

Sakura was incredulous. "You wanted her to turn traitor? Side against her own country in a war?"

"Then the Betrayer should not have made a promise she couldn't keep." Sosano drained the last of his tea. "Tsunade betrayed my mother when she went back on her word. For six years she betrayed her. And she betrayed her at the end, on Deathtrap Mountain, when Tsunade attacked my mother's base and when she fought my mother and she killed her."

_I remember_, Sakura realized, her breath catching in her throat. _I saw it._

She had seen it in her sensei's memories. They had been deep underground, fighting around the frozen machine that held the terrible power of the Annihilation Heart, a thousand ninja locked in desperate combat. "Dan!" Tsunade had screamed, and his upper body had exploded into an golden haze, and a beautiful dark-haired woman with burning eyes had been standing over his corpse. And with one stroke Tsunade had cut out her heart.

"I..." Sakura wet her lips, unsure of what to say. "I'm sorry."

Sosano smiled. The casualness of it took Sakura aback, but he seemed not to care. "I never knew my mother. She abandoned me when I needed her most, and for that I have never forgiven her. I am only trying to explain to you the thought process of the Fifth Hokage. The death of Seurin Shadowstar at the end of the war changed everything. My mother would surely have become the Tsuchikage, if she'd lived. But my father came to power instead. And Seurin's death at the hands of the Betrayer became a symbol that has driven much of Iwa's enmity towards Konoha. My mother haunts this village still. My mother, and the possibility of what would have been. It has haunted your sensei for seventeen years. And that is why Tsunade has returned to Iwa. After all those years, she has finally come back, and she has come to try to make amends for what she did."

"How do you know?" Sakura demanded. "You've only met Tsunade-sensei once. You've never even talked to her."

"And yet it seems I know more of her past than you do."

Sakura could not deny that the Hokage had a bad habit of secrecy. _If he can change the subject, so can I._ "And you, Sosa? What do you want?"

"You mean to ask, why did I help you? During the First Trial, after the earthquake. If I hadn't fought by your side, you would not have survived."

"Something like that."

He laughed softly, eyes closing into thin slits. "You know, my father asked me to kill you."
A hot flash ran up her spine to lodge at the back of her neck. Or perhaps it was the memory of the Hokage's voice, sharp and ruthless. And then? Sakura, you poor sweet fool, then…

"You are not your father's son," she said.

"No? That would be quite a surprise to us both." He laughed. "No, but that was not the reason. I have ended many lives at my father's command, all of those he considers his enemies. My father has many enemies; and those who wear a Konoha forehead protector are the worst of all. Yet to me, it is not so. To me, Sakura, you can never be my enemy."

The tone of his voice made her uneasy. "How can you be so sure?"

"Because you are my deliverance."

The kettle of ukiyo tea was empty. A serving girl came by to fill it, but Sosano gestured they were leaving instead, setting a lavish tip on the rickety wooden table. Teru bounded up from her place at Sosano's feet, evidently free from whatever inducement to silence that Sosano had placed on her. "I thought you'd never stop babbling," the deer protested. "Drinking hundred year old ukiyo, and scarcely offering me a sip. Not even a pat on the head, either! Can she be that attractive? She's not half so pretty as me."

Nothing in the whole world was as pretty as Teru, Sosano agreed placidly. The deer sniffed, her ears twitching in an oddly adorable manner. Sosano stroked her soft brown fur. "Come on," Sosano told her. "Let's go find Nobunaga Kikuko's cat."

"A most impudent and debauched feline, truly. Sneaking into a brothel! You ought to give this Compass a sharp lesson, singe her fur a little at least."

The cat Compass was not to be found in any brothel of the Street of Beggars, however. Teru led them to the door of the House of Brotherly Love, where the cat had apparently made a visit in order to drink from a bowl of milk, and then out of the Street of Beggars again, heading west and south across the Shitamachi district.

Toward the Overlook.

The Overlook was visible from anywhere in Iwa, a giant dome of shining white dreamstone. Sakura saw it now, growing larger with each street they crossed. She kept on expecting Teru to turn, for the trail to diverge into another part of the village, but it just kept on going straight forward. Soon enough they had entered the central Kuramae district, and then the great tiled red expanse of Uzaemo Square. The Overlook loomed high above everything. Sakura could clearly see the castle carved from its peak, the pyramidal towers and halls of Sougon Castle. The heart of Iwa.

Teru led them right to the gated portcullis.

"Here?" Sakura asked.

"Here," the doe said happily. "Home."

Sougon Sosano laughed. "Well. Let's go visit my family."
Sougon Castle was as she remembered it. The pyramidal towers hollowed out of the upper levels of the Overlook; the steel portcullis gates; the long bare stone halls lit by long slanted windows; the suit of red samurai armor, right by the entrance.

"The armor was my great-grandfather's," Sosano told her. "Sougon Uzaemo of the Furnace. He was the Shogun of the Earth Country as well as the founder of Iwa. It was said that he was invincible in battle; that not even Hashirama the Dragonheart or Madara the Bloodhawk could stand against him and his legendary sword Masamune. Uzaemo died of natural causes on the eve of the First Ninja War. If Uzaemo had lived, it was said, the war would not have been a stalemate, but all the world would have knelt before his burning eyes."

This Uzaemo sounded like an impressive fellow, Sakura thought, but not so impressive as Sosano made him out to be. If he was, he wouldn't have died.

"The armor is a lot older than your great-grandfather, though." She reached out to touch the helmet. The red lacquered dreamsteel was of extraordinary craftsmanship, infused with a very fine pattern of black mother of pearl, and still smooth as silk. Yet the iridescence had obviously faded with time. "Hundreds of years."

"A most perceptive observation, Sakura. This suit of armor was originally forged by the master smith Mitarashi Masamune during the Age of Chaos, along with its companion sword. Both the armor and the sword were passed down through my family for generations. In time, as all the other swords forged by Masamune were lost or destroyed, the Sougon family sword became known simply as the Masamune. The armor is one of several surviving Masamune armors scattered throughout the world, but due to its close association with my great-grandfather, it is also known as the Armor of Uzaemo."

"I'm surprised that nobody wears it anymore."

"It is a sign of respect for our illustrious ancestor." Sosano smiled at her. "Besides, samurai armor isn't of much use in the modern age. Now, the sword Masamune is a different story."

"Have you used it?"

He laughed. "No. I'd love to, of course… but my dreamsteel katana is made of a far more recent vintage. My father had the katana forged for my tenth birthday, from the Iwa swordsmith Yone. Yone is a good man, but his skill cannot compare to any Masamune. Though there is a little story in the forging… a tragedy, some might say. If you meet Yone during the Second Trial, he may choose to tell you the tale. Be that as it may. The sword Masamune is currently wielded by my uncle, Shirasu."

Shirasu the Sword of Winter, they called him. He used the same taijutsu style that Sosano used, only he was better at it. And with a legendary sword to boot.

"Do all you Sougons have to be so dangerous?" Sakura asked.

"Oh, my little sister is innocent as a newborn fawn."

Behind them, the deer Teru snorted. "Hah! She'll make your heart break with her pigheaded pouts, you mean. The princess is a slave driver."

"Semele likes to ride Teru around the Castle," explained Sosano. "She pretends Teru is a dragon."
"Perfectly ridiculous. Do I look like a dragon to you? I ask her. Do I have wings? Oh yes, she'll say, giggling, and reach down to flap my poor ears. Deer have very sensitive ears, you know."

"And uncouth mouths," said Sosano. He winked at Sakura.

They walked deeper into the bowels of the castle, following Teru's nose. Sougon Castle was far from empty; indeed, liveried servants and stone-faced guards were everywhere, though they made no move to bar Sosano's way. The hallways were surprisingly well lit. Long narrow shafts had been chiseled into the dreamstone all the way to the surface of the Overlook, and noonday light pierced through the gloom like golden spears. Where the windows did not reach, electric lamps blazed in rows of recessed sconces. *An old castle, but with modern resources.*

It made Sakura think of the Annihilation Device.

"We are approaching my father's apartments," announced Sosano. He waved a hand at the suite of luxurious rooms looming before them, decorated in the traditional Earthen style. "The court is in session, I believe."

The Tsuchikage's formal reception chamber was in the uppermost level of the Overlook, where Sakura had visited for dinner on the night of the First Trial. The place they entered now appeared to be something akin to a solar. Sosano led the way up a flight of steep steps, sliding open a set of tall redwood doors carved with painted figures, each panel depicting another chapter in the illustrious life of Sougon Uzaemo.

The doors seemed to be the only concession to opulence. The rooms within were as bare as the hallways outside, the only decoration several hanging banners emblazoned with the Sougon family crest. *A golden oval on black, oriented vertically, with six winged lines radiating outward from its top.* The oval represented the Overlook; the six trailing lines represented the legendary comet that had brought the Overlook to earth from the heavens. Sakura thought the crest also looked like a bird of prey, diving toward the ground. Or an eye turned sideways.

A burning eye, golden with flames.

The solar proper was indeed attended with people. Sakura recognized Tokako Matsushita the Stonecrusher, an influential warmonger; Chuzuru Kazan, Jibachi's father and the head of the Chuzuru clan; and one of Sosano's uncles, Sougon Shirasu, called the Sword of Winter. *There are enough members of the Iwa High Council here to call a quorum.* Above them all, on a raised dais, Sougon Sawar the Sun Breaker sat on a throne of pale white stone.

There was also one another member of the Sougon clan in evidence.

"Sosa!" a little voice cried out. "Teru!"

A bundle of pigtails, laughing eyes, and skinny limbs rushed at Sosano, leaping into his arms. *Sougon Semele,* Sosano's half-sister. The girl reminded Sakura strongly of her own sister, Kyoki. Semele was older by two years, but they had the same air of sweet innocence, the same spunky moxie. *They even have the same eyes.* All the Sougon she'd ever met had dark inky eyes, but Semele's eyes were green, as bright as a forest leaf. Sougon Sawar was her father, but in general appearance Semele evidently took more after her mother, the courtesan Enyo Kayura.

Sakura liked her already.

The Tsuchikage's gaze passed over his children in silence, before coming to rest on Sakura. His look could have curdled milk. "What is *she* doing here?"
Sosano bowed low, Semele giggling as she held on to his neck. "Father, pardon our intrusion. Sakura and I are on an urgent mission given to us by Nobunaga Kikuko the Spinster. Have you seen a cat, perchance?"

"A cat?" Sawar frowned, though it was hard to tell, since he never smiled. "I do not suffer cats in Sougon Castle. Capricious, disloyal beasts. They know not the meaning of honor."

Teru spoke up, craning her neck. "Actually—"

Just then a tabby cat ran into the room. It was the fattest cat that Sakura had ever seen, an orange-and-black striped monstrosity, yet very quick on its feet. In an instant it had climbed the dais and bounded right into the Tsuchikage's lap.

"Look, Daddy, it likes you!" said Semele.

Sougon Sawar ground his teeth so loudly he almost caused another earthquake. "The cat wants me to feed it a bowl of fish, more like. I should like to throw this fat feline in the river and let nature dispose the other way around, yet the laws must be observed. What does the Spinster want with this cat, I ask you?"

"It's Kikuko's cat. Her name is Compass."

"A mission to retrieve a missing cat? Absurd—a transparent ruse." The Tsuchikage eyed Sakura again, then flicked his narrowed eyes back to his son. "You ought to know better than to be seduced by some ape harlot."

Sakura figured now would be as good time to speak up as any. "Tsuchikage-sama. I assure you, that is not my intent."

"Intent." The word was poison on Sougon Sawar's tongue. "I did not intend to sit this throne, nor did I ever want it, yet so it is. Intention counts for naught in the scales of justice, only deed. I see the blood in you, girl, and deeds of darkness beyond count. It is in your very veins. The blood of Haruno Arashi the Demonslayer, and the arts of the Queen of Torment, mortal enemies of Iwa both. Monsters. Oh, Tsunade would have us believe that she did not intend to betray our clan, or to kill my wife. Just the other day she even sent me a letter of apology. Utter absurdity. The sins of blood cannot be washed away with a piece of paper. Perhaps I'll send Tsunade back a message as well. The corpse of her precious apprentice, how would she like that?"

"Father, you must not forget your manners. Sakura is my guest."

"That is what I fear most. Beware, son. This girl shall be the death of us all."

A loud laugh came from the other side of the room. It was Sougon Shirasu, Sosano's uncle. "I daresay an excess of teeth grinding will be the death of you, brother." Shirasu was lounging on a chair, his leg hanging over the side, as if too bored to stand up. But now his eyes found Sakura's own, playful and very sharp. "As for sweet Sakura, why, she is at much the disadvantage. My nephew has been known to sweep many a shy maid off her feet, and afterward the poor things can never quite find the ground again."

Sosano smiled. "You describe yourself, Uncle Shirasu."

"Oh, you are too kind."

The Tsuchikage was not amused. "If all you can do is make idle japes, Shirasu, then go join a mummer's show. It will better serve your talents, and not waste the time of this High Council."
"A mummer's farce? Why, I thought I was already in one. An obese cat is sitting on your lap, brother, and you pretend to hold court with half of the Council missing. I shall turn this travesty into a comedic play, by your leave."

Sawar ground his teeth. Then he grabbed Compass off his lap and handed it to Sosano. "Take it." Still in Sosano's arms, Semele reached for the cat with squealing delight, hugging its bulk to her face. "It is done. Sosano, return this creature to the Spinster at once. Tell her we may be allies, for the moment, but I will not suffer her old woman's meddling."

There was nothing to do but go, though Sakura wanted to stay longer. It was significant that this meeting was being held in the Tsuchikage's private solar, not in the official Iwa High Council Chambers. It was even more significant that important High Council members were absent, Haghira Doi most conspicuously. *It means there are divisions on the Council.* If Sakura could only listen… but of course they would never let a leaf-nin do that. She turned for the doors.

"Hold," said Sougon Shirasu.

"What is it?" demanded Sawar.

"The cat. Let me see it."

Semele gave it over. Shirasu held the cat gently, and then in a blink he had activated his Enshogan. The man's eyes flickered gold, over and over, like a stuttering film. "It is as I suspected." Shirasu grinned, most amused. "The cat is modified at the genetic level. It is able to detect trace amounts of radiation."

For a moment Sakura did not understand. "A homing device."

*For the Annihilation Heart.*

"Outrageous," declared the Tsuchikage, grinding his teeth. "Is this the action of an ally? What good is the Confederacy, I ask you, if the mist-nins treat us thus? Trying to steal state secrets is a crime punishable by death."

Shirasu laughed. "Less the work of Kirigakure than of one bored old hag, I think. Well, Kikuko did tell us what she was doing. Sort of."

It was very cleverly done. *Compass,* Kikuko had named her cat. *A compass needle.* The cat would be attracted to the scent of the Annihilation Device, wherever it might be in Iwa. By tracking it down, the cat would eventually led Sakura and Sosano right to the source.

Right to Sougon Castle.

*It's here,* Sakura realized. *The Annihilation Device is right under my feet.* The power to destroy an entire country in a single instant.

She shivered.

"It matters not," Shirasu continued. "Everyone knows the Device is somewhere in Iwa. The only question is what are they going to do about it?" He eyed Sakura slyly. "I've fought Nobunaga Kikuko before, and found myself on the wrong end of Red Needle on more than one occasion. I was lucky to escape with my life. If the Spinster does nothing more than play games with her cat, we should count ourselves fortunate."

"Very well then." Sougon Sawar's judgment was final. "Take the cat, Sosano, and go. And one
more thing."
"Yes, father?"

"Never bring that girl here again."

When they'd closed the doors of the Tsuchikage's apartments behind them, Sakura breathed a sigh of relief. Her whole body was as tense as if she'd been in battle. "Your father was… angry."

"He's not quite gotten over the fact that I didn't kill you."

The casualness of the remark cut Sakura to the quick. "You speak so lightly of death."

"Never. But perhaps I do not fear it as some do."

"You're not afraid of a bomb under your own house?"

"Ah." He grinned. "You want to know about the Annihilation Heart. Much I'll tell you, Sakura, but not that. Not yet." 

_He is not on my side_, she thought. _I must remember that, or I am lost._"I thought I could never be your enemy."

"Nor are you." Yet he said no more on that subject. "Tell me, Sakura. What did you think of my sister?"

Semele had remained behind in their father's apartments, with Teru. It was only Sakura and Sosano, now, and Compass the cat in Sakura's arms. They walked down the halls of Sougon Castle together, footsteps ringing on the cold white stone.

"She's adorable."

"Not like a ninja at all, yes? Yet Semele has been training to be a kunoichi since she could walk. Soon she'll graduate from the Iwa Ninja Academy, if she passes the tests. Though that is far from certain. Did you know that my sister has never woken the Enshogan?"

Sakura thought of Ino, soft rain dripping down her face as she sat beneath a cherry tree, her blue eyes washed pale by the mist. _No one should be a ninja unless they want to._

"What will Semele do, if she doesn't become a ninja?"

"An artist. Semele is most talented; a prodigy with brush and ink, watercolor and pencil. A creator of life, not a destroyer. I never wanted her to be a ninja, in truth. I don't need my little sister to protect me." Sosano stared Sakura full in the face. "I'll protect her, with these eyes."

"Seurin?" a voice whispered from the darkness.

Sosano turned sharply, staring into the recessed shadows of Sougon Castle. For an instant Sakura saw nothing, but then the shadows moved, and became the barest outlines of a person.

_A ghost_, Sakura thought, but the ghost had a woman's voice, old and hoarse, and her shrunken frame was like skin on bones.

"Seurin?" The old woman was staring at Sakura, eyes shining with tears. "Is that you, Seurin? Are you come back to me at last?"
"No," whispered Sosano. "No, Grandmother. This is Sakura."

The woman did not seem to hear him. She moved closer, shaking her head as if in disbelief, shuffling barefoot along the cold stone hallway. The woman wore nothing but a thin gray robe. She reached out a hand to brush Sakura's chin, so softly.

Then she shrieked.

The cry which came out of her throat was full of grief and rage, of a life lived too long. It was a cry which made the breath freeze in Sakura's chest. "No!" she screamed. "No, no! Where is Seurin? Where is my sweet baby girl?"

Sosano went to her. "It's all right, Grandmother. Seurin is in a better place now. I'm here." He folded the old woman into his arms, letting her shake and rage against him. "I'm here. I'm here. Oh, Grandmother. You must remember to take your medicine."

Mad, Sakura thought. *She's mad, the poor woman.*

Could this truly be Sosano's grandmother? He had only the one, since his mother and father were full blood siblings. *Sougon Karumi,* Sakura remembered. That was her name. Karumi was supposed to be the matriarch of the Sougon clan, but Sakura had scarcely ever heard a word about her, nor seen a single photograph. It was as if Karumi had been banished, as if the rest of the clan pretended that she did not exist.

Now she knew why.

Sougon Karumi smoothed back her tangle of white hair with fingernails long as claws, exposing a dark wrinkled face, beady eyes the color of dirty snow. A spark of sanity seemed to return to her. "Who is she?"

"This is Sakura."

"A leaf-nin. Like Tsunade."

"Yes."

"So young. So full of life." Karumi shuddered, a hollow sound rattling from her chest. "So false. You cannot trust her. She'll kill you, just like Tsunade killed my baby girl. *False friend,* I named her. *Betrayed.* Seurin did not believe me, but she learned the truth of my words on Deathtrap Mountain. When I saw Seurin's corpse… she was too beautiful to be dead, I thought. I shook her and I shook her, telling her to wake up, but she never did, not ever. You were too young to remember, Sosa."

"I remember." Sosano's face was hard as a winter frost. "Come now, Grandmother. I'll walk you back to bed."

Sosano led the mad woman away gently, holding Karumi's arm and letting her lean on his shoulder. Sakura watched them go, disappearing down the shadowed hallways of Sougon Castle. It was a considerable while before he returned.

"It is unfortunate you saw that," he told Sakura.

"What happened to her?"

"Grief." Sosano paused. "Sickness. It's said that Sougon Karumi was a great kunoichi once. An unrivaled prodigy, the favorite of her father, Sougon Muu the Second Tsuchikage. The heir to the
clan. But Karumi became sick once she reached puberty. A woman's sickness, the menstrual blood flowing down her legs day and night, rivers of blood and pain and wild moods. It was impossible for her to continue on as a ninja. Muu began to despise his daughter as a weak failure, good for nothing but making babies. That Karumi did; Seurin first, and then my father and uncles. Seurin Shadowstar was her pride and joy. But even then, in the flush of her motherhood, Karumi's sickness left her debilitated, scarcely able to rise from bed unaided, her mind a fever swamp. Hysteria alternated with periods of relative lucidity. Only Seurin was able to ease Karumi's symptoms. When Seurin died... there was nothing left but madness, I fear."

*A tragic tale.* "There are drugs to regulate the menstrual cycle."

"Not back then. And therein lies the irony of my grandmother's life, does it not?"

Sakura was not sure what to say. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, we all have much to be sorry for. We exist in a world of sin and death, our lives one extremity of torment after another. And perhaps the Sougon clan most of all. My grandmother, a madwoman. My grandfather Onoki, who killed himself on the point of his own sword. My mother, butchered in the prime of her life by the Betrayer. Their deaths haunt Sougon Castle like vengeful ghosts. My father cannot close his eyes for a moment without seeing them. Nor my uncle Charasu, nor my cousins. Nor even Shirasu the Black Sheep, no matter how much he protests otherwise."

Sakura regarded the stone-nin boy with an careful look. "But not you."

Sosano grinned wolfishly. "Why, you know how much I love my family."

The way out of Sougon Castle was uneventful after that, and they soon emerged out into Uzaemo Square, cat in tow. It was growing late, the sun a fat red smudge low on the horizon. Even so, Sosano took the long way back to Kikuko's steamboat in the Aoyama District.

The very long way.

Evidently, the boy meant to draw out his time with Sakura as long as possible.

"Where are we going?" Sakura asked him, the tenth time they'd turned down some random street.

"I want to show you something."

They ended up somewhere on the border between Shitamachi and Aoyama, in a narrow twisting alley jammed with wooden houses—the northern end of the Street of Beggars. Sosano led her to a small nondescript residence, the roof tiled with red brick. By the door there was a rusted sign.

*The Floating World*, the sign said.

"Another teahouse?"

"Actually, a gambling and brothel establishment. It has the best view of the sunset in all of Iwa, clientele notwithstanding."

This seemed doubtful. "Better than the Overlook?"

"Like nothing you have ever seen before."

The Floating World was a seedy little dump, with musty card tables and even mustier customers. Shouting men played the same dice game Sakura had seen in the casino in Sunagakure, and others
she knew from Konoha, but the most popular game appeared to be indigenous. The gambler would throw rice into a metal cup and rattle it around, betting on which numbers would show when he slammed the cup down on the table. The rules seemed complicated, and there was much consumption of alcoholic beverages involved.

Sakura looked around the hazy room, thick with cigar smoke and flickering candlelight. "There's no windows."

"The Floating World does not need them. Gambling is best done in shadows, I would think, as much else in this world. Do you not play?"

"I never gamble."

"Why not?"

*Because my father did, and it ruined our family.* "It's a rigged game, and the odds are against you. You always lose in the end."

Sosano laughed. "True enough. Though until it happens, we cannot know if it's the end or not. Come—the back exit."

The back exit led into a little stone courtyard that adjoined the street. Sakura stepped into the yard, wondering what the boy really wanted.

Then she saw it.

It was the sun. The sun was setting between the streets of Aoyama, right on the cobblestones, so close it seemed she could reach out and grab it in her fist. *No, she thought, that's just an illusion,* but the extraordinary beauty remained. Sakura realized the illusion was because of the alignment of the streets, which allowed the sun to pass between the profiles of the buildings on either side, her view unobstructed all the way to the horizon.

The stone-nin boy was smiling. "Do you see?"

Sakura remembered the poem Sosano had recited to her, the first time they'd ever met. "I see with eyes in their last extremity. Long is the night to I am who awake."

"Yes. It was fate that brought us together today, Sakura." He moved toward her, his lean figure silhouetted black against the setting sun. "This courtyard is a special place."

"Why?"

*Iwagakure is ancient. You saw that in the Catacombs, I'm sure. Long ago, before the Age of Enmity, before the Age of Revelation, before even the Birthright Empire, there was Iwa. It was not called Iwa then, but Overlook Island. Populated by fractious mountain clans who worshiped the pagan nature religion of Shiva, the island became a temple of sorts. My ancestors erected great stones around the island, each one a shrine to different kami spirits. Above all they worshipped the sun. In accordance with astrological calendars, they built their sun shrine in a specific spot, so that during the time of the summer solstice the sun would heat the temple from dawn to dawn. The remains of that temple lie beneath our very feet. Here, twice a year around the Midsummer's Festival, if you look west at sunset, toward the Scar, you can see the sun as it touches the surface of the earth. Nothing to block the way. Not the Overlook. Not Inume Pass, or Facing Ice Falls, or Mount Echigo, nor even the Ice Spear. No buildings, no fences, no barriers. Only pure light. Like you, Sakura."

Sosano's eyes were shimmering. For a second Sakura thought he'd activated his Enshogan, but it was
only the light of the sun reflecting in his dark pupils, a soft golden warmth.

And then he was holding her.

Kissing her.

Sakura did not stop him. She let the cat Compass fall from her arms, let the cat scamper away as she embraced Sosano with her body, with her breasts and lips. They'd kissed once before, on the Overlook the night of the First Trial. But that time she had not even closed her eyes. She'd held a kunai in her fist, in fear of what he might do, and thought about killing him. All such thoughts vanished now.

The kiss went on for a very long time. At last they broke apart, breathless, though Sosano's arms were still wrapped around her, his dark scent clinging to her neck.

"Well," he said.

Sakura nodded. "Well."

"Now we know each other a bit better."

The sun had set, a gray dusk settling over the village. Sakura figured they ought to get the cat back to Kikuko the Spinster soon, before the old hag started complaining. A thought cut Sakura short. "Um… do you know where Compass went? I dropped her."

Just then Kikuko's cat burst from an adjoining alleyway, racing down the street at a full run. *What's she doing?* Completely ignoring the two of them, Compass ran to a large, expensive-looking house at the far end of the block, screeching loudly, and started to scratch at the door.

A bad feeling suddenly prickled Sakura's forehead. "Whose house is that?"

"Misain Dayu's residence, I believe. A number of the mist-nins are staying in this part of Iwa. Why?"

"Because—"

The entire house exploded.
"How dare you countermand my order, Tsunade?" demanded Koharu Utatane the Sleeper. She stamped her cane on the table so hard it cracked. "We must send a team to secure Misain Dayu's house at once. I insist on it. An army would be even better. The Annihilation Device is within our grasp, you fool, and you're throwing the chance away."

The conference room was muggy hot, even at night. Starlight shone through the windows. The Konoha High Council had been gathered, as well as the ranking members from Suna and Ame. Temari and Kankuro as well, and Team Tosuken of Ame.

The Fifth Hokage was tight-lipped. "We don't know anything about the explosion in the Dayu house. It is a volatile situation."

"Yet your apprentice was the one who caused it all!" The Sleeper turned her wrath on Sakura. "A cat, if I am to understand correctly? You have caused an international incident with this feline. A war could start at any moment, are you aware of that?"

"It wasn't my cat," said Sakura, a little sullen.

"Yes, yes, it was the Spinster's little toy. I am well acquainted with the cunning ploys of that woman. That does not excuse you from undertaking some mission on the Spinster's behalf, without any authorization. Are you a mist-nin or a sworn kunoichi of Konoha, I ask you?"

Dr. Honjo Micho coughed. "Actually, I authorized it."

"More fool you. Is there no one in this room who is not an utter imbecile?"

"I am with you, Utatane-san." Akasun Baki the Two Faced looked grim. "We have been looking for the Annihilation Device for months. If it is in the Dayu house…"

"The Device is under Sougon Castle," Sakura pointed out. "That's why the cat went there first."

"It is not only in once place," said the rain-nin Densuke Tosuken. "The Annihilation Device is modular in design. The larger machine may in fact be under the Overlook, but as for the Heart itself... this evidence of a booby trap in the Dayu house is most suspicious." He paused. "My inclinations also lie with the Sleeper, Tsunade. We must act."

The Hokage's eyes were sharp. "Perhaps. Haghira Doi has sent word that he's leading an investigation into the explosion of the Dayu house. He means to include the United Countries."

Tosuken shook his head. "You place much faith in Doi Dragonsight. He is a man of honor, I grant you. Yet I wonder... his lover was Seurin Shadowstar, the woman you killed on Deathtrap Mountain. How do you know he is not secretly plotting his vengeance against you, in concert with Seurin's widower?"

"Enough," said the Hokage. "I've heard your views, but the decision is mine. I've sent ANBU Squad 1 as our representatives. I trust Utatane considers them sufficiently qualified?"

"Send Ibiki as well," said Utatane.

Senju Tsunade stared at the old hag, distaste curdling on her lips. Then she nodded. "It is done."
There was only haggling after that, the emergency meeting of the United Countries principals descending into petty sniping and recriminations. Sakura stood in a corner, only speaking when spoken to. There had been questions about the explosion, or the cat, or what exactly Sakura had been doing, when the cat ran off and set off an international conflagration, with the fate of world peace hanging perhaps in the balance.

"I was kissing Sosano," she had to admit.

Aumono sniggered, and Kankuro shook his head. The eyes had almost bulged out of Koharu Utatane's head. "Fraternization with the enemy is a death penalty offense," the old witch sputtered.

Her sensei had looked no less pleased. "This is fool's work, and very dangerous. Do you have any idea what you're doing, girl?"

Sakura did not.

Sosano had been so close. The tension had been building all day, his flirting, his sly glances that seemed to see right through her uniform. He'd brought her to watch the most beautiful sunset she'd ever seen in her life, and then he had wrapped his arms around her waist. *It just sort of... happened.* And then Kikuko's orange tabby cat ran into Misain Dayu's house, and it blew up.

The explosion had been truly massive, as if a thousand explosive tags had went off at once. Sakura had been blown back by the force of it, and Sosano as well. Then there was a big hole of smoke, and fire spreading elsewhere across the street, engulfing half the Aoyama district in flames, it seemed like.

"Sakura!" Sosano had helped pull her from the wreckage. "Sakura, are you all right?"

"Better than the cat."

The poor cat was gone, of course, obliterated. Burning cinders floated in the dusk like a swarm of red insects. Sakura stumbled to the edge of the hole and looked down. Where Misain Dayu's stately manse had been, only a crater remained. *The house was booby trapped. It was rigged to explode the moment its secret was discovered.* The crater was very deep, but through the smoke and fire she could just make out several charred corpses. None appeared to be of the Misain clan. And there was...

A tunnel?

"Ah." Sosano's braid was all disheveled, his long black hair billowing in waves across his face. His eyes were pools of burning gold, putting out the fire in the street with the Enshogan. "I told you, Sakura. A ninja must look beneath the surface."

"What's in there?" she demanded.

"I don't know."

"The cat was a radiation detector. It ran right into that house and it blew up! The house of Misain Dayu the Cinder, the leader of the waterfall-nins and a close ally of Iwa. What's down there? Is it the Annihilation Heart?"

"I truly do not know."

"You would not tell me if you did."
"On the contrary. The less my father tells me, the less occasion I have to betray him."

"I'm going to find out," declared Sakura.

Yet no sooner had she started down into the crater than the Iwa police arrived, led by a squad of ANBU. The ANBU leader, a woman in a black mask, was apparently Sosano's relative, judging by how they addressed each other. The ANBU told Sakura to leave the scene immediately, and Sosano had shrugged apologetically. "I'll tell Kikuko the news about her dear cat. I see you."

Sakura had not lingered, either, her dalliance with Sosano forgotten in the heat of the moment. She'd ran back to report what had happened to her sensei, and Tsunade had called a meeting of the United Countries at once. The council had only just convened when an angry message came from Misain Dayu the Cinder. Dayu blamed the Hokage and her lackey Sakura for deliberating destroying his house. Dayu accused the Hokage of trying to assassinate him, and he declared that this was an act of war.

A letter arrived from the Tsuchikage had shortly after. Sougon Sawar backed Dayu's interpretation of events, and threatened to expel the United Countries from Iwagakure for breaking the peace.

"A craven lie," said Akasun Baki.

"Of course," said Tsunade. "Sawar dares not move overtly against us, not with such flimsy evidence. Yet I fear he has successfully shifted the blame for this explosion onto me."

"If only you had done it," insisted Koharu Utatane. "Then we could've recovered the Annihilation Device."

And so the emergency meeting had continued in circles, on and on.

When it finally finished, it was so late at night that the sun would be rising soon. Sakura's joints ached from standing still so long, not to mention the lingering pain from opening the Chakra Gates. Koharu Utatane the Sleeper hobbled out of the conference room on a cane. Tosuken and Baki took their leave as well.

Only Sakura and her sensei were left.

The Hokage's face was sculpted, as white and smooth as porcelain. A transformation jutsu, Sakura knew, to hide her true age. She looks so young, but her eyes are full of old sorrows. "Utatane the Sleeper." The name was poison on the Hokage's tongue. "I wish she would go to sleep and never wake up again. If I had not stopped her ROOT dogs from trying to seize the Dayu house… there would've been war in the streets."

"Was it that dangerous?"

"Worse. The Sleeper is not wrong. You've caused a lot of trouble today, Sakura."

"I'm sorry about the cat."

"Not the cat." Her dark eyes gleamed. "I mean the Sougon boy. You didn't kill him like I told you to."

No, I fell in love with him. "He didn't kill me either."

"Then you are both fools." The Hokage paused. Turned away, then back again. "Though the situation may be salvageable. If you will not kill the boy… then spy on him. Find out his secrets."
"Sosa said he didn't know anything about the Dayu house."

"And you believe him?"

"I… I don't know. I don't think his father trusts him."

"That may be. Sougon Sawar fears his son is soft. Too pensive, too close to the enemy. The Tsuchikage does not have nearly as much control over the Sougon clan as he would have us believe. Only Charasu is completely loyal to him, but Charasu is sick and not the force he once was. Even Shirasu… well, Shirasu is quite unpredictable at times. Perhaps that is why Sawar chose to store the Annihilation Heart with Misain Dayu. He trusts the waterfall-nins more than he trusts his youngest brother. And there are secrets he did not want exposed."

"Secrets?"

"There is one piece of information I did not share with the Sleeper. Three of the corpses found in the Dayu house have been identified. The stone-nin Nimiya Roshi, jinchuriki of the Yonbi. The stone-nin Azuraki Han, jinchuriki of the Gobi. And the waterfall-nin Rokusho Fuu, jinchuriki of the Nanabi. They were already dead before the house exploded."

Sakura understood.

**Bijuu.**

The power of the Annihilation Device came from bijuu. That was what it was, a machine that harnessed the chakra of a tailed beast for destructive purposes. The more bijuu, the stronger the resulting superweapon became. Roshi, Han, and Fuu had been sacrificed so that their bijuu could be taken from them and absorbed by the Device.

Sakura frowned. "But that means… Iwa doesn't have jinchuriki anymore."

"Yes. The Sun Breaker has gambled all on the Annihilation Device. The Device was unstable, prone to misfiring. You experienced that yourself during the First Trial. More bijuu were needed to complete its core. Once operational, Sawar believes that Iwa will become invincible. But to sacrifice three jinchuriki for such a hypothetical, and in secret… the Iwa High Council is not pleased."

"You mean Haghira Doi."

"Doi Dragonsight is the leader of the opposition, yes. Doi and Sawar have been rivals ever since they were children, adversaries for the favor of Seurin Shadowstar. Sawar won his sister's hand in marriage, as decreed by ancient Sougon custom, but Doi won her heart. It's said that after Seurin died Doi went to Katsu-ji Temple and vowed before the Sage of Six Paths that he would never take a woman into his bed again. He is a man of implacable will, though cautious to a fault. Like a tree, slow in taking his ground, but firm when the storm rises. Haghira Doi is not a man to be toyed with… and, I believe, the key to our entire mission in Iwa."

"You trust Doi," Sakura said. "But not Sosano. Why?"

The Hokage stared at her. "Because he is his father's son."

"And not his mother's?"

Senju Tsunade did not answer. "I see the boy has already cast his spell on you. By all means, try to win him to our side if you wish. But remember who you are, Sakura. Remember that you are a shinobi of Konoha, and remember that the test never ends."
Word of Sakura's romance with Sosano spread through the United Countries Embassy like wildfire. The others approved of the relationship no more than the Hokage had. Middle-age chuunin shook their heads when they saw her, and even Tonton the pig seemed to shoot her dirty looks when she snuggled under the covers. Rock Lee had been the most upset. Rock Lee had gotten drunk one night, she heard, and trashed an entire wing of the Zoo. Then the next morning he'd shown up in the training yard to tell her that he was going to challenge Sosano to a duel, in order to satisfy his honor as a man. Neji had to physically restrain him from doing it. He's lost Tenten, Sakura thought, he's distraught by grief, and now he's lost me as well. The thought made her feel guilty and angry all at once. Lee was the friend I could always count on, and now I am alone.

As for the Sand Siblings… it was complicated.

With them, it ever was.

Sakura trained daily with Temari and Kankuro, trying to improve their teamwork. They'd done well enough in the First Trial, but neither Baki nor Tsunade-sensei was satisfied. "You must know each other as if you were one mind," Baki would say. "One heart, one soul. Only then shall you be able to survive the Second Trial."

Sakura knew Baki was right. On paper Team Tsunade had few weaknesses. Kankuro provided reconnaissance, battlefield control, and ambush potential. Temari blew shit up and defended just as effectively. Sakura could heal and use genjutsu. Together they were an extremely balanced team, able to adapt to any set of conditions. Yet there was something lacking in the execution… something off. The Sand Siblings had been fighting together for their entire lives, and integrating Sakura was not easy. But learn they must.

The Second Trial of the 54th Iwa Chuunin Exam was coming, and it would be far harder than the First.

Not just one night.

One week.

And they would have to journey across the entire length of the Scar.

The Scar, the great mountain valley that stretched west from Iwagakure all the way to the Ice Spear itself. The Scar, the most dangerous and wild and beautiful place that still existed on earth.

Team Keel is waiting for us there. Team Dayu.

Team Sawar.

"You broke your leg in the First Trial," the Hokage told her. "You could not even walk. If the Sougon boy had not helped you, you would have died." And so Sakura's sensei had taught her the Mystical Stitch Technique. Using chakra strings, it was possible to perform internal surgery with just a touch, quickly stitching back together torn muscles and tendons, even broken bones. "You must use chakra flow to create extremely dense cords of chakra, hard as steel. The sutures do not truly heal the wound, only hold it together temporarily. But on the battlefield it could mean the difference between life and death."

The Sand Siblings also learned new jutsu. Kankuro's two puppets, Karasu and Kuroari, had been repeatedly ravaged in the First Trial. "That freak Hoshigaki Makera broke them with his teeth," he complained. "I'm gonna make something tougher." So began to take shape the giant salamander-like
puppet Sanshouo. Sanshouo was a defensive puppet, with a hard iron frill that could swing up to block any frontal assault. "Ain't nobody gonna get through this," said Kankuro proudly, covered in grease and waving around a wrench. "The Little Monster'll snap his teeth in half."

Temari worked with Baki on a new wind jutsu called Vortex. It was based on the same principles as the Blade of Wind, only much more versatile. Using precise wind manipulation, Temari could create mobile vortexes of spinning air, sending them in any direction she wanted. The vortexes could block attack, attack opponents, and even enable bursts of short-range flight. "Vortex is the pinnacle of all wind control jutsu," said Baki. Temari had not quite mastered Vortex yet, but she was good enough for it to be another deadly addition to her arsenal.

One day, Temari invited Sakura to tea.

That was the morning Rock Lee had tried to challenge Sosano to a duel. Team Tsunade had been training all hard night, sparring in one of the Zoo's many training fields. Lee had showed up with the dawn. The rising sun cast Lee's face in a halo of bloody light, his green jumpsuit stained black with spilled beer. He stumbled as he walked, his lips a drunken leer. "Sakura-chan. How could you? Him?"

"Lee…"

"They killed TenTen!" Tears flowed down Rock Lee's cheeks. "The fucking roaches. Sakura-chan, tell me… tell me it's not true."

Kankuro sniggered, but Temari only stared with her hard dark eyes. Sakura did not know what to say. "Sosa didn't do any of that."

"I'm going to kill him." Lee giggled hysterically. "I'm going to challenge him to a duel, and I'll kill him. On my honor as a man. I'll avenge you, Sakura-chan. I promise."

No, she thought sadly. You would only end up a corpse, and I will have lost another friend.

Neji showed up to save the day, physically restraining Lee and dragging back to their quarters in the Zoo. Neji's face could have been made of marble, it was so still. "I am sorry, Sakura. This will not happen again."

"Will he be okay?"

"I would not worry so much about Lee if I were you." Neji turned away from her. "Worry about yourself."

Afterward, Temari pulled Sakura aside.

"Come," she said. "Let's have tea."

"What?"

"Do you have wax in your ears? It's a fine summer day, and I am tired of all this training, Baki-sensei be damned. I'd rather sit in the shade and have some tea and crumpets. There is an excellent place in Shitamachi, I'm sure you know it. Inaho Teahouse."

Sakura had been shocked, to say the least. Temari had never invited her to do anything.

Yet she found herself in Inaho Teahouse an hour later anyway, sharing a cup of cool green tea with the other girl. Showered and freshened up, Temari looked almost the princess she was. She wore a
fetching kimono of orange silk, her blond hair done up in ribbons, her teal eyes dark in a striking face. Temari leaned across the table, graceful as a dancer, and poured Sakura a cup of tea.

"Sakura. How are you?"

"Fine."

"That's good. It is well that we can talk, one woman to another. In the Wind Country, there's little time for pleasantries. Time passes so swiftly, like the wind, like the sand in the hourglass. Yet we also know how to use the short time we have." She paused. "I suppose love is like that, too."

_Love? "What are you getting what, Temari?"

"Only that I understand. Love is a fickle thing, and no one knows which way it will blow. I don't blame you for your attraction to Sougon Sosano. I myself had a similar romance, during your Konoha Chuunin Exam."

That surprised Sakura. "You mean… Shikamaru?"

"It happened toward the end, right before the Third Trial. At that time Suna intended to conquer Konoha on December 7th, though Shikamaru did not know. A sweet, awkward boy, but full of ambition. So full of plans, dreams to change the world. I'd never met someone quite like him before. But even as we fell in love, I knew that, if we met in battle, I would have tried my best to kill him. I almost did." Temari's eyes glittered bright. "Later, after the Fifth returned to Konoha and made peace, I came to Shika's aid during the mission to rescue Uchiha Sasuke. But the romance was over. I'd betrayed him, and he did not forget."

"And now?"

"Now… well, half a year is a long time, in this world of fleeting moments. Iwagakure is a new beginning for you and me both."

"But I must warn you. Sougon Sosano is not Shikamaru. I saw enough of him during the First Trial to see that. He's dangerous… you should take care."

"Why are you telling me this?" asked Sakura.

"It is sincere advice."

"I mean, you barely even talked to me before."

"As I said, there are few pleasantries in the Wind Country. We were thrown together for political purposes, and there seemed no need to make friends."

"So I proved myself to you in the First Trial.""

"No," Temari's voice was very soft. "You proved yourself in the Battle of Red Rock Cliff, when you saved my little brother's life. Family is everything to me. I raised Gaara from when he was a baby, I was his mother as well as his sister. Yet I was helpless to protect him when he needed me most. It was you who acted to stop the assassination. You who in the moment of decision acted with courage and fierce intelligence. Haruno Sakura, I shall never forget that as long as I live."

Sakura was not sure what to say. "You never told me."

"I'm telling you now." Temari smiled a sad, strange smile. "Please forgive Kankuro. He is a boy, still, and he hides his fears with idle words. But his heart is in the right place. You can trust him."
Help him, Sakura. Guide him. Let my brother find his own path, and he will never let you down."

*She speaks as if she is going to die.* "Kankuro has you to guide him."

"Yet I do not know the way. I've made many mistakes. Too many. With him, and with Gaara… Gaara above all. There is not even a moment of calmness in the heart of this passing life. I only pray that God is merciful."

"I don't know what I'm doing," Sakura blurted. She was not sure why she was confessing this, now, nor why to Temari of all people, but the words came out in a rush nonetheless. "Sosa… I never meant to fall for him. He was supposed to be the enemy. He wasn't… wasn't what I expected. I thought he'd be like the other Sougons, like the ones we killed in Red Rock Cliff. But he… he's different. It was like he saw right through me. He saw me, and he felt my heart, and the touch was burning hot."

"Then I shall pray for us both."

Sakura saw Sosano only at night. Evidently his father approved of their relationship no more than the Hokage did. They snuck out for clandestine meetings under the moon, in quiet corners of Aoyama or Shitamachi, in the Sagewood or the ruins of Haghira Tower or in the abandoned training fields of Sakaicho. Sosa brought her gifts, flowers and candies and charming earth-kin trinkets. A book of poems by Okki of Kyouko, an ink wash painting of Mount Echigo in the Scar.

And kisses. *His lips are as warm as the summer sun, his tongue wicked as a snake.* When Sosano held her in his arms, his embrace strong and fierce, Sakura could feel the heat rush through her body like fire, and she could feel the stirring beneath his robes as well. Yet he never did anything more. *He's waiting, he wants to be sure I'm ready.* Not like Sasuke. Sasuke had never waited, that first time. He'd pushed her into the grass, and they'd fumbled around like fools, and then he'd thrust into her and spent himself in less than a minute. Afterward Sakura made sure to take a morning after pill. *We were only little kids.* Sasuke had gotten better with practice, much better, and Sakura had went on the full cycle of oral contraceptives.

It all seemed a lifetime ago.

They did not talk about the Annihilation Device. Every time Sakura tried to broach the subject, Sosano deflected the question. A joke, a smile, a kiss. "He tells me nothing," Sakura had to report back to the Hokage. "He won't even talk about the chuunin exam."

"Did he get into your panties yet?"

Sakura flushed. "No."

"Then what are you waiting for? All men are such thundering fools. Make him think with his penis, not his head, and both will be yours before long. That's an order, girl."

Senju Tsunade had many orders for her.

Ordering Sakura to train with the Sand Siblings. Ordering Sakura to attend her at various meetings. Senju Tsunade was still dealing with the aftermath of the explosion of Misain Dayu's house. One afternoon Nobunaga Kikuko showed up at the Hokage's villa, Yukari and co. in tow. The Spinster cackled in delight at the trouble she'd caused. *Four bijuu, eh? That's a bomb that could blow up the entire Fire Country. Oh, you've got your work cut out for you, Tsunade-kun. Perhaps you might think about immigrating across the ocean? The United Republic of Genoa will surely take in refugees. You ought to talk to Ambassador Burgouine about it… and other things, I think. A most*
delightful storyteller. Why, the other night I heard a wicked tale about the Third Hokage…"

Tsunade indeed had meetings with Ambassador Imanuel Burgouine of Genoa. The Ambassador seemed convinced that Konoha wanted to steal the Annihilation Device in order to use it themselves, and he wanted Genoa to have a piece of the action. Tsunade brushed him off politely.

She also met with Ambassador Loom, representative of the Iron Country, who spoke not a single word during the entire meeting. The huge man only stood there in his suit of full-body plate armor, occasionally nodding or shaking his head in response to the Hokage's remarks. "Loom has no tongue," the Hokage told Sakura afterward. "It's said he cut it out himself, in order to fully live by the samurai code of honor." In any case, Loom professed the complete neutrality of the Iron Country. "We will get no help from the samurai, but no harm either."

Apparently, the River Country meant to join the Confederacy. Rouga Eneki the Nightingale had reached a preliminary agreement with the Fourth Tsuchikage, swapping some territory on their borders in order to cement the military alliance. Meanwhile Tsunade was in furious negotiations with the Dust and Wave Countries. "Ashuju Ikoma is all bluster, but he knows that Dust is vulnerable to conquest if the Confederacy grows unchecked. Nor have the stone-nins ever been friends to him. He will join us."

The Wave Country was more tricky. Unchiku Narumi, Nonou's sensei, evidently wanted to join the United Countries, but as Namigakure was still a satellite village of Kiri, it would be a very risky move. "If they join the losing side, they'll be destroyed, true enough." Neutrality seemed a safer strategy, as it was for many of the lesser villages.

Besides dragging Sakura into diplomatic negotiations, there was also training.

Sakura had learned the Mystical Stitch Technique fast enough. But her sensei was not done with her. "It's time to work on your elemental jutsu, girl. Your earth affinity is strong but undeveloped. Now, I would not have you throw rocks all over the place, like some caveman brute, but there is a powerful A-rank earth technique which synergies well with your other jutsu. It is called Mirrored Clone."

"Like a mud clone?"

"Yes, but far more advanced. Unlike any other clone technique, Mirrored Clone allows you to directly control the actions of your clones. Seeing through their eyes. Moving as they move. In a fight, this instant coordination is extremely powerful."

Sakura chewed her lip. "Using a chakra field to coordinate, you mean. Like in Amnesia, where you project out a chakra field that allows you to control other people's minds. So it's sort of like putting a genjutsu on your own clone."

"Exactly. I will demonstrate."

The Hokage waved a hand.

A mud clone rose from the earth in the Hokage's private courtyard. It seemed a typical mud clone, but when Sakura touched it, she felt the power underneath. "The chakra's a lot denser than a typical clone," she said. "You're using earth chakra flow, to strengthen it."

"What else do you feel?"

"Nothing."

"Then your senses are not good enough. Mirrored Clone requires at least a rudimentary level of
Chakra Sensing. My clone and I are constantly sending information to each other through overlapping chakra fields. If you can't feel that interaction, then you will not able to control your clone."

Sakura frowned, concentrating. "Well... I'm sort of a chakra sensor now, I think. Like during the First Trial, I could sort of feel Sosano coming before I actually saw him."

"You speak of mere chakra awareness. All ninja have a certain subconscious awareness of chakra. Powerful chakra fields in the air interact with the tenketsu in our bodies, creating certain premonitions or instincts. As a medic-nin and a genjutsu type, it's expected you would have a greater sensitivity to this kind of effect. However, that is not Chakra Sensing."

"It's not?"

"Chakra Sensing is a jutsu. Now, the higher mysteries of Chakra Sensing are byzantine, but for our purposes, at the rudimentary level, it is essentially a chakra-flow projection field. The chakra sensor creates a chakra field around themselves, and uses this field like a detector. Other chakra signals in the area will cause minute variations in the field, which the chakra sensor detects and then perceives through his own senses."

Sakura thought she understood. She remembered how'd she felt back in Sunagakure, when Baki had used his Chakra Sensing Transfer jutsu to temporarily grant her chakra sensing. Baki had altered her brain, and suddenly Sakura could see the chakra around her. She could hear it, taste it, feel its texture and weight and heat. An illusion, of course; chakra was pure energy, with none of those physical properties. But somehow she sensed it as if it was. Somehow Baki had looped the information from his detector field into the sensory centers of her brain, causing her mind to translate that information into a form she could properly interpret.

"So that's how I can control my Mirrored Clones, right?" she asked. "By using Chakra Sensing to send a continuous genjutsu back and forth between my brain and the clones?"

"Easier said than done."

The Hokage was right about that.

It took days for Sakura to even make a proper detector field. Chakra Sensing was by far the most challenging chakra control jutsu she'd ever tried to learn in her life. Not only did she have to create a continuous chakra field of just the right density, she then had to loop the chakra back into her own brain. A skilled chakra sensor could perceive fluctuations in chakra through all of his body's senses, including sight, touch, hearing, smell, taste, even balance and temperature. Sakura was not skilled. It was all she could do to loop enough chakra into her optic nerve, managing to dimly see a spectrum of gray colors in front of her. Her sensing range was very short, too—not even half the length of the courtyard. And if she lost her concentration, even for a moment, the field would collapse.

Fortunately, she did not have to be a good chakra sensor to use Mirrored Clone.

"Make the clone as dense as you can," Tsunade-sensei told her. "The greater the quantity of earth, the more chakra you can embed in its body. That will make sensing it much easier. But make the clone with no mind of its own; the mind you will provide yourself."

And then, finally, Sakura made the connection.

She did not have to sense everything around her. Only her clone. Only detecting the chakra field from the clone's body, and looping it back into her own. Then suddenly Sakura was seeing through
two sets of eyes. Her own eyes, and also her clone's, standing a short distance away. Two fields of vision. Two places at once… Sakura could not make sense of it. She fell to her hands and knees, completely disoriented, and promptly threw up.

"How're you supposed to control two bodies?" she gasped.

The Hokage shrugged. "Practice."

Kankuro laughed when he saw Sakura at her training. "It's not that bad. Like using puppets, you know? You have to see the puppet—or the clone, in your case—like an extension of your own body. Like extra limbs or eyes." Like mirrors of mind.

"Easier said than done," said Sakura.

"You want help?"

Sakura accepted. Kankuro proved to be an enthusiastic teacher, if a sarcastic one. Temari was right about him. I thought he was a heartless killer, but he's just a kid who's eager to please. And so their training went on, day by day, week by week. The Second Trial approached. Sakura waited for it with bated breath. Team Tsunade would be ready.

She would be ready.

The only thing that remained to do was to fulfill the Hokage's final order.

Did he get into your panties yet?

"No," Sakura whispered at night, snuggled next to the fat pink bulk of the pig Tonton. "Can you keep a secret, Tonton? No, but he will. And then I'll be ready."
Kindness Hospital was quiet in the sleepy morning. The last time Sakura had been here, in the aftermath of the First Trial, it had not been so. Then the hallways had been jammed with shouting doctors, frazzled nurses; with blood and screams and the maimed bodies of dying children. But the First Trial was over. Through the window, she could see people bustling in Uzaemo Square below, and the Overlook directly across from the hospital.

*Kindness At All Cost*, she remembered. The Kiyome sutra, the prayer to love all men and to care for the suffering. It was a good name for a hospital. A place of polished white tiles and clean fluffy rooms, of tall windows that let in the bright summer light. Iwagakure could not be so bad, if it had a hospital such as this.

"Follow me," said Dr. Honjo Micho. Micho was a member of the Konoha High Council, a legendary shinobi, and entitled to the finest courtesies Iwa had to offer, yet he had chosen to make his office in a makeshift corner of Kindness Hospital. *He exhausts himself day and night to heal the wounded, yet takes nothing for himself.* The old doctor had a craggy face, deeply lined and windburn beneath a shock of disheveled white hair. There was a great dignity in Micho's grandfatherly demeanor, and a sadness as well. "The Fifth Hokage wishes you to see the body."

Sakura and the Sand Siblings followed. Micho led them down a long hallway and into an operating room. The naked body of a man lay on a metal table in the center. No one was operating, though; the body was long dead.

"Is this the jinchuriki?" asked Temari.

"Yes," said Morino Ibiki, stepping forward. Ibiki was Konoha's Chief of Interrogation as well as a member of ROOT, Koharu Utatane the Sleeper's right-hand man. Hideous scars crisscrossed his grim face; it was said that Ibiki had a scar for each man he had ever tortured to death. "This is Azuraki Han, the former vessel of the five-tailed dolphin horse, before it was ripped out of him."

*A stone-nin*. The Azuraki clan was one of the most powerful clans in Iwa—in fact, a member of the so-called Six Scared Clans which dominated the village. It was no surprise that a bijuu would be given to one of the Six Scared Clans to safeguard. What was surprising was that the clan would sacrifice a bijuu for no particularly good reason. *How many demons does one doomsday weapon need?*

Dr. Micho looked at Ibiki with with an expression of extreme distaste. "I do not recall inviting you here."

"You did not need to. I am a part of the official investigation into the explosion of the Dayu house. By the order of the Fifth herself, if you recall."

"By her sufferance."

When Morino Ibiki smiled, the scars on his face stretched out like so many wriggling worms. "She needs me, though it galls her to admit it. There is no one with more experience unraveling conspiracies than me. Don't you agree, Yamato?"

ANBU Squad 1 was standing at the far end of the operating room. Captain Yamato, in his mask painted like a forked branch. Rhino, too, and Ink. The fourth shinobi Sakura knew only by reputation. *Honeybee, in a mask like a swarm of wasps*. He was a replacement for Saint, who had
Sakura had killed the first.

Yamato's carved ANBU mask revealed nothing. "The results of Haghira's Doi investigation have thus far been inconclusive. However, we've gleaned several pieces of information. Under Misain Dayu's house there was a hidden laboratory. Extensive in scope and equipment, though of course all destroyed by the explosion. The design appears similar to what we observed in Akatsuki headquarters in Caiaden, during the Battle of Darkness Barrier."

Temari frowned. "I knew this would stink of those terrorists."

"Indeed. The extent of Akatsuki's involvement in the Annihilation Device conspiracy is not known, but they certainly aided its development. Misain Dayu as well. The weapon is the reason that the Waterfall village joined the Confederacy, even though Misain Seve the Thrice-Dead fought on the side of Konoha during the Third Ninja War. One of Dayu's students, the boy genin Onira Kawai, is an expert medic-nin. We suspect that Kawai helped prepare the three jinchuriki for being sacrificed for the Device. The jinchuriki were likely willing participants."

Dr. Honjo Micho gestured to the corpse on the operating table. "Go on, Sakura. Feel it."

Sakura felt at the dead stone-nin jinchuriki Azuraki Han with her hands, using the Mystical Palm jutsu to explore inside his body. Oddly, the jinchuriki seemed to be in perfect health. At first she was not even sure how Han had died. It was like he had simply fallen over dead for no cause.

Then she probed deeper, and saw it.

His heart was black.

It had been turned into something that seemed not a heart at all, stiff and cold and… alien. A sense of wrongness emanated from the dark heart like a foul smell. Unnatural. Not the wrongness of death, but the wrongness of something that could not be. The five-tails bijuu, Sakura realized. It was sealed in Han's heart. But Onira Kawai had ripped the five-tails out of the jinchuriki and sealed it into the core of the Annihilation Device. And along with the five-tails had gone… something else.

Something that, being ripped away violently, would turn a human heart black.

"The jinchuriki's soul was sucked into the Annihilation Heart along with his bijuu," she said. "Why?"

"Biju are inherently unstable," said Micho. "With only the tailed beasts as the core, the Device would always be unsafe to actually use. But a human soul… that is another matter. Especially the soul of a jinchuriki, which shares a spiritual bond with its bijuu. If a tailed beast is the meat and potatoes of the Annihilation Heart, a jinchuriki soul is like the final seasoning on top."

Temari narrowed her eyes. "You speak as if this dish is already done."

"Precisely, sand-nin." Ibiki's face was grim. "We believe the Annihilation Device is nearly operational. The sacrifice of Azuraki Han and the other two jinchuriki was the last major step in its completion. According to our best scientific guesswork, in fact… the bomb itself is ready. It should already work."

Sakura felt as if ice was running down the back of her neck.

"Then why hasn't it been used?" demanded Temari. "To hear you tell it, Sougon Sawar could wipe
out the Wind Country with a snap of his fingers."

"He will target the Fire Country first."

"I was not aware Konoha had been destroyed, either."

Honjo Micho laughed. "She's got a point."

"It may be that the threat is enough." Yamato shook his head. "Seurin Shadowstar did not intend to use the Annihilation Device during the Third Ninja War; it was meant to be a deterrent, a means to force Konoha to the bargaining table to forge a peace. No one can credibly attack Iwa as long as it is in the Tsuchikage's possession. But once used, the Annihilation Device will force the rest of the world to unite against it."

Sakura frowned. "You mean it's a defensive weapon?"

Tsunade-sensei had always maintained otherwise. *She said Sougon Sawar would use the Device as he soon as he completed it, and he would launch a pre-emptive strike on Konoha.*

Was she mistaken?

"The Tsuchikage will use it," insisted Ibiki. "He is merely waiting for the right political opportunity. To do so now, with so many foreign shinobi in Iwagakure, would only invite a crisis in the village itself. The Iwa High Council is divided. Haghira Doi the Dragonsight does not support another war, and he would likely launch a coup if the Sun Breaker attempted to use the Annihilation Device unilaterally. Sawar means to crush his internal opposition before using the weapon. Much depends on the outcome of the chuunin exam."

"And Akatsuki," said Honjo Micho.

"Why, dear doctor, I'm so pleased you agree with me."

Micho ignored Ibiki's dripping sarcasm. "If Akatsuki believes the Annihilation Device is complete, as we do, they will not wait. They will attempt to use it as soon as possible. By theft is necessary."

"And run afoul of the stone-nins?" asked Temari.

"Akatsuki does not believe in the hidden ninja system in the first place. Their alliance with the Sun Breaker is one of expediency only; neither party will blink at betraying the other. Akatsuki will use the Device as a terrorist weapon—launch an attack against one of the major population centers in the North, or even in the Southern empires across the sea. Their goal is pure chaos, to turn the entire world into a war-torn anarchy like the Rain Country. Only then, they believe, can the old corrupt order be cleansed, and a New Dawn rise from the ashes. It is a fanatic ideology, and extremely dangerous."

Kankuro grinned. "That almost sounds like an endorsement, Micho-sama."

"It is not."

"Then what do you want with us?" complained the sand-nin boy. "Are you sending on a mission, huh? We gonna destroy the Annihilation Device with a incense candle and a screwdriver?"

"Wait," said the doctor. "Watch. And speak of this to no one."

The ANBU Captain nodded. "Haghira Doi's investigation into the Dayu house explosion continues.
None of Sougon Sawar's actions in regards to the Annihilation Device are officially sanctioned by the Iwa High Council. An open secret, to be sure... but the Sun Breaker has been careful not to make his fingerprints too obvious. If Doi can uncover direct proof linking him to the plot, he can take his charges to the Council, and potentially challenge Sawar for leadership of the village. In the meantime, Hokage-sama will continue to pursue all avenues to neutralize the threat of the Device."

"ROOT stands ever ready to serve."

Morino Ibiki closed the front of his black trenchcoat, his scarred face vigilant. Then Ibiki was gone, striding out of the small operating room. ANBU Squad 1 left as well, Rhino greeting Sakura warmly, Captain Yamato all friendly courtesy, Ink irreverent. The ANBU codenamed Honeybee said nothing. The Sand Siblings took their leave as well. "Well," said Kankuro, "Baki-sensei wants a report from us, so. Why don't you two have some more fun dissecting corpses?"

Then it was only Sakura, Honjo Micho, and the dead jinchuriki that lay between them.

"Why did Tsunade-sensei want me to see the body?" asked Sakura.

"A perceptive question," said the old doctor. His glasses gleamed white in the fluorescent lights, his hair sticking up in tufts as if it had been rubbed over with a charged comb. "It was not necessary for you to examine the corpse yourself. Yet the Hokage wished you to know what you faced."

"Sacrifice," said Sakura. A jinchuriki, who gave his soul for his village, however uncertain the ultimate outcome. "Do you think Azuraki Han killed himself willingly?"

"Would you?"

Sakura thought of Naruto, his laughing blue eyes, his boyish hopes and dreams. Yet within him was sealed the terrifying power of the nine-tailed demon fox. A living weapon, meant only for destruction. Sakura thought of Sasuke, and she thought of a white marble memorial on a lake glittering with stars. "I am a kunoichi of Konoha."

"So you are," said Micho gruffly, "yet that does not eliminate the choices we all must make. The Second Trial of the chuunin exam approaches, and Doi Dragonsight means to test those who would call themselves leaders of shinobi. The human heart is always in conflict with itself... in the young above all. Will you kill the girl, Sakura, and let the woman be born? Will you kill your... temptation?"

Sakura knew what he meant. "You mean Sougon Sosano."

"Yes."

"Sosa's not like what everybody thinks. You don't know him." She could not stop the frustration from seeping into her voice. "What concern is it of yours?"

"It is my concern, as a councilor of Konoha. And as your friend." Micho paused. "Your relationship is no accident of attraction, I fear. From the moment that the United Countries Embassy set out for Iwagakure, it was destined that you meet. You are the Fifth's personal apprentice, and the representative of the United Countries in the chuunin exam. Sosano is the Tsuchikage's son, the great shining hope of the Confederacy. Your relationship is not just personal, it is political as well."

"I know that."

"Then let me ask you a question. Why do you suppose the Hokage lets you pursue this relationship?"
"She wants me to spy on him. To find out the location of the Annihilation Heart."

"And Sougon Sosano? What has his father ordered him to do, you think?"

"Sosano isn't controlled by his father." But even as Sakura said the words she realized how naive they were. "I mean… sure, he wants something. Maybe he wants an advantage, in the chūnin exam."

"He wants to kill Tsunade," said Honjo Micho.

*The Betrayer*, a soft, smoky voice whispered in her memory. *Tsunade betrayed my mother. For ten years she betrayed her. And she betrayed her at the end, on Deathtrap Mountain, when Tsunade attacked my mother's base and when she fought my mother and she killed her.*

"How do you know?"

"Because the Sougon never forget a slight. Do you recall what happened in Sunagakure?"

Sakura remembered only too well. The Hokage's upper body had exploded, her torso tumbling from her horse like a rag doll, and a golden haze had occupied the space where the Hokage had been. "Sougon Shune, Sosano's cousin, tried to assassinate Tsunade-sensei. But it was only a mud clone."

"Yes, Tsunade is hiding her true body. That is why there have not been any more assassinations attempts thus far. But Sosano thinks that Tsunade is disguised as someone else in Iwa. And he thinks you know who it is."

"I don't."

"Then let us hope the boy believes you."

Sakura was growing angry. "You think that's all he wants? To get close to me, so he can assassinate my sensei? How can you know that?"

Dr. Honjo Micho looked at the corpse of the stone-nin jinchūriki on the operating table. For a moment the old doctor did not speak, and when he did, he did not answer her directly. "Do you know why I gave up my commission as a shinobi?"

"No."

"It was ten years ago. I was sent on a secret mission into the Rain Country, with Morino Ibiki and Maito Gai among my comrades. It was the most disturbing mission I have ever been on. Atrocities I have beheld, before and since, but nothing like what I experienced there. I will spare you the lengthy details… but suffice to say that there came a night when the success of our entire mission hinged on the murder of a young innocent girl, no older than you. Micho Manslayer, my enemies named me for my actions in the Second and Third Ninja Wars, but that night I was only Micho Unmanned, Micho the Weak. I did the depraved deed, but I could never kill again. Perhaps the change was not in the circumstances, but within myself. I had lost my taste for murder… and from that moment I was finished as a ninja.

"Do you see, Sakura? That is the essence of what it means to be a ninja: *to kill*. That is what this life means; and that is how I know Sougon Sosano will try to kill your sensei. Because he is a shinobi, a great one." The doctor's gruff voice was hoarse and pained. "Just like you."

Sakura looked away. The anger had drained out of her like the wine out of a leaking cask. "I'm sorry, Micho-sama. I know you wanted me to give up this path, to follow your footsteps. To save
lives instead of end them."

"A coward can be as brave as any man, when there is nothing to fear. And we all do our duty, when there is no cost to it. Yet soon or late in every man's life comes a day when it is not easy, a day when he must choose. When we weigh the scales of the world, and live with the decisions we make for all the rest of our days. You made your choice... and I made mine as well." Dr. Honjo Micho's features were lined and weathered, and time had stolen the color from his hair and left him only grey, yet his sharp eyes were full of strength. "The Hokage has given you a mission, Sakura, but I have another. A mission that requires no killing. Will you promise me to complete it?"

"What?"

"Promise me you'll live."

*Don't make promises you can't keep.*

Sakura nodded, her mouth dry. "I promise."

The old doctor hugged her fiercely. "Then good luck, Sakura. And be careful."
Sakura returned one day to find Sosano waiting in her bedroom.

It was the day before Midsummer Festival. Even the barren courtyards of the Zoo were covered with festival decorations, strings of lights and incense and paper lanterns. The summer solstice, the longest day of the year. Though it was late when Sakura came back from her training, the sun had still not set.

He sat sprawled against her bed, his face aglow in the soft crimson light. "Haruno Sakura. I see you." In his lap he held the pig Tonton, scratching at her fat pink belly. Tonton squealed happily, milling her arms in the air.

"What are you doing here?"

"Surprised?" Sosano grinned. "My father has recently given his blessing to our relationship. I came to the Zoo to find you, but you were out training. In the meantime, I had a most fascinating conversation with Sabaku Temari."

Temari was the other person in the room. She sat in the corner with her arms crossed, and did not take her eyes off the stone-nin boy for a moment. "Yes. Fascinating." The tension between the two was so thick Sakura could cut it with a knife. She does not like him, or trust him. And he does not care.

Sosano only smiled. "Shall we go, Sakura?"

They headed out of the Zoo and across Shitamachi to the Slug Bridge, towards the Sagewood. "Your teammate Temari is a most exceptional woman," continued Sosano when they were alone. "I saw how she fought in the First Trial to protect the life of the cloud-nin Juukan Dee. A truly selfless act… yet she conceals that truth as deep as she can. I wonder why that is?"

Sakura was not sure how to reply. "You have quite a set of teammates, too."

"Ah, Geigin and Orajuchi? Geigin is not important. A xenophobic hothead with daddy issues—a pawn, not a player. Orajuchi… Orajuchi is different. A boy in whose blood runs the very essence of darkness, of transformation, and yet he does not truly know his own nature. If you would seek to understand any genin in Iwa, Bakura Orajuchi is the one to watch. Sometimes I fancy he is the most dangerous of us all."

"More dangerous than you?"

"You flatter me. I am predictable, and no threat to those who understand my motives. Yet no one knows what Orajuchi will do… not even himself."

The Sagewood loomed before them now, a forest of twisting black trees. They'd taken several walks in the Sagewood before, and Sakura knew many of the trails that winded through it. But this time Sosano led her down a path she'd not taken in a long time, not since the first day she had arrived in Iwagakure. He is taking me to the ruined temple.

The Cathedral of Faces, it was called. Like the other great Cathedrals it had been constructed many centuries ago by Shiva monks, and like the others it had been abandoned after the coming of the Sage of Six Paths. Fragments of broken stone littered the forest as they approached, half a granite head there, a moss-covered pillar there. Everywhere, the ghosts of long-forgotten prayers. Colossal
ruins grew from the surrounding trees, stone walls and stone towers and stone faces. A sloping path led into a ravine, the center of the Cathedral of Faces.

At last it was growing dark.

"There," said Sougon Sosano. "This is the right place."

In the center of the derelict temple, squatting on the ruins of a stone pyramid, stood a huge pine tree, so big and old that its branches bent down toward the ground. It was where Sakura had met Sosano for the first time. It must be fate, he'd whispered in the cool daybreak. Stay a while, and I shall show you.

"Why do you come here?" she asked softly.

His face was all in shadow. "Because it is mine. Mine, as Sougon Castle can never be. There is a place deep beneath the Overlook, a buried shrine older than the castle itself. The Vault, it's called, and within its walls are locked away the ghosts of all the Sougon who have come before. My great-great-grandfather Sougon Uzaemo the Furnace is buried there, and my great-grandfather Muu the Mummy, and my grandfather Onoki of the Third Light. My mother is buried there. I will be buried there, after I die. Yet here I live. Here, in this once sacred place, surrounded by the beauty and vastness of the mountains, I am all alone, and I do not want to sleep. Not yet."

Sakura remembered. "You called it your garden."

"And so it is. A garden is a private place. Walled from the outside, it is a refuge for contemplation, for those who wish to understand themselves. Once a thousand pilgrims came to the Cathedral of Faces to seek their true destinies, yet now I am the only gardener who remains."

"A secret world?"

"Just so." Sosano sat under the pine tree, leaning back against the gnarled trunk. Sakura joined him. Faint starlight trickled down through the tangle of branches, etching the boy's Iwagakure forehead protector in uneven shadows. A rock with a rock, secrets within secrets. He smiled, leaning close. "My secret world, and yours as well. Tell me, Sakura. What are you hiding behind those lovely green eyes?"

"I told you, I'm not that interesting."

"Yet you never talk about your past."

"I'm not hiding," she insisted. "What do you want to know?"

"Tell me about your family."

"My family?" Sakura frowned. "They're not that interesting, either. My father was the first ninja in his family. His parents—my grandparents—were farmers on the outskirts of Konoha. They died way back in the Second Ninja War. My dad was a great ninja, a hero of the Third Ninja War. Haruno Arashi the Demonslayer. But then he got sick and died, too. Tuberculosis. My mom is a librarian. Her dad was a soldier—not a ninja, just a regular soldier—and her mom was a seamstress. They passed away two years ago, right before I graduated from the Ninja Academy. I have a sister, Kyoki. She's eight—well, nine now, her birthday was last week—and she doesn't know what she wants to be yet. Maybe an astronomer, because she likes to look at the stars. We have a telescope, that I picked out of a junkyard. It's sort of dented and stuff, but it works. So she likes to look through it at night, at all the constellations and things like that. I don't know much about it."
"How did they meet? Your parents?"

"At a library. My mom always loved to read, she'd spend whole days there, her nose buried in a book. Dad wasn't the reading type, but I guess Mom was his. He read all her favorite novels just to have something to talk to her about. They were different as cats and dogs, you know. Mom was always so careful. Dad… he did whatever he wanted. He was a man of great appetites. He loved to laugh, eat, fight, go on great adventures. He was… he was generous with money, too." Her voice trailed off. Why is it hard for me to talk about it, even now? "Lending it away to friends. Giving us gifts and presents. Gambling. Dad was so strong he thought he was invincible. He didn't understand money... that debt creates more debt. While he was alive, it was okay, because he could always do missions for money. But then he died. And then there wasn't anyone to pay off our debts."

"And your father's friends? Did they not try to help you?"

"They did, and there was a pension from the government, but there was… so much debt. Maybe if the Uchiha clan… my dad was best friends with Uchiha Fugaku. They were rich, they would have helped, I know they would have… but then, you know, the Massacre happened. So that was the end of that. And the debt was still there. Too much. And my mother was only a librarian… we had to sell our house, all our stuff, move into a tiny apartment. Even then, the creditors were always hounding us." Sakura forced a smile. "We're still paying, you know. I guess that was part of the reason I wanted to be a ninja, too. Free schooling, and if you're strong, you can make a lot of money, more than any other profession…"

"I see. No child should ever have to bear such a burden."

"It's fine. There are people a lot worse off, you know? We made it out okay."

Sougon Sosano smiled. "Yes. You became a very fine woman."

I became a kunoichi of Konoha. Sakura hugged her knees to her chest and wrapped her hands around her shins. "Well, that's all. That's the story of the Haruno clan, such as it is."

"Then tell me about the Uchiha."

Sakura looked at Sosano sharply. "The Uchiha are all dead."

"I did not realize Uchiha Sasuke was a ghost."

"You know what I mean. Itachi killed them all, everyone except Sasuke. That's why Sasuke left the village, to kill his brother." Forget me, Sakura, he'd whispered with his last words, and she had never seen him again. "I was just a little girl."

"A tragedy." Sosano's amused tone said otherwise. "The Uchiha clan is one of the three most famous bloodline clans, along with the Hyuuga and the Sougon. The Eyes of the Three Secrets, our bloodlines are called, for our unique powers to see into the hidden depths of reality. The Sharingan can see thought. The Byakugan can see spirit. And the Enshogan can see life itself. Our clans have much in common, but in that we differ, our perception of the world. Tell me, Sakura. Was there anyone in the Uchiha clan that is like me?"

Sakura knew far too much about the Uchiha clan. It was hard to avoid, being Sasuke's admirer and then girlfriend, not to mention all that time she had spent around the Uchiha as a child. I know the secrets of people that are all dead.

"Uchiha Shisui," she said. "He's the one most like you."
"Shisui of the Body Flicker. His reputation is still known, for someone who died so young."

"He was Itachi's best friend, before Itachi killed him and took his eyes for himself, to get the Mangekyo Sharingan. Before Itachi killed everyone. Shisui was very charming… very smooth. Always smiling, always making others laugh. People loved to be around him. But he had a sadness about him, too. An aura of tragedy, of despair. I think it was because of Shion… that's his younger brother. Uchiha Shion was just a baby when he disappeared during the Third Ninja War. Just vanished, like into thin air. It was a big thing back in the day, a huge mystery and scandal. The Shion Affair. No one could understand it. People thought he had been kidnapped by enemies, by stone-nins. There was a big investigation, and they even found a buried body that could have been him, but no one could confirm it. It was never solved. Shisui took it hard, and his parents even harder. Whenever Shisui smiled, there was always something else behind it. Something dead, or something that was waiting to die. And you… Sosa, you're like that too."

His smile was sweet and sad at once. "An insightful comparison."

A deathly comparison.

Sosano did not speak again for a long moment. "And Uchiha Itachi? Who was he like?"

"Itachi…" Sakura remembered. "Itachi was like your mother."

Sosano narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"He was like Seurin Shadowstar. The way people around here say it, you know? Seurin Shadowstar. Like she's some sort of deity, more than a human being. Like a god. Itachi had the same prestige in Konoha. Itachi, the Prince of the Leaf. That's what we would call him. Everyone, from kids like me to the Hokage himself. His reputation, the way people looked at him… he was perfect. Everyone loved him, looked up to him. We all thought he would change the world. And then he killed everyone, he massacred his whole family. So he was like Seurin Shadowstar, before that. I don't know who he's like now."

"Like Senju Tsunade," said Sosano.

"What?"

"To the people of Iwa, when you think of Itachi, and his betrayal, that is also how we think of Senju Tsunade. The Betrayer."

Remember who you are, Sakura.

"That's not fair," she said.

"Fairness has naught to do with it." The boy sat so close to her that she could feel the heat of his body. His breath was summer smoke, his eyes haughty and enigmatic in the darkness. "Have you heard of the Will of Stone?"

The Will of Stone?

"That's a earth-kin philosophy, isn't it? Like the Will of Fire, except for stone-nins."

"Yes." Sosano's teeth flashed white in the dark. "But they are not the same."

Sakura thought back to what Tsunade-sensei had told her. "In Konoha, we believe that a shinobi's true strength will manifest when protecting something important. Everyone in the village is like a
family, looking out for each other, sacrificing for each other. From those bonds, we find the strength to fight. From this sacred covenant, we find the meaning of our lives. That's the Will of Fire."

"A good saying. Yet fire is a fickle thing. No one knows which way a flame will go. Love for your comrades… a powerful force, yes, but hard to control once unleashed. Sometimes friends do evil, and sometimes the enemy is your friend. Like fire, love is impulsive, unpredictable, blown any which way by the wind. Those who start fires are liable to burn down their own homes. And how often fire, like a summer blaze, flares up for a brief moment, burning in glorious rage, but then goes out just as quickly, once all its fuel is spent. The poet Kishimo Jiraiya says that separation does to love what the wind does to the fire: it puts out a small love and fans a big one. Perhaps it is the same with shinobi."

I thought my love for Sasuke would burn forever, but only embers remain. "And the Will of Stone?"

"The stone keeps to its path." Sosano stood, picking up a rock at the base of the pine tree. He raised it above his head, then dropped it. "You see how that stone falls? Straight. The stone does not waver. It does not complain, or cry out, or change its mind. It only goes onward, ever constant, whatever its final destiny may be. Enishi, we call it in the Earth Country. Fate. And were all the world destroyed, were all to fall in chaos and confusion, even so, the stone keeps to its path—until it is finally stopped." Sosano gestured to where the rock he'd dropped had thudded into the ground. "Of course, this is just a pebble. Some stones are much larger."

Sakura stood up as well. "You mean the ninja should be like the stone. Strength can come from outside yourself, like the fuel for a fire. But for the stone, its strength comes from inside. Not from love, but from self-reliance, honor, duty. From sheer endurance."

"Endure. In enduring, grow strong."

"But I don't get it." Sakura shook her head. "The Will of Fire is about fighting to protect each other. If you stone-nins don't believe in that, then what are you fighting for? But then what's the path that the stone takes?"

Sosano's eyes shimmered like hidden rubies. "The path is fate. It ends only in death."

For a long time they did not speak again.

Silence, upon silence. Sakura felt like her heart was going to burst with the tension.

Then Sosano grinned, his slanted eyes crinkling in laughter. "Tell me, Sakura. Did the Betrayer order you to spy on me?"

Sakura was in no mood to play at words. "Did your father?"

"Of course. He thinks you are Tsunade's weak spot. He asked me to do whatever it took, to win your trust." He paused. "But that is not the reason I am here tonight. Tonight, I am not here as a shinobi. I am not here as my father's son. I am not here for any other reason but as a man… a man who is in love with a woman."

"I thought you stone-nins didn't believe in love."

"Oh, we do. I only said it was dangerous." Sosano clasped her hand in his own. "Sakura… I want you to be here not as anyone else. I want you to be you. I want you to be mine, as I am already yours. For just this one night."

"And tomorrow you will be someone else again."
The boy turned away to look at the branches of the pine tree. "Yes." His voice was bitter. "I cannot help that the Tsuchikage is my father, nor can I assuage his hatred for Konoha. No more than you can change your own enishi. Fate goes ever as fate must. Yet sometimes I wonder... I wonder what it would be like, if the world had been different. If my mother had lived. If Iwa had won the war, or the Silla Brotherhood had not murdered Enyo Kayura. If I had not been born a Sougon at all. But then I would have never met you."

"No." Sakura felt the goosebumps prickle along the flesh of her bare arms. "If we can't change the past, we can still change our future. I believe that."

"Run away, you mean?" Sosano smiled. "Perhaps. I always wanted to be a cook."

The absurdity made Sakura laugh, despite everything. "A cook?"

"Oh, yes. I'll start a little noodle shop somewhere. Somewhere deep in the Scar, hidden in the Dreamstone Mountains. One of those lonely places where mist rolls across the peaks like painted curtains, and in the night you can hear the unbidden cries of golden monkeys. A place where you stand still and stop the sound of feet. There wouldn't be many customers, but sometimes a few might trek on by on their way up or down the mountain. A peasant hauling bamboo cuttings down the stone steps, red-cheeked girls going to wash their clothes in the running brook. Maybe even once in a while a traveler; a pilgrim to Senso-ji Temple on the mountaintop, or someone who had simply come to see the sunrise. That's the best thing about my little restaurant, I think. The dawn. The sun rising over a sea of clouds, burning through the mist, and for a single moment all of the Scar is spread before you like an ink wash painting. But the dawn does not last. The fog returns, and then the mountain ages, fainter, duller, until you have to strain to make out what is drawn, the trees blurring together with the stone and the sky. And then at last the painting is swallowed by the fog. But you remember still; and the dawn is the most beautiful thing you've ever seen in your life. Then I'd come out with my apron on and say, 'You there, m'am, you look like you're tired. Come sit a while, won't you, and I'll make you some noodles.'"

"I'd love to go there one day," Sakura said softly.

"You will. It is called Mount Echigo, and there is no other mountain like it on earth. We must pass through it for the Second Trial." Sosano stepped toward her; his voice was as gentle as wet grass. "But not tonight. Tonight, Sakura, there is no chuunin exam. No enishi. Only us."

A boy sees a girl, a girl sees a boy. I saw you on that night, Sakura, and I looked into your eyes. Eyes like the bright green forest, sweet and young and sure. But something else, too. A secret glimmer, a darker truth. Something strong.

"Why?" Sakura asked. "What do you see in me, Sosa?"

"Death," he whispered.

And then his eyes were golden flames.

Sakura flinched.

She could not help it. Every time she had ever seen the Enshogan activate, someone had been trying to kill her. But he only said, "No." He held her shoulders with a fierce strength. "No, don't be afraid. Not this night." His voice was a desperate command. "Look at me, Sakura."

She looked.

The light of his Enshogan was so bright it almost hurt to stare. A blaze of inflamed blood vessels
coiled around the golden pupils, feeding them with pulsing chakra. Yet there was no heat. She was
close enough to feel it; and his eyes were cold as ice. Cold like a vacuum. Cold like all the heat in the
world had been sucked away.

"Heat is motion," said Sosano, "and heat is life. But to perceive life one must stand apart from it, just
as to capture motion a camera must remain still. So the Enshogan eye itself reflects all light, all
warmth. Yet to the user the effect is the exact opposite. At night you see only darkness, but I see…
everything. Can you imagine it? Can you see as I see? All around me, the beauty of life. The trees
that retreat to tangles of roots deep in the earth. The movement of nocturnal animals, the dance of the
wind. The heat of the distant stars. And you, Sakura. The blood that rushes through your heart, the
heat that flushes your face and opens your lips. Why should you be afraid? Are these eyes death?
Yes, but they are life as well… they the same thing, the beginning and the end. I see you, Haruno
Sakura. You are the most beautiful thing of them all."

And then his arms were closing around Sakura's waist. His dark lean body which smelled of the
forest, of wild flowers and black soil and secrets. His eyes sparked, first like embers, then like
candles blowing in the wind, and then as a furnace. Ripples of light and heat shadowed his regal
face. Sakura could not see anything else.

"You're not like him," she whispered.

"My father?"

"No." She shivered. "Sasuke."

"The last of the Uchiha. The boy of cursed blood." Sosano's eyes burned bright as the sun. "Did you
love him?"

Did I? "I... we grew up together. Our fathers were best friends. Funny thing is, as kids we didn't like
each other that much. Not one bit. Always fighting, things like that. I broke his nose once. But
then... you know, my father died, and his family... we didn't really see each other much for a couple
of years." The words came easily, though she had never spoken them before, not even to herself.
"Then, at the ninja academy, we were in the same class. It was like he was a completely different
person, I didn't know him at all. He had so much hate, inside. Pain. And somehow I... all the girls,
really... we wanted to touch that part of him. Girls, they always want to fix stuff, you know. Boys
break but girls want to fix. And Sasuke was so broken. I thought I could... could save him. I loved
him, I did. And he loved me. I thought it would last forever."

"Summer fades, and shriveled leaves blow in an autumn wind. The young grow wrinkles and
hardened hearts, and sprout bright young things that grow old in their turn. Nothing lasts forever."

All men must die.

"I know," she whispered.

"Then look at me, Sakura, and see. Look at me, with both eyes open."

She looked, and her soul trembled at what she saw. "You're not like him," she said again. "Sasuke
was so angry, all the time. He tried to hide it, but I could see it. You're not angry. You're... sad. So,
so sad. But a beautiful sadness. Like a sad poem. A poem of a summer that never was. A summer so
beautiful that it has to be a dream, more real than real, for a moment at least... that long magic
moment before we wake."

"Do you want to fix me?"
"No." She knew the words were true as she spoke them. "But maybe…” Maybe you can fix me. "Maybe I want to forget it all. This damn chuunin exam, this damn world. I want to dream, Sosa. And I don't want to wake up."

He kissed her.

It was slow, at first. His lips brushed her own, firm and sweet, then drew back, teasing, playing. "Sosa," Sakura breathed, "Sosa, please, I—" but he shushed her with another kiss, his hands sliding down to the small of her back. Sakura gasped, clutching at the back of Sosano's head, his braid of thick fine hair. By instinct she fumbled for the knot, one twist, two, and then the braid came undone, his hair spilling out behind him like a river of darkness. Sakura had never seen hair so long, so black, so thick. When he leaned forward, it enveloped her like a thousand strands of silk.

Not like Sasuke. Sasuke had always been so ardent, so eager to have her; a fire that burned bright and then in an instant was only ashes. Sosano was a slow fuse. His mouth moved to her cheek, to the hollow of her throat. He unclasped the straps of her leather chest armor, letting it slip down to the forest floor. Sakura tried to press her body against his own, but he only smiled, as if to withhold a secret. "Sakura. You're so beautiful." He ran his hands across her shoulders to peel back the fabric of her uniform. Slowly, so slowly. "You're so strong."

Her clothes slid to the ground one by one. First her United Countries vest, then her spandex bodysuit, then her belt and knuckle gloves and sandals and fishnet underwear. Sosano's calloused fingers were deft and strangely tender. Each movement was a caress, each touch a whispered promise. Then there was only her forehead protector. Sakura pulled it off herself, the night air chilly on her bare skin.

At last she stood naked beneath the pine tree. Sakura shivered, gooseflesh covering her arms and legs, but she could feel the heat inside her young body as well. For a moment the stone-nin boy only stared. His Enshogan eyes glittered, twin stars of golden light.

Then he began to touch her. Circling her, stalking her as a wolf stalked its prey, methodical, hungry. He held her hand in his own and licked her fingers, one by one. He ran a hand gently down her leg. He stroked her face, tracing the curve of her ears, planting kisses down her cheek. He put both hands in her hair and combed it with his fingers. His tongue lapped at her shoulders, at her arms and the curve of her spine.

It seemed as if hours passed before his mouth finally went to her breasts. Sakura gasped, her nipples stiff and aching. Sosano's long black hair hung down over his face like a shroud. "Strength," he whispered. "Strength, and something else. The slightest hint of uncertainty, as if, deep inside, you know how fragile things really are, and that if you ever let go, even for a moment, all your plans might quickly unravel." He kissed the hollow between her breasts. Her chuunin exam key still dangled there, a glowing metal shard on a silver chain. The ghost of a smile flitted over Sosano's lips. "I want to know that part of you."

His palm slid between Sakura's thighs. Sakura was wet, her clitoris swollen from arousal. He knew what she wanted; and he gave it to her. But so slowly. Dragging it out with his fingers and darting tongue, teasing her until she could not bear it anymore, until waves of pleasure surged through her body and she cried out, fingers digging into Sosano's hair. Starlight shone down on the ruins of the Cathedral of Faces. She pulled the boy from his knees, tearing at his robes. "Sosa," Sakura told him, flushed and breathless. "Sosa, please…"

Sosano's naked skin shone bright as bronze, the faint lines of old scars visible on his taut chest. Ink-black hair, loose and unbound, cascaded over his shoulders and down his back, well past his waist. His erect manhood glistened wetly. Not like Sasuke, she thought again. Sasuke was beautiful, needy,
delicate. But Sougon Sosano was stone. Immovable, enduring. She buried her face in his chest and inhaled the dark fragrance of his sweat. He smelled like grass and warm earth, like smoke and sin and aching regret.

"I love you," he whispered.

And then he was pushing her down, pressing her into the summer grass beneath the starlit pine. Their bodies twined together. The boy's skin was slick with sweat, his stiff erection throbbing with heat. "Sosa." Her fingers clawed at his back. "Sosa, please, take me, enter me. Now, damn you, please." He gave back only dirty nothings. Their erotic dance seemed to last forever, on and on, scene after scene. Sosano knew tricks that Sasuke had never guessed at, yet in the very end he took her the way she had always wanted to be taken. His weight on top of her, filling her with his manhood, grunting as he thrusted. Sakura orgasmed repeatedly, and when the moment of his pleasure came, Sosano called out her name.

Afterward.

He lay on top of her, inside her. Exhausted but not spent. Sakura closed her eyes, savoring the magic of the moment, and did not move for a very long time. I wish this moment could go on forever. But nothing lasted forever, and she had to ask the question. Ask now, or forever hold her peace.

"Sosa… Sosa, tell me. Why you are so sad?"

What are you hiding?

Sougon Sosano stirred. "Why? Because, Sakura, there will never, ever, be a night like this again. Because all men must die, but first we'll live. Is that reason enough?" And the lonely stone-nin boy on top of her smiled, eyes burning brighter than the stars, as he went to give her another kiss.
The Second Trial: The Gorge of Winds

The genin gathered together at the Overlook, as they had once before. But they were much less now. Hundreds, not thousands.

Haghira Doi the Dragonsight was waiting for them.

"The Second Trial begins," he said. "I will not ask you to reconsider your participation, for if you have returned now, after all the death of the First Trial, then no words of mine will stop you. Nevertheless, I must note that the Second Trial is to its predecessor as the Overlook is to a clump of dirt. It shall be the most challenging mission you have ever attempted. Very few will be able to succeed. In fact, it is very possible that none of you shall succeed."

"Laying it on a bit thick, don't you think?" whispered Kankuro.

"Actually, I think he's serious." Temari grinned. "If everyone dies before the war starts, can they still call it a war?"

"The Second Trial is designed to test the virtue of Duty," Director Doi continued. His voice rang out across the red tiles of Uzaemo Square. "While Insight is the first necessary ability of the chuunin, it is not enough. In various times, and in various places, shinobi have also sworn vows to a higher purpose. Protect the innocent. Defend the village. Obey your superiors. Be loyal to your comrades. Complete the mission. All these things, we call Duty. But the question remains, what is duty? And when there is a conflict between duties, how does one choose?

"The Second Trial shall take the form of a race. Behind me, to the west of Iwa, lies the great mountain canyon called the Scar. You have one week to journey from the beginning of the Scar to its end. Three Locks will you pass along the way. Each Lock must be activated with your chuunin exam key, and each Lock also involves a choice. All choices are valid… though not all choices will allow you to pass the Second Trial. Think carefully, and weigh your true values in the balance. Good luck, all of you. May the best shinobi prevail. The Second Trial of the 54th Iwa Chuunin Exam begins now."

The early morning sky was overcast with grey clouds. A cool, sharp wind blew from the east, whipping Sakura's hair and the open United Countries vest she wore over her genin uniform. It will rain in the Scar today. The rain would mean a reprieve from the sweltering summer heat that had invaded Iwagakure after the Midsummer Festival… but it also meant they would be slowed down.

The Scar stretched over half the Earth Country, and even an entire week might not be enough to reach its end.

Teams left the Overlook in staggered intervals. The order was based on how fast each team had finished the First Trial, though Director Doi had also tried to split apart allied groups of genin. Team Tsunade ended up somewhere in the middle of the pack, and it was almost midday before they were finally given leave to start. Kankuro took off at a run, eager to be off.

The Scar was visible as soon as they rounded the Overlook and crossed the Wasp Bridge to the far side of the Dreamstone River. It rose in the distance like a great pointed crown, not quite as tall as the Overlook but far wider, with sloping mountains to either side. A crack ran down along the center of the crown like a lightning bolt.

Inume Pass, Sakura knew. The only entrance to the Scar from the east.
It was not far away. Within minutes Team Tsunade had reached the base of the pass, following the rushing path of the Dreamstone River upward. Inume Pass lay high above the river itself, a narrow twisting gap set into the canyon cliffs, barely wide enough for two wagons to pass side by side. A torrent of blue water rushed out below them, foaming in the wind.

Sakura looked back once.

If she had wanted to see Iwa from another vantage point, she was disappointed. Even at this height the village was mostly hidden from view, concealed by the sheer white bulk of the Overlook. Besides the weathered towers of Sougon Castle, Sakura could only see the Sagewood to her left, and the slums of Sakaicho to the right. It had begun to rain. The dreary sight seemed to Sakura like some kind of metaphor. *I have lived here for a month, but I understand it no better than I did on that first night.*

Sosano had teased her for it. "Are you sure you're all right, Sakura?" he'd asked her. "Do you wish to rest? You look flushed."

That had been the day of the Midsummer Festival—the day right after they'd slept together for the first time. Sakura had been exhausted from all the sex, to tell the truth, but she could hardly admit that. "So do you." The Midsummer Festival was the holiday of the summer solstice, the longest day of the year. And the hottest, it seemed. *It must be forty degrees today, and not a cloud in sight. Sweat ran down Sakura's face and seeped through her tight uniform. 'I've never seen so many people trying so hard to die of sunstroke.'*

Uzaemo Square had been thick with frolicking crowds, the air filled with incense and smoke from chains of exploded firecrackers. Sakura had to stand on tiptoe just to see Katsu-ji Temple in the distance. The Overlook was behind her, Kindness Hospital to her left and the Iwa Council Chambers to her right. Each was among the most important buildings in the village, but today the only one that mattered was the temple. Thousands of Kiyome worshipers streamed through the great bronze gate; many of them painted in strange garish colors, meant to represent the ghosts that returned to the living world during the festival—the kami spirits of their dead ancestors.

Not a few of the faithful had overexerted themselves. They collapsed on the temple steps, panting like dogs, as shaven-headed monks tried to revive them with bamboo fans.

Sosano had only laughed. "Then you do not know Iwa. We do not fear nature, or try to control it, as you fire-kin do. The Midsummer Festival is rooted in Shiva traditions of season worship… a time for earth-kin to return to their hometowns, clean the graves of their ancestors, and make votive offerings. A celebration and a memorial both. On the last night of Midsummer Festival, candles are floated down the Dreamstone River, to help guide the ancestral spirits back to the world of the dead."

He had led her into Katsu-ji Temple then. All that day they'd walked through the streets of Iwa, admiring the festival decorations, guessing riddles in paper lanterns, eating delicacies, or playing carnival games. It was a dance that seemed never to end. Yet now, as the evening came to a close, Sakura sensed that something had changed. Something about the fragrance of the incense. The odd plaintive chants of the gathered worshipers, half-animal, half-spirit. The paper lanterns, strung up on ribbons all over Katsu-ji Temple, burning in the twilight like a thousand glittering red jewels.

She did not understand.

The gongs began to ring. A deep brass beat, over and over again. The priests and their flock of Kiyome faithful cried out with the music. *Oh Sage of Six Paths, grant us your wisdom. Oh Kami spirits, oh great ancestors, grant us your blessing. Spirits, it is time to return for you to the veil beyond this veil. Leave us be; give us peace; and let us do the work of our life. We will never forget*
There was much and more, but Sakura remembered only how Sosano had wrapped his arms around her waist from behind, snuggled close to place his warm cheek against her own.

"Sakura," he'd whispered. "The summer is half over. The Second Trial approaches."

"Yes."

"Will I ever see you again?"

She had not understood that, either, no more than she understood the strange rituals of Midsummer Festival. "Of course you will. We're going to take Semele to Tsukai Gardens tomorrow, aren't we? Sosa… Sosa, what do you mean?"

But he had not answered.

Only held her.

Team Sawar is ahead of us, Sakura thought, turning away from the Overlook to look toward Inume Pass, and the great mountain canyons that lay beyond. Sosano and his teammates had been one of the first to depart. With any luck, they would race through the Scar with such swift speed that Team Tsunade would never catch them.

Somehow Sakura did not think so.

The cliffs of Inume Pass were steep and winding, but shorter than she expected. Within minutes they had reached the other side of the mountain. A great pile of rubble and crumbling walls greeted them. This is Agestone Keep, she knew. The ruined castle had once guarded the western end of Inume Pass, during the days of the Age of Glory. A dozen armies had dashed themselves to pieces upon the gates of Agestone Keep, it was said. Then the Sage of Six Paths had come to destroy the Shiva empires of the Scar, and the castle had dashed itself to pieces upon him.

Kankuro climbed atop the ruined curtain wall of Agestone Keep. Heavy rain lashed down from the gray sky, making the stones slick and loose. The sand-nin boy kicked at the wall, sending a chunk of rocks tumbling over the edge and into the abyss beyond. There was no sound.

"Holy shit," said Kankuro.

When Sakura joined him, she understood at once.

One the far side of Agestone Keep, the mountains opened up suddenly upon a vista of blue rivers, green bamboo forests, and soaring limestone pillars that took her breath away. The Gorge of Winds. The first great canyon of the Scar, and one of the most beautiful sights that Sakura had ever seen in her life.

They stood at the eastern end of the Gorge, where the beaten path called Gunnai Road crested Inume Pass and began its winding descent to the valley floor far below. The Dreamstone River twisted and turned there amid steep hills, lush fields of rice and wheat and barley, swaying bamboo stalks hazy in the rain. The limestone peaks were the most spectacular. The Valley of Spears, the earth-kin had named it, for the limestone pillars like a thousand daggers thrust into the belly of the sky. The narrow passageways gave rise to fierce currents of wind, which made an eerie sound almost like music; a resonant, haunting piping. Sakura could feel the faint taste of spray on her face.

So this is the Scar.

Temari went to one knee. Her eyes were fervent with prayer, and on her lips was worship, the truth
of her Kiyome faith:

"Countries may fall
But their rivers and mountains remain.
When spring comes to the ruined castle,
The grass is green again."

Sakura unrolled the map which the chuunin examiners had given them at the Overlook. The scroll contained a detailed topographical map of the entirety of the Scar; the locations of the three Locks were marked in red.

The challenge was not in finding the Locks, this time. It was what they had to do, once they got there.

On the map, the Scar looked much like a giant katana, curving gently from east to west. Each of the three huge river gorges that made up the Scar could be identified as different sections along the katana. The eastern tip of the Scar was the Gorge of Winds, sharp and narrow. The main length of the Scar, wide and broad, was the Gorge of Mists. And the westernmost, rugged base of the Scar was the Gorge of Stones, with the hilt being the legendary Ice Spear itself—the tallest mountain in the entire world.

The first Lock was a red dot in the Gorge of Winds. On the valley floor, in the middle of a human settlement.

"The First Lock is in Kashima Village," Sakura read, tracing the route along the map. "We ought to be able to make it there by nightfall."

Temari frowned. "The Untouchable Village."

Kankuro grinned. "Offended, sister?"

"Kiyome preaches the equality of all men under God. Caste discrimination is prohibited by the Toso."

"Oh, I agree… but these so-called 'untouchables' are rather unlike the outcaste castes of yore, don’t you think? They were all exiled from Iwa for being criminals. Kashima Village is more of a prison than anything else."

"We shall see."

Team Tsunade descended from Agestone Keep down Gunnai Road, heading toward the Valley of Spears below. It was slow going in the rain, and the road ran muddy with runoff. Sakura found herself longing for the previous week of stifling heat—better sunstroke than drowning. The rain seeped into her uniform, matting her hair against the sides of her face. Still, the weather lent the Gorge of Winds a certain mysterious character. Limestone pillars soared from the valley floor, rainwater sloshing down their rugged sides in little waterfalls. Stands of bamboo clung to the sides of the path, bending and rustling in the gusting wind. A place of great beauty, but wild.

They did not reach Kashima Village by nightfall. Instead, when the day began to grow dark, they found themselves wandering the ruins of yet another ancient building.

"The Cathedral of Hands," said Sakura, recognizing the design.
Kankuro laughed. "How many of these are there?"

Of the abandoned Shiva shrines scattered throughout the Earth Country, there were countless. But of the great Cathedrals, only five. The Cathedral of the Faith in Hiroshiki. The Cathedral of Faces in the Sagewood of Iwagakure. The Cathedral of Hands in the Gorge of Winds. The Cathedral of Bones in the Gorge of Mists. And the Cathedral of Hearts in the Gorge of Stones.

*One for each of the Five Gods of Zen.* The Cathedral of Hands was the holy temple of Dymeter the All-Seeing. The Wind God, and the God of Justice. Sakura could just make out Dymeter's statue at the base of a broken stone pyramid, badly eroded by the rain. A bearded old man with a set of iron scales in his hands. *The patron god of criminals.*

Huge graven hands dominated the rest of the ruined Cathedral, thousands of them, carved out of walls and towers and stairs, as if to support all the weight of the stone. Moss covered their palms; vines grew out of the cracks between their crumbling fingers. Many of the hands had simply broken off to litter the ground with stone fragments. Trees grew all around them, pine and cypress, tall sentinel trees with their grey-green needles, aspen wreathed with slimy white garlands of ghost moss. And bamboo above all. A vast bamboo forest, stretching all the way across the length of the Valley of Spears.

"Hey," Kankuro whispered. His three puppets Karasu, Kuroari, and Sanshouo were scattered in a perimeter around them, providing reconnaissance. "Something's coming. A lot of somethings."

Sakura tensed. *Another genin team?*

She did not expect to see a herd of white-tailed deer.

"Hi!" said the doe in front, giggling. The female deer twitched her ears in a friendly manner, shaking water off her coat of brown fur.

"Teru?" asked Sakura.

"Teru!" The deer giggled again. "No, silly, I'm not Teru." She turned to the other deer in the herd, all of which looked exactly the same. "She can't tell us apart, can she? Typical human."

"Our sister went chasing after the prince," explained another doe. "Or was it the princess?"

"But not before Teru told us about you," said a third.

"The new fling," declared the first deer. "The pink-haired girl with the pretty green eyes, who can hardly look at the prince without blushing. Even though she's supposed to be his enemy."

Sakura could feel the heat rising to her cheeks, though the forest was cold and dark and wet. "Did Sosano pass through here?"

"He did." That was a new voice; older and wiser. The other white-tailed deer parted to let her through—the largest and most magnificent deer that Sakura had ever seen. Though the doe's legs were as tall and thick as Sakura's entire body, and her ears brushed the highest leaves of the bamboo forest, yet her every movement was graceful, elegant. Dense white spots dotted her dark flanks almost like stripes. "I see you, humans of distant lands. I am Teru's mother, the one called Tajima. The matriarch of the sacred deer of the Valley of Spears, and the leal servant of the Sougon clan. My daughters and I welcome you to our home."

Temari stepped forward. "Well met, Tajima. We seek only to journey through these lands peacefully."
"Yes. But it will not be possible."

"Why?"

"The prince Sougon Sosano left a warning for you. Beware the ambush."

There was a short silence. Kankuro waved his hands around. "Well… any, you know, details?"

"No more."

"Wonderful."

At that very moment, a fire appeared on the horizon.

Red flames, billowing in the night. Spreading by the second, leaping in the air, filling the sky with cinders and smoke and the dance of burning death. It must have been a very large fire, to be visible even through the rain and the forest and the distance.

A fire out of nowhere.

Sakura had a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"Where is that?" she asked.

The matriarch Tajima turned her great grizzled head. "That is Kashima Village."

"It's pouring rain!" said Kankuro.

He did not have to point out what that meant. No ordinary fire could have survived in such a downpour. But there was a certain kind of flame that the rain did not quench, but only fanned to a greater fury. Demon fire burns on water itself.

One of their most dangerous enemies had reached Kashima Village first.

Team Dayu.

Mizuho.
"Fuck!" Kankuro was shouting. "Where are they?"

"I've no idea!" Temari shouted back. "How do we put out these damned flames?"

"I've no idea either!"

They'd raced toward Kashima Village from the Cathedral of Hands as fast they could. The Mizuho fire only grew in size as they approached, feeding off the rain that fell from the sky. Demon fire danced on the stormy wind, turning the wooden buildings into a smoking, burning pyre.

Team Dayu was nowhere to be found. Could the waterfall-nins have already left? Sakura was wary of an ambush… yet they could hardly let the entire village burn down through inaction.

Not to mention the people in it.

A boy was wailing from somewhere within the fire. Sakura leapt into the flames, using a chakra projection field to keep the fire away from her body. If I don't find him he'll die. "Temari!" she shouted.

Temari understood. "Wind Release: Storm Shield!"

Gales of wind swirled from the sand-nin's War Fan. The wind cleared away much of the water on the streets—and with it the Mizuho fire that burned on the water itself. A temporary path was made. Sakura raced forward, leaping over several charred corpses, until she came to the boy.

He'd hid under an overhanging ledge, a place the rain had not yet touched.

A little boy, in a butcher's apron.

"Are you all right? Where's your family?"

"They..." The boy wiped the tears from his face. "I don't got none. But my master... we ain't want no trouble. Just let the ninja pass through, my sensei said, don't bother them none. But those three ninja freaks from Waterfall ain't care. Three monsters. One of 'em, with blue eyes and red hair. He— he burned everything..."

"I know."

The Sand Siblings joined them. "Now what?" asked Kankuro.

"Now we try to save Kashima Village," said Temari.

Temari made a hand seal, and a miniature tornado appeared above her head. Vortex, her new jutsu. The vortex of spinning air traveled along the burning buildings, sucking away the Mizuho fire into itself and then funneling it away into the empty streets. Kankuro aided his sister, using the iron frill of his puppet Sanshouo like a suction cup. Sakura used chakra fields to contain the flames.

It was not nearly enough.

The Mizuho fire spread with every droplet of rain that fell from the sky. Their combined efforts barely put a dent in the raging conflagration. Nor could they actually put the fire out. At this rate, Kashima Village will be ashes before the dawn comes.
The fire froze.

Where the flames had been, suddenly there was only ice. Frozen fingers of Mizuho; the blazing, dancing water transformed into cold, motionless ice. In seconds all of Kashima Village was covered in it, like some of kind of elaborate artistic sculpture. When Sakura reached out gingerly to touch the frozen flame in front of her face, the ice broke off in her fingers. *The Enshogan?*

Then a mirror of ice appeared, and a scrawny bald girl stepped through it.

The girl grinned, folding her scrawny arms under a chest flat as a boy. Shaved of hair, her head was scrawny as well, and white as an egg. But her eyes were startlingly blue, as fierce and large as a cat's. A wild tomcat, stuffed into the uniform of a ninja. But a ninja she surely was. Her grandmother was Nobunaga Kikuko the Spinster, and her grandfather was the patriarch of the Touin clan, and the infamous bloodline called *Hyoton*. Ice Release.

Sakura knew her.

"Yukari," she said.

The mist-nin Touin Yukari stuck out her tongue. "Hey. The Mizuho giving you a bit of trouble?"

"Well, it helps to have a *bloodline power that can control water,*" protested Kankuro.

"Jealous? Don't be stupid, my entire clan was massacred for it. Grown men sticking swords into little girls, all 'cuz they were afraid we could make iced tea faster than anybody else. Something psychological there." Yukari glared sweetly. "Where's Team Dayu?"

"They left before we got here."

"Bunch of cowardly camel cunts."

Sakura explained how they'd seen Kashima Village burning in the night, and how they'd rushed to help. How she'd found the butcher's boy alone in the street.

The rest of Yukari's team showed up as they talked. The two new mist-nins could not have been more different in appearance. Unchiku Onome was a fiery, full-blooded beauty, voluptuous to the point of absurdity, with sultry red hair and a face full of even redder freckles. Tsunaga Kuina was a shy maiden by contrast, all awkward elbows, tall and gangly as a half-starving crane. Yet they were lesbians both, like Yukari, like their sensei. Outsiders in Kiri, bound together by a shared difference. *Team Kikuko.*

Temari approached the butcher's boy. "What's your name?"

"Eien." Without the Mizuho fire, the night was very dark. Yet Sakura could see the tears on Eien's cheeks even so. "Don't got no other. Thank you, for saving the village." The boy had a square face, a pug nose, and short woolly hair. He reminded faintly Sakura of Inari.

The thought made her remember the mission to the Wave Country, and Team Kakashi, and Zabuza and Haku. It made her remember the wave-nin Unchiku Nonou, and all the blood seeping slowly out of her body in a dark cave. *Onira Kawai killed her.* Kawai and his teammates had almost killed Eien, too. Had almost killed everyone in Kashima Village, if Yukari had not put out the Mizuho fire in time.

"Eien." Temari's voice was gentle. "Please lead us to your village elder."
The rain slowly died as they walked through the streets of Kashima Village. It was still deserted; evidently the villagers was still too afraid to come outside. A soft rain was falling now, light as dew on Sakura's skin. The ice from Yukari's jutsu began to melt, dripping cold wet tears down the walls of the wooden buildings. At least a quarter of them had collapsed in the fire. Shabby cramped things, little more than shacks. When Sakura looked into the ruins of one hut, there was nothing between its walls but burned clothing, the melted remains of a metal bowl, and two charred corpses. Like a hovel where an animal might live, not a human house. Colored rings haloed the scant few windows where lanterns still burned. The night was half gone, Sakura guessed. Dawn would be upon them in a few hours.

Eien stopped in the center of the village, the village green. A town hall had been built into the side of the mountain here, made of stone unlike all the other buildings. Its walls and roof was badly burned, but it had not fallen down. The door was barred from inside.

A woman's voice came from within. "Please, we don't want no trouble." The woman peeked through a small rectangular window set in the door, hiding the lower half of her face. Her skin was oddly leathery, her nose almost like a snout, her eyes black and huge. Where have I seen that face before? "Ninja-sama, please. We'll give what you want. The First Lock, please, it's yours. Just leave us be."

"You're Bakura Kurotsuchi," said Temari, surprised.

"I'm Suchi. Yes." The woman's eyes were downcast, frightened. "Please, ninja-sama, we ain't done nothing to you." Then she spotted the butcher's boy. "Eien! Eien, come in here. You shouldn't be with them."

"They saved me," Eien told her. "They was the ones that put out the fire."

"Oh?" Suchi's face broke into a wide smile; her mouth was full of sharp teeth. "Oh, thank you, ninja-samas. The fire… I thought… well, please! Please, come in. You must meet Montonobu-sama."

Montonobu-sama was the village elder of Kashima Village. He stood in the foyer of the stone hall, an old bearded man in farmer's clothes who leaned on a stick just to stay upright. There was a nasty bruise on his face, swelling to cover half his head, and his nose looked as though it had been broken more than once. Yet the elder Urashima Montonobu was not meek as the woman Bakura Suchi had been. There was a weight to the way he regarded them, a sense of firmness and certainty.

"You helped us?"

"We saved your village, old man," said Kankuro.

Temari gave her brother a frown. "Shinobi are taught to protect the innocent… though few follow their vows faithfully. These waterfall-nins who set Kashima Village on fire, Team Dayu. What happened? Was there a fight?"

"No." Montonobu shook his head. "They were sadists. So young, yet so drunk on their own power. The youngest one, Misain Sebi, he said that he wanted to punish us… that he was going to burn down our home and everyone in it. We had no means to fight back." There was a haunted look in the old man's eyes, but something unyielding as well. "I deeply thank you for your assistance."

Sakura looked around at the hall. The stone walls were blackened, dusted with soot from recent flames. The Mizuho fire started inside here. "Elder. Is there anything else we can do?"

"Yes, there is."
He led them deeper into the hall. The next room beyond the foyer was a large one, circular and filled with burned benches, some kind of combined auditorium and Kiyome temple. The ruined benches had been pushed up against the walls; a smell of acrid smoke filled the air. On the floor were laid out several corpses, covered in white sheets, and dozens of injured patients on makeshift beds. Other villagers milled about the patients, tending to their wounds.

"Suchi! Montonobu-sama!" said one patient. The man looked very much like Suchi, with his spindly frame, long bat-like ears, and leathery skin… except for the burns running down his bare chest. He glanced at Sakura and her friends worriedly. "The ninjas—"

"—are here to help," said Suchi.

"I'm a medic-nin," said Sakura, bending down at the man's side.

His burns weren't too bad, considering the destructive power of Mizuho on human flesh. Mostly second-degree burns, a third-degree burn around his upper arm, where the skin had gone completely stiff and yellow. The man would live with only a few scars once Sakura repaired the damage using her Mystical Palm jutsu. The mist-nin Tsunaga Kuina of Team Kikuko also went to work, healing patients with less serious wounds, bandaging their burns.

While Sakura and Kuina healed the injured villagers, the others chatted with Montonobu and Suchi. Sakura heard snatches of their conversation.

"Your brother?" Temari asked Suchi, referring to the wounded bat-faced man. "Bakura Kurobachi?"

"Yes, ninja-sama. Bachi and I are twins."

"I've heard of your story. My father fought against Bakura Shibito at the Battle of Kannabi Bridge. One of the finest and bravest shinobi he'd ever known, my father said… Iwa lost the battle, yes, but not because of Shibito. The Third Tsuchikage, Sougon Onoki, did not send in the necessary forces to repel the attack. Afterwards there was much outrage in Iwa, and a need to blame someone for the defeat. The generals could not directly criticize Onoki himself. So they scapegoated Shibito, the commanding officer, instead. They sentenced Shibito to exile, stripping him of all rank and title, and branding him an 'untouchable' outcast. Except the only thing was… Shibito was already dead. He'd been killed by Minato the Yellow Flash in the battle. There was nobody for the generals to punish."

"Except for Shibito's children," said Montonobu, sadly.

"Yes. Bakura Shibito had three children. Two twins, a boy and a girl, only seven years old at the time. And a newborn son, born just before Shibito died at Kannabi Bridge. It's said that the Iwa High Council wanted to exile all three of the children. But the twins pleaded for the Council to spare their little brother. Sougon Onoki took pity on them, seeing as everything was his fault in the first place, and promised he'd let the baby stay in Iwa, and raise him up in his own household, in Sougon Castle itself. But the twins themselves were outcast. So they went to Kashima Village… and so they have stayed there ever since."

Suchi did not reply for a long moment. "Ninja-sama. How do you know this story?"

"Orajuchi told me."

Orajuchi? thought Sakura. She remembered the stone-nin boy vividly. They'd fought each other during the First Trial, around the Pillar of Heaven, and afterward, when the earthquake had changed all, they'd fought together to escape back to the surface. Orajuchi is their younger brother? The physical resemblance was obvious, to be sure. Each had Koumori—the bloodline of the Bakura clan
that gave them bat-like features. Yet their respective social positions could not have been less alike.

*Orajuchi is a ninja, Sosano's best friend, and his siblings are untouchable.* In the social hierarchy of the Earth Country, that was the difference between a king and a whore.

"Orajuchi is a kind lad," said Montonobu. "He visits Kashima Village when he's allowed… sends his brother and sister anything he earns from his missions. We need all the help we get."

Sakura could see that. Kashima Village was essentially a prison for untouchables. During the days of the Birthright Empire and the Age of Blood, untouchables were an outcast caste, lower even than slaves in the social order. Untouchables performed spiritually unclean tasks such as digging graves and butchering meat. After caste discrimination was prohibited in Kiyome doctrine by the Sage of Six Paths, most untouchables were gradually integrated into the general population. However, some untouchable traditions survived in the Earth Country. Usually disgraced soldiers or criminals, untouchables were segregated in their own villages and prohibited from direct contact with normal members of Earth society, including harsh restrictions on self-government, trade, and travel.

Kashima Village was one such example. Despite its closeness to Iwa, it was totally isolated from everything else. Prohibited from having its own police force, the untouchable villagers also had no right to appeal to Iwa for protection, no right to justice. Anyone could walk into the village and burn it down, and the stone-nins would not lift a finger to stop him. Even to be granted permission to visit Kashima Village as an outsider was exceedingly difficult. Orajuchi had probably only visited his brother and sister a few times in his life, under supervision, and he had certainly never been allowed to touch them.

*I can touch them, because I don't believe in discrimination against the innocent.*

Sakura moved around the room, healing the burns of the wounded villagers. Some of them were old men and women. Some were adults in their prime of their life. Some were children, young as Eien.

Then she came to the girl.

The girl was painfully thin, her skin hanging in loose folds around her body. Her eyes fluttered, and she shivered uncontrollably, though the stone hall was still stifling hot. Her breath came out as a hissing wheeze. She looked barely older than Kyoki, Sakura's own sister; perhaps ten or eleven, on the cusp of adolescence. The girl was not burned, Sakura saw. Something else was wrong with her, deeply wrong.

When Sakura tried to use Mystical Palm, she knew what it was.

*The wasting sickness.*

Tuberculosis.

"Can you help her?"

It was the village elder, Urashima Montonobu. He squatted down, leaning over his walking stick, and gave the girl a gentle kiss on her forehead.

Sakura shook her head. "She has tuberculosis. This is beyond my power to heal, but there's medicine to manage the symptoms. From the empire of Ru Daunu, from across the sea. Send to Iwa, they'll have a supply—"

"We have no money." Montonobu suddenly seemed very old. "We used the last of it just to buy food. Kashima Village has been starving since our last harvest was stolen by a gang of robbers, who
knew we could not defend ourselves. Iwa did nothing to help. Instead they charged us double for even the basic food staples, draining our coffers just to buy a sack of rice." He looked down at the sick girl. "This is my granddaughter, Kocho. She became infected last year. At first, we thought it was only a cough… but when the cough did not go away, I knew. I have lived a long time, ninja-sama. Perhaps too long. And I have seen the wasting sickness take away those I love, I have seen how it destroys the human body. Have you, ninja-sama? Have you seen how terrible it can be?"

Yes, thought Sakura. Oh, yes.

Haruno Arashi the Demonslayer had been one of Konoha's greatest shinobi, a hero of the Third Ninja War at the height of his strength. Yet tuberculosis had struck her father down all the same. *We had friends generous with money,* thought Sakura, *we had the best doctors.* But in the end it had made no difference. The bacteria that caused the wasting disease had burrowed itself into her father's lungs, ravaging them until he coughed up blood with every breath, until he'd lost so much weight that his big frame was nothing more than skin and bones. Even the expensive new medicines developed in Ru Daunu could do little more than arrest her father's decline. Tuberculosis was incurable.

"I'm sorry."

The girl Urashima Kocho coughed. "Grandfather," she whispered. A bloody spittle came dribbling out of her mouth, out of her ravaged lungs. "Grandfather, don't be sad. Don't worry about me. I want to see you smile."

"Hush, Kocho." Yet the old man smiled nonetheless; a strained grin which did quite reach his eyes, despite his best efforts. "Hush, this ninja-sama here will help us, she'll make you all better. You'll see, I promise. Rest now."

Sakura pulled Montonobu aside. "Elder, I don't think—"

"The First Lock."

"What?"

"That's what you're here for, isn't it? The Lock is right here, I'll take you to it. Please follow me."

Montonobu led Team Tsunade and Team Kikuko further into the hall, then down a flight of stairs. The cellar. A soft white glow was coming from the middle of the dark room.

The Lock.

It was identical in form to the Lock they'd found in the First Trial. A tall slab of rectangular white metal, smooth and pulsing with energy. There was a single keyhole etched in its center.

Kankuro took out his chuunin exam key and tried to put it in the keyhole. A puzzled frown passed over his painted face. "Hey. There's something over the keyhole, I can't stick the key in. Some kind of seal, or something."

Touin Yukari laughed. "You didn't really think it'd be that easy, did you?"

No, thought Sakura. Director Doi had warned them at the Overlook. Each of the three Locks involved a test of some kind. *The Second Trial is designed to test the virtue of Duty… but what is duty? And when there is a conflict between duties, how does one choose?*

"I know how to open the Lock."
It was Urashima Montonobu.

"There's a specific command you have to say aloud," he continued. "Say it, and the seal will fade away. But you will never be able to break the seal without knowing the command."

"Well, what is it?" demanded Kankuro.

"I'll tell you... for a price."

There was a silence as the two genin teams took that in.

Temari said, "You want us to pay you?"

"Yes, ninja-sama. One million ryo. From each person."

*One million ryo?* Sakura almost laughed aloud, but Montonobu was deadly serious. One million ryo was more than Sakura's mother made in twenty years... it was as much as a shinobi made from completing an S-ranked mission. Sakura had never seen that much money in her life, and if she had, she would hardly give it away to Urashima Montonobu for nothing.

"This is extortion," said the mist-nin Unchiku Onome, her freckled face growing redder by the second.

"Yes. It may be a lot of money for you, I know. But Kashima Village has thousands of men, women, and children, and we are desperately in need of it. Without this money, we will starve before the autumn harvest comes. As the elder of the village, I have a responsibility to my people."

"Well, I don't have one million ryo," complained Kankuro. "This is crazy. You can't blackmail us, old man." He brandished a kunai. "You don't have any power over us."

"Brother, put that away," said Temari softly.

"Why? That's what everyone else did, isn't it? Half of the genin teams must have passed through Kashima Village by now... I don't see it overflowing with millions of golden coins. I bet this guy told his same sob story a hundred times. I bet he tried to blackmail everybody. But it didn't work." He waved his kunai in Montonobu's face. "That's why Team Dayu set the village on fire, isn't it? Because you wouldn't tell them how to open the Lock?"

"Yes, ninja-sama." The old man touched a hand to the bruise on his face. "Some of the ninjas threatened to kill me. Some threatened to destroy the village. Some threatened to rape and torture my granddaughter. In the end, I gave in."

Temari's mouth was a tight line. "It must have been easy to them. They must have thought the First Lock was a joke."

A woman ran down the steps into the cellar. Bakura Suchi. "Montonobu-sama!" Her huge black eyes were full of tears. "Montonobu-sama, don't, please. Just give the ninjas what they want. After what happened last time—"

The old man did not waver. "This is our only chance, Suchi. Didn't you hear Director Doi-sama? By next week all these genin will be gone. We have leverage now, we have to use it! Where will our food come from? Where will our medicine?"

"Protect the innocent," whispered Sakura.
Director Doi had set up this whole situation. Putting the First Lock in an untouchable village. Giving a secret password to the village elder, knowing the village elder would try to sell his information to any passing genin. Knowing, too, that the genin only had to pay the bribe if they wanted to. The genin could easily use their physical power to bully the elder instead, forcing him to divulge the password at the threat of his own life. A joke of a test, just like Temari said.

Except it wasn't.

*Protect the innocent.* Sakura had sworn a vow to do that on the day she had become a ninja. But she had sworn other vows as well. *Defend the village. Obey your superiors. Be loyal to your comrades. Complete the mission.* There were too many vows. Vows which came into conflict with each other.

And she had choose.

They all had to choose.

Without warning Kankuro rushed forward, and held the edge of his kunai against Montonobu's wrinkled neck. "Okay, old man. You like threats? I'll threaten you." He pushed harder until a thin line of blood trickled out. Bakura Suchi screamed. "What's the goddamn command?"

"No. You won't kill me."

"Really?"

Montonobu's eyes were wide with tension, sweat beading on his brow. But his voice was surprisingly calm. "You put out the fire. You healed our wounded, without asking for anything in return. You're a good person, and you won't kill an innocent man in cold blood."

Kankuro hesitated, then threw his kunai away in disgust. It came skittering to a stop at the foot of the First Lock. "I'm not giving you a million ryo, you—you *untouchable*!" he cried, whirling around. Then he stalked up the stairs out of the cellar.

Five of them were left with Montonobu now.

"We'll pay you," said Sakura. "We want to help. But the sum you ask for is too much."

The elder shook his head. "Too low, I think, for a powerful ninja village such as Konoha."

"You… won't negotiate?"

"Don't think he will." Yukari laughed. "This scheming bastard's seen right through us. He knows we're softies, and he's going to bleed us dry for every last coin."

"It is my duty," said Urashima Montonobu sadly. "I am very sorry, but I do what I must for Kashima Village. One million ryo from each of you, in hard gold. One million, or you'll fail this chuunin exam without opening a single Lock."
The morning dawned clear and warm over Kashima Village.

Sakura found Temari standing in a thicket of green bamboo on the outskirts of the village. *Singing Stick Hollow*, it was called. Kashima Village was situated roughly in the center of the Gorge of Winds, nestled along the northern mountain face of the narrow gorge. Here the Gunnai Road rose up from the valley floor again, skirting the mountainside like a long sloping hill. Kashima Village stood at the top of the hill, offering a spectacular view of the rest of the Valley of Spears.

Singing Stick Hollow was the best overlook in the whole village. Temari stood at the edge of the bamboo grove, looking out south between the tall green stalks. Great limestone peaks shot up from the valley floor like rows of spears, and between them fields of rice and wheat, bamboo and pine and cypress. A strong gust of wind pealed through Singing Stick Hollow then, shaking the bamboo trees, making them lash and sway. Eerie sounds echoed through the forest: whistling, screeching, gasping, wailing, *Like a song*. The wind was the conductor of a living orchestra. In a gentle breeze the trees answered faintly, but in a full gale the chorus was gigantic.

Hearing that music, it was easy to forget all their troubles.

"Hey."

Temari turned. "Has the old man changed his mind?"

"No."

"I didn't think so."

"We saw another genin team." They'd been coming at regular intervals all morning. "They went into the town hall, stayed a couple minutes, then left again. Kankuro says Montonobu gave up the password when they threatened to cut off his cock. Anyway, there's only one password for the Lock. Kankuro says we should just wait for a team from the United Countries to show up, and then after they do the dirty work, we'll get the password for free."

"No." Temari shook her head. "We may not do the evil ourselves, but if we stand by and let others do it for us… that makes us no better than they are. I feel sick, Sakura. Is this truly our duty?"

The words of Dr. Honjo Micho echoed in Sakura's memory. *We all do our duty, when there is no cost to it. Yet soon or late in every man's life comes a day when it is not easy, a day when he must choose. We have to complete the mission," said Sakura.

The sand-nin closed her hand into a fist. "Do we? Is it worth passing this chuunin exam, if I must terrorize an innocent old man to do it? A helpless village?" She stared at Sakura with hard bright eyes. "The last chuunin exam was different. Then, the mission was clear."

*Yes, your mission was to destroy Konoha*. Sakura still remembered the chaos in the stadium, the screams and shouts. Gaara's crazed laughter as he crushed her beneath a cage of sand. Picking up the bodies of the dead in Hashirama Square afterward, piling them in little hills of cold flesh. "You make it sound an improvement."

"In a way… yes. We sand-nins are not like you apes of Konoha. In the Wind Country we are always
short on time... short on money, short on men and material, short on everything. And like the wind it is gone. I have done much that I am not proud of, in service to Suna. Yet always I did what I could. We were told the invasion of Konoha was necessary for the survival of our village, and in the end we did not flinch from our duty. Yet now... now, because of that stubborn old man, I am not sure what my duty is."

Sakura was silent for a moment.

"Can I ask you a question? How do you know the Bakura clan?"

"You are not the only one to befriend a stone-nin on Team Sawar. Bakura Orajuchi is a devout follower of Kiyome. We pray together in Katsu-ji Temple often. He's a sweet boy, but distrustful. It was not easy to grow up in the shadow of his disgraced father, and of his exiled older siblings. Growing up in Sougon Castle made it even harder. Half of Iwa wishes Orajuchi to reclaim his heritage as the leader of one of Iwa's Six Sacred clans. The other half wishes he were exiled to Kashima Village along with his brother and sister." Temari frowned. "Truth be told, Orajuchi reminds me somewhat of Kankuro."

"Not as dashingly handsome."

"Yes, if only Kankuro would stop painting his face that garish purple color. An affect he learned from our master puppeteer Anayama Chiyo... I have nothing to do with it. My brother thinks it make him look fearsome, instead of ridiculous. All boys of a certain age are alike, I think. Too desperate to prove themselves."

"What does Orajuchi think about Kashima Village?"

"The village itself? He does not question it. Untouchables have existed in the Earth Country for thousands of years... of course they must be shunned, in his mind. Orajuchi only thinks that his particular family's punishment was wrongly decided."

"I thought he was religious. Kiyome prohibits all forms of caste discrimination."

"So it does. And yet the Untouchable Village still exists, a day's ride from Katsu-ji Temple." Temari closed her eyes, her straw-blond hair blowing in the fierce wind of Singing Stick Hollow. "The Sage of Six Paths teaches us that faith is not to be found in words. Not even in the words of the Toso. True faith is found in action, Sakura. And we must seize the moment to do what we must."

Sakura left her friend there, walking back to the village alone. From Singing Stick Hollow the path led north to the village green, the center of Kashima Village, where the stone town hall had been hollowed out of the side of the mountain itself. Kashima Village was a substantial settlement, with thousands of people. Thousands of untouchables. From east to west ran the Gunnai Road, cutting through the village like a long muddy strip. To the north were the Dreamstone Mountains, and to the south was the Gorge of Winds.

The village green was green no longer. Last night's fire had engulfed the whole village, leaving nothing untouched. Not only the houses had burned, but also the trees and fields and grass, leaving a sea of ash and cinders in their wake. The remnants of burned huts thrust blackened spears into the sky. Other huts had collapsed and spilled out on the streets. Teams of haggard villagers worked to sift through the rubble, dragging out corpses to bury them in a pit by Kashima Shrine. The village elder, Urashima Montonobu, directed the reconstruction effort, along with another old man called Daiton Hagakure, the Black Preacher.

The Bakura twins were standing in a burned field on the eastern hillside of Kashima Village.
Suchi and Bachi, as alike as two bats in a pod. They looked down at their feet when Sakura approached, nervous and shy. Sakura had to prod them to speak. "Your home?" she asked.

"Our farm, ninja-sama," answered Bakura Kurobachi. "Rice paddies."

That was dire news. Mizuho fire burned on water itself. With the fields flooded at the height of the growing season, the fire must have utterly consumed every last stalk of rice. "The harvest is in autumn. What will you do?"

"We'll do as we can."

Bachi made a brave show of it, but his sister was a broken creature. Tears burst from the woman's huge bat-like eyes, dripping down her leathery cheeks. "We'll starve, we've nothing to eat. All our crops gone. And the sheep and pigs, too. Look, look!" She was almost screeching. Sakura put a hand on Suchi's shoulder; the shock of the touch shook her from her grief. "I... p-pardons, ninja-sama. Its ain't your fault. You helped us. You healed my brother, you did alls you could."

No, I didn't. "You haven't left Kashima Village since your exile, have you?"

Suchi shook her head.

"Do you remember Iwa at all?"

Bachi spoke after a long moment. "Like a dream. I dreamed... I dreamed I used to live in a great house, with meat at every meal. I dreamed of my father, a great shinobi. But so long ago. I dream of rice and sheep, now. And fire."

"It ain't matter," said Suchi. Her pointed teeth glittered in the sun. "The Bakura clan carries on."

"I'm told your brother Orajuchi passed through the village yesterday."


"He gave us money," added Bachi.

"But he did not touch you. Or teach you how to use the bloodline which is written on every line in your face."

Suchi seemed shocked. "It is forbidden. No untouchable... it is wrong, ninja-sama. Orajuchi is a ninja, we are nothing but criminals and butchers."

"Not Lee Sheeptamer," broke in a young's boy voice.

It was Eien, the butcher's apprentice Sakura had rescued from the fire the night before. The boy stalked through the wreckage of the farm, his face and clothes smeared with soot. He was barefoot, Sakura noticed, and his eyes were red and puffy with impotent rage.

"If Lee Sheeptamer was here, those ninjas ain't dare burn down the village. Lee Sheeptamer would've killed them."

"Eien!" Suchi shushed. "You can't talk to ninja-sama that way—"

"It's all right," said Sakura.

Lee Sheeptamer was the Earth Country's most notorious criminal. Originally a mafia boss, he then became one of the leaders of the infamous pirate gang called the Silla Brotherhood, led by the
Dancing Ninja. The Silla Brotherhood was Akatsuki before Akatsuki existed. The first major criminal threat of the Postwar Period. Formed in Silla in the aftermath of the Third Ninja War and dedicated to the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, the Silla Brotherhood engaged in a spree of criminal operations up and down the entire Northern continent, most famously the kidnapping of the Fire daimyo's daughter. Among the Brotherhood's ranks numbered such legendary outlaws as the Dancing Ninja, Hyuuga Haru the White Hare, Arakida Moritake the Confessor, Kid Swan, Butcho the Moonbandit, and Sir Thayan Egbert of Izu.

But it was Lee Sheeptamer that would lead to the Brotherhood's downfall.

Sakura knew the general outlines of his story, though details were scarce. Born in an "untouchable" shepherd's family in Kashima Village, Lee Sheeptamer escaped to join the mafia at the age of ten and rose through the ranks to become the most powerful boss in the North. But his mob activities brought Lee into conflict with the Silla Brotherhood. After being defeated by the Dancing Ninja, he then abandoned the mafia to join the Silla Brotherhood… a fateful decision. Lee convinced the Brotherhood to try to kidnap the renowned Earth courtesan Enyo Kayura for ransom, but the operation was botched, resulting in her death.

Unfortunately for the Brotherhood, Kayura was Sougon Sawar's lover, and the mother of his daughter Semele. The Sun Breaker was enraged; he assembled an international coalition of shinobi to destroy the Silla Brotherhood once and for all. Among them numbered such personages as Hatake Kakashi, Kasuga Darui, Sougon Charasu, Ryokan Mukade, Akasun Baki, Densuke Tosuken, and Hiroshi Keel. For months the task force aggressively pursued the Brotherhood across the world. Finally, at the Battle of Three Wolves beneath the shadow of Silla itself, Sougon Sawar met Lee Sheeptamer in single combat and killed him. Then he fought the Dancing Ninja and killed him, too. The battle had resulted in the total destruction of the Silla Brotherhood.

Sakura bent down to Eien's height. "Do you want to be Lee Sheeptamer when you grew up, Eien?"

"He helped people. He joined the Silla Brotherhood and he stood up to the Tsuchikage."

"And he died."

The boy was defiant. "So did my sensei. He ain't do nothing, but they killed him."

"It ain't so bad before," whispered Bakura Kurotsuchi. "Before Lee killed Enyo Kayura. Seurin Shadowstar, she… she was always kind to untouchables. Her brother, the Tsuchikage… he started off like that, too. Gave us food, beat off the robbers sometimes. Let us plant crops in the valley. But then she died. Kayura."

"What do you mean?" asked Sakura.

"Lee Sheeptamer was an untouchable, ninja-sama. He was from Kashima Village. Lee made Sougon Sawar hate all untouchables. Hate us."

"So he will do nothing to help you, even after your village burned down."

"We'll do as we can," repeated Bachi.

Words as empty as the field in which we stand. His twin sister had the right of it; they would starve, if help did not come. Sakura could do nothing for the moment. She turned away toward the village green, leaving the two twins to pick up the wreckage of their lives. Eien she took with her; it turned out the boy had been sent to deliver a message.

"The blacksmith?" she asked. "What does he want with me?"
"Dunno, ninja-sama. Says it’s about the Prince."

_Sosano._

The village blacksmith was at his forge on the far side of the green, using a hammer to pound a red-hot iron plow into shape. The roof of the man's shop had collapsed in the Mizuho fire, but that had not stopped him from his task. Sweat beaded from his bushy brow, the skin on his face drawn back tight and wrinkled from a great beaked nose. The man was muscular and very strong, his jaws like an ox, bristling with white stubble.

Sakura did not know him. "Sir?"

"Well met, ninja-sama. My name is Chikuda Yone."

_Where have I heard that name before? _"Sosan... he told me a story, once. About an Iwa blacksmith named Yone, who forged his dreamsteel katana."

"Aye. And the sword of his father before him, and of many others in the Sougon clan. I was Sawar's sworn man."

"I did not know you were living in Kashima Village."

"I was exiled."

"Unjustly?"

"That depends on who does the judging. I broke the law. With good cause, I tried to plead, but the Sun Breaker would not hear of it. He knows not the meaning of mercy. Not then, not ever. It is hard for outsiders to understand."

Sakura did not doubt it. "I've nothing better to do, if you'll tell me."

The grizzled blacksmith nodded. "It goes back to the founding of Kashima Village itself, and the prejudices of the First Tsuchikage, even before my own time. Sougon Uzaemo the Furnace believed that there was a whole caste of people who were unclean. Untouchables. The distinction between untouchables and other castes had blurred after the Crusades of the Six of Six Paths, but Uzaemo was determined to segregate them again. So he rounded up anyone with a taint of untouchable blood in Iwa, and exiled them into the Scar. The untouchables would not be allowed to leave Kashima Village, nor could anyone enter the village without Uzaemo's leave. From the first, that was the iron rule. It was the rule under Uzaemo's son Muu, and his son Onoki. And under the Sun Breaker."

"And you broke it?"

"No, the prince did. The young prince, Sosano, he was ten, the age when a boy should wield his own sword. His father commanded me to forge a katana out of pure white dreamsteel. Easy enough... but Sosano had other plans. He was always a strange boy, much given to flights of fancy. His grandmother, Karumi the Mad, filled the boy's head full of tales, of spirits and ghosts, and haunted weaponry, and blood magic. Sosano began to believe that it was his destiny to bring his mother back from the dead."

_Seurin Shadowstar._ Some said she was the greatest shinobi that had ever lived. But she was dead, cut down by her best friend Senju Tsunade in the final battle of the Third Ninja War. Tsunade the Betrayer, so the stone-nins named her ever after.
"How?"

"In Kashima Village. Seurin was fond of the untouchables, often spent days among them. Her son fancied that Seurin was somehow becoming untouchable. There are ancient legends of the power of untouchable blood… of how untouchables dabble in the dark arts and lie with demons in the night, which is the reason all true men must shun them. The prince believed these legends. He was convinced that the katana I forged for him was a sign. I had made it as a replica of the sword Masamune, Seurin Shadowstar's own blade. Sosano believed he could turn his new sword into another Masamune by bathing it in untouchable blood. Then he would thrust the sword into his own heart, and his sacrifice would bring his mother back to life…"

"Of course it, was madness. Rank madness, all of it. Yet such was Sosano's obsession that he even got his best friend, Orajuchi, to go along with it. In secret the two of them hatched a plan to sneak into Kashima Village with the sword on the anniversary of Seurin's death." Yone shook his head. "It would have worked, too, if not for Orajuchi. Evidently the prince wanted Orajuchi to be the one to actually thrust him through the heart. Orajuchi could not do it, and finally he went to me, confessed all. By this time Sosano was already making his way for Kashima Village on the back of his pet deer. The Tsuchikage was away, and I had no time to find him. I rallied some other servants and went chasing after the boy. I found him right there, on the village green, with his sword unsheathed, still white, and the Bakura twins tied up at his feet. What would have happened next, I'll never know… because I tackled the boy to the ground.

"I expected a reward from the Sun Breaker for saving his son's life. I was a fool. When the Tsuchikage returned from Hiroshiki, he sat in judgement of us all. The children, Sosano and Orajuchi, were forgiven the worst crimes on account of their age… though Sawar whipped them both bloody, and took a firm hand in his son's education thereafter. As for myself... I had broken the law by entering Kashima Village without permission. Justice, Sawar called it. That's how he thinks. A good act does not wash out the bad, nor a bad act the good. Each should have its own reward. I saved the prince's life… yet I was also a lawbreaker. So Sougon Sawar gave me a big bag of gold, and so I was exiled to Kashima Village, an untouchable, never to leave again."

Sakura felt the goosebumps prickle along the flesh of her bare arms. A ghastly tale. It was so horrible she suspected it had to be true. "Sosa wanted you to tell me this story?"

"Aye, ninja-sama."

Outside the blacksmith's shop, in the pit dug by Kashima Shrine, the villagers were busy burying their dead. The wind blew the stench of charred bodies east, right across Sakura's face. Sakura could hear the wailing of those who had lost friends or family. Kashima Village had no priest, so they settled for a former one, Daiton Hagakure, to lead the funeral rites. Hagakure had been exiled from Iwa for incurable sexual perversions, for which he was called the Black Preacher.

The Black Preacher did his job serviceably. He burned incense and mournfully intoned the ancient prayers, the prayers that had already been old when the Sage of Six Paths walked the earth:

\[
\text{Fleeting alas are moments,} \\
\text{subject to rise and fall.} \\
\text{Having begun, they cease;} \\
\text{their subsiding is bliss.} \\
\text{So life goes on and on.}
\]

Then the villagers filled in the grave. People had gathered boughs of colorful wildflowers, and now they laid them on the dirt mound, a kind of makeshift tombstone. Nearly a hundred people had died in last night's fire. A hundred less mouths to feed when winter comes, Sakura thought, but felt guilty
for even thinking it.

"You know the Sougon clan well," she said.

"Aye," agreed Chikuda Yone.

"What if… what if things were different? Sawar the Sun Breaker is without mercy, as you say. But what if he were not the Tsuchikage? All would be changed. Sosa is the rightful heir, if he could come to power… Sosano would do right by Kashima Village."

"Will he now?" The blacksmith eyed her frankly. "I hope that's so, but once I might have said the same of Sawar himself."

"Why?"

"I was his sworn man. I'm old enough to remember Sougon Muu, and his children Sougon Onoki and Karumi. I knew Onoki and Karumi's four children, the Sougon Siblings, since they were in swaddling clothes. I'll tell you this—Sawar was never the same after he put on the white robes of the Tsuchikage. Some men are like swords, made for fighting. Hang them up and they go to rust."

"And his siblings?" Sakura asked.

Yone considered that a moment. "The Sougon Siblings are a tale for the minstrels, aye. I'd make a song about it, only I can't sing worth a cow's dungprint. Born in darkness and death, they were, forged in fire and blood. Yet each so different. Sawar is pure iron, black and hard and strong, yes, but brittle, the way iron gets. He'll break before he bends. Charasu is bronze, easy to hammer, easy to mold, but weak under pressure. And Shirasu, that one, he's copper, bright and shiny, pretty to look at but not worth all that much at the end of the day. Seurin… now Seurin was the true steel. The best of her brothers, and none of the flaws. She would have been the greatest Tsuchikage of them all. As strong as she was beautiful, as wise and kind as she was ever strong. Seurin Shadowstar… aye, but she's dead. Your Hokage cut out her heart."

Sakura paused. "And Sosano?"

"The boy? The Prince of Dawn, they call him. Yet I never knew anybody more sad, more cheerless. All his mother's talents, all his father's strength… but none of their purpose. I'll tell you true, ninja-sama, and I pray you listen before you throw away your sense. Stay away from Sougon Sosano. He's cursed, he is. That one is just waiting for the day that he can die."

For some reason, Sakura thought of her father.

Haruno Arashi had been nothing more than a living corpse towards the end. That had been in the big house with the red door, the house near Hashirama Square where she had been born. The house where tuberculosis had struck her father down. She'd watched her father waste away day by day, his strength fading to skin and bones, his scratchy pink beard hiding a face like a skeleton, too weak even to sit up in bed. Her father had coughed and coughed, dribbling sick purple blood all over his face with every breath, and it had been all so horrible that it was almost when a relief when Haruno Arashi had passed away at last. That had been the very last night of the eighth year of Sakura's life. Her father had made a last rattling gasp, and when the life went out of him, at that very instant, the fireworks had exploded outside the window, bathing his face in kaleidoscopic light.

A stranger's face. It had all seemed so unreal to her then. An impossibility against nature, how the life could go out of someone just like that. My father was the first dead man I ever saw.

"All men must die, Yone-san," she told the blacksmith.
And left him there.

Sakura made her way along the Gunna Road back to the village green. A noise was coming from the stone town hall; someone calling her name, calling her over with waving hands. When she looked up, she saw that Yukari and the other mist-nins were lounging on the roof. Onome who looked so much like her cousin Nonou, Kuina who blushed red as a tomato when she saw her. Yukari blew her a kiss.

"Sakura!" called Yukari. "When the winds blows through your hair like that, you look absolutely gorgeous!"

"Stop it, she's taken!" giggled Onome. "By Sosano the Prince of Dawn, no less…"

"The Prince of Bad Poetry, more like."

Sakura jumped onto the roof. "Sorry, Yukari. I prefer my lovers to be taller than my little sister." The scrawny mist-nin stuck out her tongue as Onome giggled again. "Now, what's this about?"

Yukari pointed.

The village elder, Urashima Montonobu, had come out of the town hall. A team of river-nins followed him… but instead of slighting them, Montonobu turned around and bowed to the river-nins. He got on his knees and knocked his head against the dirt, three times. Tears streamed down the old man's cheeks. Other villagers gathered around to do the same.

Sakura was shocked. "What did they do?"

"They paid the bribe."

"One million ryo?"

"One million each. Three million altogether."

"They couldn't possibly have been carrying that much money."

"Not coins, no. Promissory notes with the signature and seal of Rouga Eneki the Nightingale. Eneki's word is good as gold, and she's an ally of the Fourth Tsuchikage to boot. Montonobu will be able to trade the notes to Iwa for food, supplies, medicine."

Three million ryo. A sum that like would make one man rich for life. For an entire village, though… thousands of people lived in Kashima Village. Three million ryo might buy the villagers enough rice and salted pork to tide them through the winter, depending on the harvest they could salvage in the fall. But supplies to rebuild the houses destroyed in the fire? Clothes or cookware or candle wax? New livestock to replace the ones they'd lost? Medicine? All such purchases would be out of the question. For an entire village, three million ryo was a paltry sum indeed.

But far better than nothing.

Sakura studied the three river-nins. They were genin, of course, dressed in uniforms of light orange and pink, with headbands that prominently displayed the symbol of Kawagakure: an upside-down triangle crossed horizontally with a thick black bar, symbolizing the position of the village within the Haven River, its namesake.

Two were women and one was a man. The women wore hairnets with tiny jade rings. And they were women… the oldest seemed to be over forty, the same age as Sakura's own mother, with laugh
lines on her ruddy face and crow's feet around her dark eyes, a blue so deep they seemed almost purple. The second woman was about the same age, perhaps in her late thirties, twice as old as most of the genin in the exam. The man too seemed more a father than a youth, a luxuriant peppered beard sprouting from his weathered cheeks.

**Team Eneki.** According to Chief Inoichi's databook, it was a team of lifelong genin, despite the tutelage of such a renowned kunoichi as Rouga Eneki the Nightingale. Higeru Shinren, the oldest, had been a genin for decades. Her two teammates, the woman Yuntoku Yuu and the man Tadao Minbu, were hardly any more distinguished as ninjas. Yet here they are, in the second round of the toughest chunnin exam in history, giving away millions of ryo to strangers. Yuu was Eneki's sister-in-law, which explained how they had acquired the Nightingale's promissory notes.

Sakura was still wondering what to make of the river-nins when they jumped on the roof.

"Haruno Sakura," said Shinren. Her manner was warm, her voice pleasant, and when she bowed the tiny jade rings in her hair tinkled together like soft chimes. "It's pleasing to make a new friend."

"Likewise." **River sided with the Confederacy instead of the United Countries.** That made Team Eneki her enemy, technically… but not everything was that simple. Alliances could change quickly, and even within one village, not all ninja had the same loyalties. Team Kikuko had proved the truth of that. **Sougon Sawar will not like it if the river-nins help the untouchables.** "Friends are not so easy to come by, these days."

Shinren smiled. "Then we must stick together, when we meet them."

Yukari laughed. "Are you hitting on sweet Sakura, river-nin?"

"Alas, my husband would not approve." Shinren had a plain, matronly face, but her eyes sparkled with life and kindness. "Or my daughters. Bright girls, of an age with poor Urashima Kocho… I could not look upon her without feeling a pain here." She held a fist to her heart. "My life has been blessed in many ways. It was the least I could do, to share some of that blessing with those who need it far more than I."

"A shinobi of true honor," said Sakura.

Yukari laughed. "Never knew honor was so expensive."

Shinren laughed too, the jade rings in her graying hair clinking together in the wind. "I never knew it to be anything but."

Sakura remembered the River Country well. She'd crossed it during the United Countries Embassy, following the course of the Haven River from its starting point at Canaltown south through Kawagakure and Saitoi, and then into Grass. A small country, but rich. A land of broad streams and fertile soil, of bustling ports and teeming markets. Due to its importance as an economic artery for the entire North, River was often called "the Ricebowl Country." The richest country in the world by per capita income, its people were well known for their hospitality, charity, and social safety net. **Why would such a country join the Confederacy?** Sakura could think of only one reason.

They thought the Confederacy was going to win.

"Join us," Sakura said. She gestured to Yukari and the other mist-nins, then to herself. "Team Dayu burned down half of Kashima Village. The roads ahead are perilous, and three shuriken are better than two. If you travel with us, we'd be most grateful. I know the Hokage would be pleased."

"That is most kind of you." Higeru Shinren bowed again. "We accept."
Yukari scratched her bald head. "What about the First Lock? Montonobu still needs to give us the password."

"As to that," said Sakura, "I have an idea."

A little while later, Sakura, the Sand Siblings, Team Kikuko, and Team Eneki stood in front of the stone town hall. A team of swamp-nins from Numagakure was attempting to get past them to open the First Lock, but Temari brandished her War Fan with lethal intent. Kankuro grinned. "You ain't going nowhere. Not without paying the toll."

"What toll?" demanded Fukki Numazu of Team Yorai.

"The Untouchable toll," said Sakura. "The toll for the right to respect on the people of Kashima Village. A lot of money, I admit… but less costly than your life. You can pay the village now. Or you can fight us."

A angry vein pulsed down Numazu's thick, stocky neck. For half a heartbeat, the swamp-nin looked like he going to take Sakura up on her challenge. But then he lowered his bamboo staff, cowed by the overwhelming odds against him. "How much?" asked Numazu sullenly.

"Oh… everything you have. Got any promissory notes?"

And so it went, hour and hour, day by day. Genin teams would try to enter the stone hall one by one, only to be blocked by Sakura and her friends. Only after they paid a sufficiently dear toll did Urashima Montonobu give them the necessary command to open the First Lock—the command turned out to be a name, "Makotogao Rika the Martyr."

Montonobu had only asked for a bribe of one million ryo because so few genin had actually paid up, forcing him to make up the difference from those who were willing. With hundreds of genin now passing through Sakura's toll gate, Montonobu could lower the bribe to a more reasonable price, if still steep. Thousands of ryo, not a million. Some of the genin held out for a while, but eventually, everyone paid. With Team Tsunade, Team Yukari, and Team Eneki all protecting Kashima Village, there was no other way to get to the First Lock.

The extorted parties were, for the most part, not pleased. Especially the Confederacy. "I won't forget this, bitch," growled Fukki Numazu. A group of mist-nins spat in Yukari's face, and one river-nin actually tried to rush Shinren, calling her a traitor, before she tangled him up in a fishing net. The blood-nin Makoto Mazu of Team Muro threatened to report them to the chuunin examiners… which did absolutely nothing. Another stone-nin team, Team Zen, absolutely refused to give up any of their hard-earned money to untouchables. Temari took their money by force.

Other teams paid up readily, recognizing the justice of Sakura's cause to help Kashima Village. Among them numbered Team Ranka of Konoha, the boisterous Sarutobi twins back in the chuunin exam with a new teammate, Hatsutori Yashi, previously of Team Genma; Team Anagen of Cloud; and Team Dakun of Steam. Of course, Sakura and her friends themselves paid as much as they could afford.

It took another a day and a night for all the genin teams to pass through Kashima Village. By the time it was over, three days had passed since the Second Trial had started. Sakura and her friends were now the very last people in the whole exam… and they had only half a week to make it through the rest of the Scar. That was a daunting task, and Sakura was not sure they would able to finish in time.

But it was worth it.
Director Doi had set the Second Trial up so as to test the virtue of Duty. To bring different duties into conflict, and let each genin decide where their true values lay. Completing the mission or protecting the innocent? The way of terrorism, or the way of honor?

*I passed.*

They said goodbye to the people of Kashima Village the next morning. It was a hot, dry day, a day of clear bright skies and summer songbirds. The wind gusted fiercely, blowing lush bamboo leaves across the village green, making music in Singing Stick Hollow. Fresh new shoots were coming up again beneath the burned grass.

All the villagers bowed their heads to the hard-parked earth of the Gunnaí Road. Urashima Montonobu kowtowed until there was a bruise on his old wrinkled forehead, and Temari had to lift him up. Even the Elder's sick granddaughter, Kocho, came out for the occasion, borne on a litter carried by the Bakura twins.

The girl's coughing was worse than ever. "Grandfather said you would make me better," whispered Kocho, blood dribbling from her mouth. "He promised."

"I'm sorry," said Sakura. "The wasting sickness—"

"I'm not talking about that. You gave hope to the village." A smile broke on her lips, and for a moment, despite everything, despite the tuberculosis, despite her skeletal frame and rattling breath, the little girl Urashima Kocho was beautiful. "And to me. Thank you, Sakura-sama."

Montonobu nodded. "My granddaughter speaks truly. With the money you've helped us collected, we can rebuild Kashima Village. We can rebuild our lives. Food. Supplies, more than we can use. And…and medicine, to ease Kocho's pain. We owe you much, ninja-samas. We will not forget."

"Nor will we forget you," said Shinren.

"I'm glad." A quaver entered the old man's voice. "You've made many enemies."

"Yes."


Sakura looked around at the gathered villagers. She looked around at her teammates, Temari with her hard dark eyes, Kankuro with his smirking painted face. And at the others who'd helped her: the scrawny Yukari of Team Kikuko, the kindly, motherly Shinren of Team Eneki.

*Yes, thought Sakura, the right enemies. And the right friends.*
The Second Trial: The Gorge of Mists

The Gorge of Mists lay all in purple fog.

After leaving Kashima Village, Team Tsunade, Team Kikuko, and Team Eneki had traveled on the Gunnai Road for half a day to cross the remainder of the Gorge of Winds. They stopped briefly in Inaho Village, a sleepy collection of fishermen's huts by the Dreamstone River, eating fried cod, then trekked up the slopes of Mount Nagara to reach Facing Ice Falls.

Facing Ice Falls was a famous bowl-shaped waterfall between the Gorge of Winds and the Gorge of Mists. Here the Dreamstone River surged through the narrow canyon cliff between the two gorges, tumbling down hundreds of meters in a roar of spray and mist. It was one of the largest waterfalls in the Earth Country by volume, so loud that Sakura had heard it from kilometers away. Yet the waterfall itself was not the most impressive sight of Facing Ice Falls.

It was what lay beyond.

"The Ice Spear," said Yukari, when she saw it.

The Ice Spear was the tallest mountain in the world, rising high above the other peaks of the Dreamstone Mountains. Yet tricks of elevation and perspective kept it hidden from sight throughout most of the Scar. Only here, at Facing Ice Falls, was the view unobstructed.

At the top of the waterfall, on the slopes of Mount Nagara, was the ancient Kiyome pagoda called Saigani Temple. When they climbed to the highest level of the pagoda and looked west, the Ice Spear appeared on the horizon. At this distance it hardly looked bigger than a hill, yet the mountain was imposing all the same. If Sakura squinted, she could just make out the dagger point of glittering white ice.

Our final destination, she thought, fingers tightening on the map in her hand. The Ice Spear is the location of the Third Lock.

It was a long way before she would reach it.

Since the view from Facing Ice Falls stretched all the way to the Ice Spear, everything that lay between was also visible. Sakura beheld a vast river valley, hundreds of kilometers long and dozens of kilometers wide at its broadest point. Here the Dreamstone River had settled into a slow, meandering series of channels, less a river than a wetland. Long scrolls of purple mist rolled across the valley floor, dotted with trees and grassy plains, villages and temples, lakes and islands.

The Gorge of Mists. The second of the three great gorges of the Scar, and by far the largest. Where the Gorge of Winds had been steep and narrow, the Gorge of Mists was flat, tranquil. It is everything that I could have imagined. If the Gorge of Winds was the most beautiful thing Sakura had ever seen, the Gorge of Mists was the most peaceful.

She remembered something Sosano had once said. "It is only in the vastness of the mountains, that we are truly awake."

"Neh, you think so?" laughed a boy's voice. The boy slid from the roof into Saigani Temple. His body was lithe and glamorous, his skin pale as ice, his uniform nothing more than a robe of translucent white silk. An albino, and an extraordinarily beautiful one. The boy's red eyes glittered with seduction, his voice a breathy lisp. "It's vast enough, yeah, but where's the decoration?"
Sakura knew him.

*Kirazu Raiki*, the cloud-nin.

His teammates followed him into the temple. They were a contrast in opposites: Fukunaga Kazuno, the tall, chiseled warrior who walked so stiffly it seemed his spine was fused in place. Imidori Jouda, the little Hoka pygmy who delighted in pranks and tricks. *Team Darui, the strongest genin team in all of Kumogakure.* Sakura had met them during the First Trial, after the earthquake, and they'd fought together against the Confederacy.

When Kazuno spoke, his voice was deep as thunder. "In the Lightning Country, there is a place called the Sea of Clouds. Through the great walls of the Bulwark, past Howling Scream Canyon, into the commanding heights of the Cojira Mountains. A valley where the clouds float upon the mountains like an ocean. Only one thing rises above the Sea of Clouds, and that is Kumogakure itself. A village of spires and bridges, of storm and soaring steel. In comparison to our home, this Gorge of Mists is but a baby brother. You have not lived until you have seen it… the most beautiful sight in all the world."

"Well, I mean, besides me," added Raiki.

"Please forgive Raiki-kun. He is most vain, neh?"

"That's not what you told me in bed last night."

Temari snorted as Kazuno reddened. The two cloud-nins were in a confirmed homosexual relationship, but Kazuno was far too dignified to acknowledge it in public. "Yes, yes, he stuck his cock into your ass, but surely that did not take a whole day? Team Darui was one of the first teams to leave the Overlook, as I recall."

"We were waiting for Team Keel," the pygmy boy Jouda answered.

Yukari giggled, shaking her scrawny bald head. "Makera the Little Monster? He's long gone."

"So it appears," said Kazuno, frowning. "Facing Ice Falls is the only way through to the Gorge of Mists. A hundred genin teams we saw pass. But of the shark demon and his iniquitous ilk, there was not a sign. I do not know how they escaped us."

"Jeez, is your head made of air? Through the water, *stupid.* Sharks are the hunters, not the hunted. Makera would rather ambush *you* than the other way 'round. You'll see Team Keel again… but on their terms."

"Come with us," said Sakura.

"With you?" A bolt of electricity shot through Raiki's body from inside, lighting up his skull, showing his painted black teeth. "Kumo is no ally of the United Countries. Why should we trust you?"

"You did before."

"Under duress."

"We fought together against the Confederacy. Against Team Keel. What if Makera has other allies with him, as he did during the First Trial? You'll need allies of your own. Surely you cannot doubt which side we would take."
"They saved Dee," Imidori Jouda pointed out.

Sakura still remembered how the cloud-nin Juukan Dee had looked, that night in the Catacombs. A little twelve-year-old girl, naked and covered in blood. First Team Keel had murdered her teammates, then they had taken turns gang-raping her. If not for Temari, Dee would never have made it back to the surface alive. As it was, the girl had started to scream every time she woke up, terrorized by nightmares.

The memory left a bitter taste in Sakura's mouth, turning all the beauty of Facing Ice Falls to ash. Dee was the Raikage's niece. After Dee had returned to Kumo, it was said that the Raikage had cried day and night over her terrible sufferings. But it was the Raikage's fault for letting Dee come to Iwa in the first place. She was not ready, she had no business being in a chuunin exam such as this. No more than Akimichi Auni had been ready, or Hyuuga Nyuka, or Tenten.

No more than Nonou.

"I swore a vow of holy vengeance against Hoshigaki Makera," said Temari. "I swore to put Team Keel down like the animals they are. Join us."

Raiki shared a look with Kazuno. Then the albino cloud-nin grinned, red eyes glittering. "Alright, Temari. We'll join you. As long as you give me the killing blow."

"Done."

So nine became twelve.

The four genin teams clambered down the slopes of Mount Nagara to the western side of Facing Ice Falls. Now they had entered the Gorge of Mists proper. The rain that had fallen the day before still lingered in the sky in the form of fog. Waves of mist floated and curled above the plains like long smoky fingers. It had to do with the geography of the Scar, Sakura thought. The Gorge of Mists was a large bowl-shaped depression amidst the surrounding peaks of the Dreamstone Mountains. Clouds blown east from the Sea of Solitude rolled over the mountains and saturated the Gorge of Mists with water vapor. When the land cooled at night, the vapor condensed into layers of thick fog; in effect, low-lying clouds. The constant mist made the Gorge of Mists one of the most humid environments on earth.

There was much water on the ground as well. Summer melt from the Dreamstone Glacier fed into the Dreamstone River and its many tributaries, swelling them to such a height that they overflowed their banks. The flood of sediment-rich water in turn fed an astonishing variety of plant and animal life. First was Grebe Lake, a dagger-shaped lake at the eastern end of the Gorge of Mists, the last calm segment of the Dreamstone River before it tumbled toward Facing Ice Falls. Grebe Lake was famous being the home of grebes, a type of freshwater bird unique to the Earth Country. The birds made their nests on the mossy surface of the lake, diving beneath the surface to scarf up fish. It was the summer mating season, and the female grebes displayed ornate plumage, orange and red frills, as they made amorous squawking noises.

After Grebe Lake came the Biwa Valley. Here the Scar widened into a large hilly valley of rolling grass, wild flower beds of mountain roses, and small glacial streams from nearby Mount Owari. The largest stream had been named the Biwa River, though it existed only in summer, draining into the Dreamstone River at Kesa Village.

Their party followed the course of the Biwa River west and north. The afternoon sun blazed through the mist, lighting the meandering hills ahead. The way became oddly rocky, larger and larger stones turning under Sakura's feet. Then she realized they were not just stones, but ruins. The remnants of
The ancient city. Stone roads and stone houses, foundation walls and canals, temples and statues. It was all gone, and only the scattered rubble remained. There was not a single person in sight.

Yukari scratched her bald head. "What happened here?"

"The Sage of Six Paths," said Temari, closing her eyes in prayer.

The coming of the Sage of Six Paths, Senju Hagoromo, had transformed the Earth Country as it had transformed the rest of the North. In those days the Scar had been the most powerful and populous part of the Earth Country, home to the great mountain clans of Shiva. But the mountain clans had opposed Hagoromo, and so they and their Shiva religion had been destroyed. *Just like Agestone Keep.* Just like this nameless city, this empire of debris.

A pair of crumbling stone statues still stood by the river. A woman and a man, entwining their arms to make an archway for travelers to pass below. The man's face had fallen off, Sakura saw, and the woman wore a crown of moss, vines, and nesting birds.

"Goyu and Akasaka," said Sakura.

"What?" asked Kankuro.

"It's a famous folk tale in the Earth Country. Goyu and Akasaka were legendary lovers who were turned into stars so that they could live forever, yet are fated to cross only once a year. The night of their destined meeting is called Lover's Eve, the seventh day of the seventh lunar month... a few weeks from now, in fact. It's a major holiday in Iwa. People write love poems to hang on bamboo branches, exchange gifts, and watch the stars."

Raiki tittered, slipping a slim pale hand around Kazuno's waist. "Once a year, neh? I don't think I can hold it in that long."

Kazuno coughed. "You cannot hold it in for half a day."

"Only 'cuz you keep throwing yourself at me."

Sakura thought of Sosano. *He's somewhere in the Gorge of Mists, ahead of us.* Was he waiting for her? And if so... to what end? Sosano was her lover, yes, but Sosano was also a shinobi of Iwagakure. One of the leaders of the Confederacy that was trying to destroy Konoha. *He is my enemy, no matter what he claims.*

If only things had been simpler. Iwa had not even existed before the coming of the Sage of Six Paths. The Sougon clan had used to live in the Scar, one family among many. A family of samurai: noble but not rich, respected but not powerful. Only after the Sougon had joined with the Sage had they risen to their present heights. Only then had they awakened the bloodline power of the Enshogan eye.

*How different would things be, if the Sage had never come?* The entire world would be changed. There would be no ninjas. No chakra jutsu. No Akatsuki, or Annihilation Device, or Enshogan. *I could find Sosa, and kiss him, and not have to worry about anything else. We could make love on Mount Echigo and watch the dawn.*

But the past could never be changed.

Sakura had learned that long ago, on the day her father had died.

The Gorge of Mists was much larger than the Gorge of Winds; bigger than the other two gorges of
the Scar put together. After a day of travel they'd scarcely crossed a fourth of it. It was night when they finally crossed Biwa Valley and arrived at a small human settlement on the banks of its western edge, where the Biwa River intersected with the immensity of the Musashi Plains.

*Kesa Village.*

The village was the largest they had yet encountered in the Scar, half again as big as Kashima Village. Yet it was strangely silent. Stars spread across the night sky... a hundred constellations bright with myth. The necklace of Tsukuyomi. The sacred drum of Noh. The goddess Amaterasu, and the monster Izanagi who pursued her. The hunter Susanoo and his sword Kusanagi. The Seven Brothers who always pointed north. *Goyu and Akasaka.* The streets were thick with forest shadows. There were only lights on in a few houses, and a dying bonfire in the village green.

A group of ninjas stood around the fire pit. Sand-nins, by the look of their white head-wraps and blue and beige nylon uniforms. The leader seemed to be a boy, short and thin. *Friends,* Sakura thought, except when she got close enough to see the boy's face, and she realized just which sand-nin it was.

"Satetsu," said Kankuro.

The boy stuttered when he tried to speak. "S-s-sand..." He spoke like a woman giving birth, in fits and starts, yet his dark beady eyes did not blink once. "Sand-s-siblings."

"That's us." Kankuro brandished his puppets before him. "Funny to meet you."

"Why?" The boy grimaced. "Because y-your brother k-k-killed my f-father?"

"Your father was an Akatsuki traitor."

Ryokan Mukade the Puppeteer had been an illustrious, decorated shinobi; the second most powerful man in Sunagakure. That had not been enough for him, however. Mukade had been implacably opposed to Gaara, going so far as to secretly ally with Akatsuki to overthrow Gaara as Kazekage. In the Battle of Red Rock Cliff the struggle between Mukade and Gaara for political supremacy had come to open war. In the end Gaara had killed him in decisive combat. Sakura still remembered how Mukade's corpse had looked, flattened on the sand like a pancake, and how Gaara had stood triumphantly atop the corpse.

Mukade's son had survived the battle, however.

And now he was in the Second Trial of the 54th Iwa Chuunin Exam.

"Traitor?" Ryokan Satetsu looked exactly like a miniature, younger version of his father. The pinched face, the hooked nose and beady eyes and thin stooped shoulders. *Like a little leathery rat.* "H-h-he was. Not me."

"You wrong him," said another of the sand-nins. Hattori Bakan, Satetsu's teammate; his voice trembling like a reed in the wind. "Wrong us. We fought against you in Red Rock Cliff, yes, but we were only following orders."

Temari's eyes were chips of flint. "The wrong orders."

"You did it, too. Or did you forget the December 7th Attack? You nearly helped Orochimaru the White Snake destroy Konoha." Bakan gestured to Sakura, his delicate, bird-like face shaking with resentment. "We're loyal shinobi of Suna. You have no right to judge us."
Ryokan Satetsu turned away. "Enough." The bonfire in the pit had gone out, red embers glowing faintly. "It's l-late. We'll speak in the m-m-morning."

Kesa Village was big enough that there were an inn, and rooms available to rent. Team Darui took out a private suite there, the better for Raiki and Kazuno to engage in various nocturnal activities. For their part, Team Tsunade, Team Kikuko, and Team Eneki slept outdoors, having given away all their money in Kashima Village. Sakura found a patch of soft grass by the riverbank to sleep on, the cool evening dew soothing her tired muscles.

She was asleep when Shinren woke her. "Someone's coming."

Shinren had been on watch duty, keeping a lookout for any danger. Sakura stared in the direction that the kunoichi pointed.

A boy came running over, panting. His face was pale, pinched with tension.

It was Satetsu.

"A-a-a-am-a-am—"

"Am what?"

"—Ambush!" Satetsu finished.

The ground exploded.
The Second Trial: Jewel Islands, Part 1

The ground exploded.

Sakura was thrown back hard by the force of the explosion, landing on her belly a dozen meters away. *Earth jutsu!* Shouting was coming from Kesa Village as well. Sakura searched wildly for her attackers.

"The r-r-river!" shouted Satetsu.

"Earth Release: Sinister Spikes!"

"Earth Release: Bedrock Coffin!"

"Earth Release: Earthquake!"

The jutsu erupted one after the other, encircling Sakura and her comrades. Swarms of sharp earthen spears, the very ground itself shaking, a massively expanding sinkhole that threatened to swallow the entire riverbank. A trap of death. Touin Yukari, the mist-nin, stepped forward at the last moment with her response to the ambush.

"Ice Release: Ice Prison!"

A thick dome of ice crystallized from the water vapor in the air. The onrushing Sinister Spikes crashed into the Ice Prison and shattered, breaking harmlessly on the impenetrable, translucent ice. Ice also formed beneath their feet—a protective layer that froze the muddy ground and arrested the sinkhole.

Then the bombs started to detonate.

Tiny figurines of clay, leaping from the darkness onto Yukari's dome of ice. The figures exploded like a string of holidays lights, blowing holes in the ice and shattering the top of the dome. *Explosive Clay!* Sakura recognized with a bloodline jutsu of none other than the stone-nin Chuzuru Jibachi. Jibachi had the ability to mold an unique red substance called explosive clay from the mouths in his hands, shaping the clay into any form he wanted and then detonating it on command.

More clay sculptures continued to swarm through the holes in the Ice Prison. A doll in the shape of an oversized frog hopped next to Sakura and the Sand Siblings. Temari swiped her Giant War Fan at it, launching the frog upwards in the air just before it exploded. The light from the explosion was so bright it lit up half the night sky.

"We're outnumbered!" Temari shouted. "We need to make a run for it."

Sakura saw it was true. Their attackers were approaching in force now, a pincer ambush from both the river and from Kesa Village. There had to be dozens of them. Stone-nins, mist-nins, swamp-nins, river-nins. *It's the Confederacy.*

The worst thing was, most of their faces were familiar.

Very recently familiar.

"Everybody we pissed off in Kashima Village," observed Kankuro.

Yukari laughed. "As Grandma Kikuko says, let no good deed go unpunished!"
The leaders of the ambush strode to the fore. Chuzuru Jibachi, the B-rank stone-nin on Team Jidai. Wicked red tongues lolled from all three of his mouths, the one in his face and the two growing from his palms. And the swamp-nin Fukki Numazu, of Team Yorai, brandishing a whirling bamboo staff.

"You tried to cheat the Confederacy," said Numazu. "Now we want our money back."

"We gave it to the people of Kashima Village," said Sakura.

"Then you'll repay us with your lives."

"Haruno Sakura!" shouted Jibachi. "Noatari Chusei was my friend and teammate. You killed him! Prepare to die."

The Confederacy genin rushed forward as one—

Sakura punched the ground.

The entire hill in front of her crumpled. Her Chakra Enhanced Strength was enough to send fissures through the earth and rip apart the very stones that held the hill together. Numazu toppled over on his butt, and Jibachi disappeared into a sinkhole. An opening, but not for long. "The river!" she shouted. "Follow me, we've got to break through!"

Most of the stronger ambushers, including Numazu and Jibachi, were concentrated on the high ground, facing Kesa Village. They'd never escape that way. The river was a more fertile alternative. Sakura ran for it, fists raised in front of her. An opposing ninja raised an Earth Wall to stop her. Sakura simply punched a hole in it and kept on going. Beside her, Temari used her Giant War Fan to cleave a path through their enemies, and Kankuro used his puppets to violently fell those who got too close.

The United Countries genin were running up the Biwa River now, sprinting for the broad Musashi Plains to the west. The meandering river bent and twisted until it crested to the high point of Jubei Dam, a little ahead of Kesa Village. Sakura ran directly up the side of the concrete dam and into the heart of the Gorge of the Mists. It was still night, but not for long. When she looked back, toward the east, fingers of rosy red peeked over the jagged horizon. Dawn is coming.

And with it, their enemies.

Temari bit her thumb and pressed the bloody cut on her War Fan. "Summoning Technique! Wind Release: Great Wind Scythe!"

The white weasel Kamatari appeared in a puff of smoke. Simultaneously, Temari opened the War Fan to its full extent, all three purple eyes showing, and then swept it outwards in an arc. The fan whipped up a giant tempest, uprooting trees and even picking up the water of the river itself. Kamatari rode the swirling winds, a blur too fast to be seen, slicing down everything in his path. The cumulative effect was truly devastating, a giant tsunami of cleaving wind that reduced the area below the dam to a muddy shambles.

"You get 'em, sister!" exulted Kankuro.

"They're not dead," Temari replied. "Only delayed."

The Confederacy ninjas below had scattered, hiding behind Earth Walls and other stone barricades. One of them stood up and fired a storm of lightning out of his hands, blasting a giant crack in Jubei Dam. The dam began to shake.
"Shit! How do we lose them?"

Temari shrugged. "Run faster."

Simple advice, and there were no objections. Sakura led the way upriver. The swollen Dreamstone River so overflowed its banks that water covered the surface nearly as far as the eye could see, almost like a small wetland sea. Here and there grassy knolls sloped out of the watery marsh, and long tangles of floating fog. Their scrambling footsteps made ripples on the clear smooth water. An oddly meditative sound, Sakura thought. It was almost easy to forget they were running for their lives. Once they ran right through an entire flock of plovers swimming around a bend in the river. The tiny yellow plovers flapped placidly out of the way, beating their wings into the sky…

… and exploded.

"A-b-b-bove!" shouted Ryokan Satetsu.

Sakura looked up, and was shocked to see a dragon circling high overhead. Then she looked closer, and saw the dragon was made of clay. Jibachi! Jibachi was raining death down on them from the sky. Bombs of explosive clay exploded all around them. Behind them, more Confederacy jutsu closed off the possibility of escape anywhere except ahead.

It was a running battle all the way. Sakura and her comrades were only ten. Team Tsunade; the river-nins, Team Eneki; the mist-nins, Team Kikuko; and Ryokan Satetsu. Satetsu had been separated from his teammates in the chaos of the ambush. The cloud-nins of Team Darui were nowhere to be seen. Either they were still holed up in Kesa Village, or escaping in a different direction. Or dead.

Sakura could not dedicate much brainpower to the problem. She had to figure out to stay alive, as dozens of the most dangerous genin in the Confederacy continued to chase them. It was all they could do just to stay ahead. Temari used her wind attacks, Yukari froze the river water and made obstacles of ice. Higeru Shinren and her river-nins threw booby trap nets laced with explosive tags.

Kankuro suddenly skidded to a stop. "What's that?"

"What?" asked Sakura.

"That, ahead of us."

A chain of tiny islands spread out all around them—each one no bigger than a city block. Lush mangrove thickets covered the islands, their roots sinking into the river like a thousand arched wooden bridges, and beneath the canopy Sakura could see the shadows of hidden caves. The rising sun made the water shine like a glittering sheet of light. "The Jewel Islands," said Sakura. Gemstones scattered across the Scar by the eternal flow of the Dreamstone River.

"No, not the islands." Kankuro pointed. "I mean that."

At first Sakura still did not see it. But then she did. A thin line of white scrawled on the rocks of the Jewel Islands, so faint as to be almost invisible. No—it was more than a line. It was…

Oh, fuck.

The Barrier Trap activated.

The white line burned as bright as the sun. Translucent purple walls sprang up along its length in every direction, curving to a common point above their heads. The Barrier Trap had activated as soon as the UC genin had entered the sealed area; they'd walked right into it.
Sakura cursed her blindness. Now it was obvious Jibachi, Numazu, and the other Confederacy ninjas had chased them on purpose. Herding them to this specific location in the Jewel Islands. So the trap was sprung.

"Haha! I told you, sister!" A little boy's voice. "They're so stupid!"

"You're right, Sebi. There, there, aren't you such a smart boy?" A girl's voice now. It came from the nearest Jewel Island. The girl and the little boy emerged from within a thicket of mangroves, holding each other's hands. Fondly the girl stroked her younger brother's hair, a tangled red streaked with blue. "Dumb Team Tsunade. Running right into our trap. They're dead. Deader than Kawai's pasty white face."

"Why, Rei, thank you." A third voice. A third figure crawling out from below a rock, like a slithering snake. "You know how much I love death." The waterfall-nin grinned until his mouth split apart into a morass of black threads.

It was Team Dayu.

Sakura knew them. *Oh yes, I know you all.*

Misain Sebi, the sadistic twelve-year-old pyromaniac.

Misain Rei, Sebi's older sister.

And Onira Kawai. The killer of Unchiku Nonou, the executioner of Azuraki Han. The freakish chimera of surgical experimentation, his doll-like body stitched together by poisonous black threads.

Sakura's heart pounded in dread. *Team Dayu is one of the most dangerous genin teams in the world.* Especially here. Especially in a closed space, surrounded by water—

"MIZUHO!" screamed Misain Sebi.

The entire river lit on fire. Everything within the wide circumference of Team Dayu's barrier circle—everything as far as the eye could see—was suddenly filled with blinding Mizuho flames. Waterfire that burned and consumed all that it touched—

"Ice Release!"

Yukari pressed her hands to the surface of the water, freezing the location immediately under their feet. Her Ice Release bloodline powers were a direct counter to Mizuho; waterfire could only burn on water, not ice. Yet she could only freeze a small part of the river. They literally drifted on a piece of ice in a sea of fire. The ice steamed and melted whenever it touched the burning water around it; Yukari grunted with the strain of maintaining the Ice Release.

Behind them, the chasing Confederacy genin had caught up. A team of mist-nins joined their hands together. "Water Release: Water Dragon Bullet!" To Sakura's surprise, the large wave of water shaped like a dragon went through the purple walls of the Barrier Trap and slammed into her ice floe with a tremendous crash. Yukari's teammate Tsunaga Kuina nearly fell off into the sea of fire before Kankuro grabbed her with a chakra string.

"What the fuck!" shouted Yukari.

*Things can come into this barrier circle, but they can't go out!* The realization came just in time for Sakura to look up and witness Chuzuru Jibachi drop a gigantic bomb on them from the sky. The clay bomb was the size of a house and looked exactly like Jibachi himself, right down to his mismatched
eyes and grinning leer. It plunged through the roof of the Barrier Trap straight toward Sakura. If it hit the ice floe, nobody could possibly survive.

"Temari!" she shouted.

"It's no good!" Temari shouted back. "If I use wind jutsu the bomb will just explode!"

"Let me!" said Higeru Shinren.

The graying matron with jade rings in her hair drew a mirror from the pouch at her waist. The mirror was no larger than the size of her palm, and strangely translucent: made from chakra as much as from green jade. A poor match for Jibachi's massive bomb, it seemed… until Shinren turned it skyward. And suddenly the surface of the mirror glittered with an indescribably beautiful, hidden light.

"Secret Truth Reflection!" shouted Shinren.

The bomb touched the mirror and exploded. But the explosion disappeared as soon as it was created —sucked into the depths of the Reflection Mirror. In the same breath Shinren spun the mirror and pointed it at the Jewel Island in front of her. Exploding clay came out of the mirrored surface and shot toward the island like a rocket. Team Dayu had to scramble out of the way before the redirected bomb consumed them. The island itself was torn asunder, dirt and rock and burning trees flying into the air.

And behind the island, a hole.

A large smoking circle in the translucent purple wall of the Barrier Trap. Jibachi's own bomb had blown a hole in the chakra barrier. Their opening to escape.

"Bitch!" screamed Misain Rei.

The waterfall-nin girl was livid, her voice more fearsome than her face. Burning water covered her tall, sharp body from head to toe, alive with the power of Mizuho fire. At her side, her little brother almost seemed peripheral. Misain Sebi was no taller than Sakura's own sister, his face still round with baby fat. Yet his eyes were lit with a wild, extreme ecstasy. He loves it, thought Sakura. He loves this, this power.

"Sebi, kill them! Make them burn!"

The boy did not have to be asked twice. Burning water poured from his outstretched hands, bright as molten metal, congealing before him into a giant, towering shape. "Mizuho: Weeping Golem!" he screamed. The golem was a statue of Mizuho fire. Its fists were crashing waves, destroying all in its path. Sakura knew the kinjutsu— forbidden because the golem did not distinguish friend or foe, even to the point of attacking the user himself. But that did not matter here. Sebi and Rei were immune from Mizuho, and Kawai was effectively immortal. The third waterfall-nin had turned himself into a giant web of slithering black threads. Tentacles hurtled toward them from above, each one dripping deadly poison.

"Wind Release: Vortex!"

Temari flashed a series of hand seals. Miniature tornados swirled above her head, blocking the tentacles with shields of intense air pressure. Another Vortex appeared in the center of Sebi's Weeping Golem and rooted it in place. The Golem roared and slammed its fists against the river of fire. Burning waves rippled outward to dash against the banks of scattered Jewel Islands.

"Damnit, the hole!" shouted Kankuro.
Sakura looked toward the far side of the barrier circle. The hole was slowly closing, the purple chakra barrier healing itself. Within minutes the hole would be sealed, and they would trapped again with no way out.

Nor was it easy to get through the existing hole. The Weeping Golem and all three members of Team Dayu stood there, guarding it vigilantly. *This just gets worse and worse.*

Behind her, on the other side of the barrier, dozens of Confederacy ninjas were still attacking, flinging elemental jutsu through the one-way Barrier Trap. Shinren did her best to deflect the jutsu with her Reflection Mirror, but it was not nearly enough. From the sky above, Jibachi was still dropping bombs—small guided clay missiles now, instead of his big bombs. The missiles had far smaller explosive yields, but they were also far harder to defend against. Kankuro, Satetsu, Sakura, and the others desperately defended against the combined Confederate assault.

A slimy black tentacle thrust up suddenly from beneath the ice floe. *Kawai is attacking us from under the water!* Sakura watched in horror as the tentacle impaled one of Shinren's teammates through the chest. The river-nin Tadao Minbu shrieked as the poison of Death and Decay entered his body and made his heart shrivel into a blackened stump. The end of his life was a blissful release from the pain. "Minbu!" Shinren screamed. Another tentacle erupted, then another. *We've got to break out of this trap, now, or it's over!*

"Yukari!" she shouted. "Can you teleport?"

The girl shook her head fiercely. Sweat poured down her pale white face from the strain of maintaining her Ice Release. "I could. But if I do, my ice will melt. And then you'll die."

*If not Yukari, then who? Who could break the blockade? Temari had her hands full with Jibachi and Kawai. Shinren's jutsu was powerful defensively, but she could not attack Team Dayu with it. And Sakura didn't have the speed. Unless I open all my Chakra Gates. She could open… three? Four? Would that be enough to breach the combined defenses of Team Dayu?*

"Me," said Sabaku Kankuro.

"Kankuro!" warned Temari.

Sakura could see the fear in the sand-nin's eyes. Fear for her brother's life. Fear that she could not protect him, that he would die before her. Yet Sakura knew at once that Kankuro spoke the truth. *It must be him, there is no one else.*

"Do it," said Sakura. "Now!"

"Cover me!"

Kankuro leaped off the ice floe, his puppets trailing after him like mechanical kites. Just before he hit the surface of the burning river Temari made a Vortex under his feet. The tornado supported Kankuro's weight in the air, propelling him forward at astonishing speeds. Team Dayu did not anticipate the sudden attack. In seconds Kankuro was in their midst, causing havoc with his puppets. Karasu, the four-armed scarecrow, slashing at Rei and Sebi with weaponry-laden limbs. Kuroari, the barrel-chested humanoid, grabbing Kawai's tentacles and twisting them in knots. Sanshouo, his new defensive puppet, blocking Mizuho fire and tentacles alike with its huge iron frill.

"Puppet Clone!" Kankuro shouted. Puppets multiplied in puffs of white smoke, more and more, dozens of them... and each connected by chakra strings to the others, allowing Kankuro to control them by proxy. Soon Sakura could not tell what were the real puppets and what were the clones.
Neither could Team Dayu, it seemed. Sebi shrieked in fury, throwing Mizuho jutsu every which way, trying to hit Kankuro at the center of his cloud of puppet clones. The Weeping Golem howled and punched its burning fists into the cloud.

"Let's go!" said Yukari. "We've only a few seconds—"

Temari swung her fan behind them. The resulting gust of wind acted as a sail, driving their ice floe forward across the sea of fire. With enough speed, they could charge right past the distracted Team Dayu and cruise through the hole in the Barrier Trap to freedom. As they got closer, Sakura supported Kankuro's frontal assault with genjutsu, and Satetsu did the same with his sound-based jutsu, such as False Echo and Sonic Pulse.

The timing had to be perfect…

"Black Spines!" screeched Onira Kawai.

Black threads shot out of Kawai's elongated spinal cord, like the spines on a sea urchin, striping the sky in lines of black and blue. At the same moment, the golem somehow decided to ignore Kankuro and began to focus its attentions on the rapidly approaching ice floe. It lumbered right into their path, blocking access to the open hole. "Fuck!" shouted Sakura.

Then Kankuro was there.

Bursting from within his cloud of puppet clones, riding on the frill of Sanshouo like riding a horse. The salamander-like puppet landed on the Weeping Golem's head and opened its hinged jaws… revealing a large bomb within its mouth. The bomb was entirely covered in explosive tags. Thousands of tags stacked one on top of the other.

"Die, you stupid weasel!" shrieked Sebi.

Sanshouo blew up.

All of it blew up, a huge inferno of flame and heat. The explosion was so bright Sakura had to turn her head away to avoid being blinded. When she looked back, the Weeping Golem had evaporated into steam, Team Dayu was nowhere to be found, and the United Countries genin had escaped through the hole in the Barrier Trap. The hole closed as soon as they passed through it.

The timing was perfect.

"Kankuro!" Temari screamed.

*He's dead,* thought Sakura. Kankuro had sacrificed himself to save the rest of them, using his life to open the way to escape. The thought brought unexpected tears to her eyes.

"T-t-there!" said the sand-nin Ryokan Satetsu.

Sakura followed his pointing finger. A body floated in the water ahead of them, a boy in a black uniform, red with spreading blood. It was Kankuro. Sakura ran across the river to his side at once, checking for vital life signs. Kankuro groaned as she turned him onto his back underneath a chakra field. The sand-nin was badly injured, but still alive. Still in one piece.

"How is he?" Temari demanded.

"I broke some stuff," answered Kankuro. "Ribs. My arm, I think. And Sanshouo." He grinned slyly through the pain. "Broke that Barrier Trap too. Did you see me, sister?"
"Yes. Your bomb scattered the mist-nins like so much spilled rice. You saved us, brother. But you were caught in the midst of the explosion. I… I feared…"

"Naw. I told you guys, Sanshouo is tough. Ain't nothing going to get through that iron frill. It shielded me."

"From death. But not from injury." Sakura scanned Kankuro's body with her Mystical Palm jutsu. "Your sternum, three of your true ribs, right leg, and right arm are all broken. And there's internal bleeding. It's bad."

To underscore her point, a roar of Mizuho fire flared up again behind them. Then the barrier circle itself dissolved—canceled since it was useless to the Confederacy now—and revealed a very unpleasant sight within. Team Dayu had survived Kankuro's bomb. All three of them.

Satetsu stuttered. Yukari sighed loudly. Shinren stood up from where her dead teammate lay flat on the ice floe, making a fist around her Reflection Mirror, fierce resolution in her eyes.

They'd broken out of the trap, but the fight was not over.

Not nearly over.
They'd broken out of the barrier trap, but the fight was not over.

Not nearly over.

"Damn," said Kankuro.

"Run!" said Temari.

Sakura picked up Kankuro in her arms and ran. A giant wave of Mizuho fire chased them from behind, Sebi putting all his efforts into the attack. At first the waterfire was so close that Sakura could feel the heat lapping at her heels. But the Mizuho wave was not quite as fast as adrenaline-fueled shinobi. Ahead the way was clear: glittering turquoise water, the byzantine green maze of the Jewel Islands, and then open country beyond. If they kept up their pace the Confederacy could not catch them…

… until Jibachi dropped a chain of bombs in front of them.

"Shit!" cursed Sakura, skidding to a stop. Jibachi's barrage of bombs made a long line right across their path—impossible to directly cross. Behind, a wave of Mizuho continued to race forward.

"I'll take out Jibachi!" said Yukari. A mirror of ice dilated in front of her; she stepped through it into the sky above. "Split up, don't them trap us again!" The mirror disappeared.

Temari did not have to be asked twice. She took one glance at Kankuro and Sakura. Then she turned decisively and ran back the way they'd come… straight toward the wave of burning Mizuho. Her unfolded Giant War Fan glittered in the bright fiery light.

"Temari!" shouted Kankuro.

"Jealous?" Temari held her fan high above her head, slamming it down on the water. "My turn now! Wind Release: Great Wind Scythe!"

Sebi's Mizuho and Temari's tempest collided in a giant elemental storm. Burning red fire, pure swirling wind—surging all together amidst the water, breaking apart again. The shockwave across the surface of the Dreamstone River was so intense that Sakura was carried hundreds of meters away in an instant. When she looked around, the others had disappeared. Only Kankuro was still at her side. They'd lost everyone else.

"Damnit!" said Kankuro. "We can't win like this."

Sakura nodded. The Jewel Islands were in complete chaos. Elemental jutsu lit up the cloudless sky—ice needles and exploding clay bombs, Yukari locked in a fierce duel with Jibachi. On the ground, fire clashed with wind as Temari struggled to hold back Team Dayu. The battle was so fragmented it was hard to tell what was happening. Sakura caught glimpses of the others, Shinren using Secret Truth Reflection against a group of stone-nins, Ryokan Satetsu flinging sound jutsu against another team of swamp-nins. We're outnumbered. Sakura could do nothing about that, but perhaps she could…

Making a quick hand seal, she cried, "Mirrored Clone!"

It was the first time Sakura had used her new jutsu in battle. Two mud clones rose up beside her;
their bodies densely packed with chakra, their brains mindless and empty. When Sakura extended her chakra field to either side, she could dimly sense them. Then it was just a skilled trick to connect their brains to her own... binding them to her with invisible cables thick as a spinal cord, like a chakra string coiled back onto itself a hundred times over.

She saw through three sets of eyes.

The overlapping fields of vision immediately disoriented her. Sakura had just enough training not to throw up; but she staggered nonetheless. The clones lurched as well. Like using puppets, Kankuro had told her. Like an extension of your own body, like extra limbs or eyes.

"Jeez!" yelped Kankuro, almost tumbling from her arms. "Didn't I teach you anything?"

"Yeah, you taught me how to be really annoying."

Sakura directed her clones to run in opposite directions. One towards Shinren, the other towards Satetsu. With Mirrored Clone, I can be in three places as one. That meant three times the support; which in turn meant three times the amount of aggravation for her enemies. As for her real body, Sakura clambered up the bank of the closest Jewel Island and dove through the tangled mangroves.

"Where are we going?"

"You're so ungrateful."

Sakura gently lowered Kankuro's crippled body to the forest floor. Then she began to stitch his bones back together. Mystical Stitching, the jutsu was called. Tsunade-sensei had taught it to her before the Second Trial, and it was proving to be extremely useful. First she set Kankuro's femur. Then she pierced a chakra string through the two pieces of broken bone, tying them together. With enough chakra, she could make the stitches as strong and hard as steel. Soon Kankuro would be able to walk again.

Meanwhile, her two Mirrored Clones had arrived at their destinations. Sakura gasped with the effort. The further the Mirrored Clones got from her real body, the harder it was to control them, and the more concentration she needed to maintain the genjutsu connection.

Three sets of eyes looked upon three different vistas. Kankuro groaning beneath shadowed mangroves. Shinren surrounded in the water, Mizuho fire burning behind her. Satetsu clutching his neck, blood welling beneath his pale fingers. Sakura had arrived to help just in time.

"There you are," said a voice behind her real body.

A dry voice, hard as withered bark. From underneath the ground, a brown and desiccated shape emerged in the shape of a genin boy. The swamp-nin, Fukki Numazu. Sakura remembered fighting Numazu during the First Trial. The desperate, insane battle around the Pillar of Heaven. When she'd tried to cut his head off, his neck had bent instead of breaking. Numazu had used the jutsu Reed Transformation to turn his body into sharp, flexible reeds.

"Hey," said Sakura. "I'm busy, why don't you wait in line?"

A dozen swamp-nins appeared behind Numazu.

Numazu grinned. "I've waited long enough."

Sakura made a hand seal. "Mirrored Clone!"
As soon as the Mirrored Clone formed, she made it punch the ground. The punch was so badly aimed that her clone blew up its own arm, leaving only a muddy stump. But it didn't matter. The rest of the chakra-enhanced blow pulverized the soft forest earth, ripping open a crater a hundred meters long. Numazu's reedy body tumbled into the sudden hole and bounced satisfyingly. "Fuck!" raged the swamp-nin boy. "Not again!"

Sakura scooped up Kankuro in her arms and ran. Behind her, huge green-black crocodiles were emerging from the crater. Numazu had summoned the crocodiles to devour her. They were astonishingly fast; when her Mirrored Clone tried to punch one, two others clamped down on the clone's legs and tore it into muddy strips. But the clone bought Sakura enough time to escape. She ran across the diameter of the Jewel Island, through a half-buried limestone cave, and then out the other side. A vast vista of smoke and burning fire stretched before her. Mizuho was everywhere.

"Can you fight?" she asked Kankuro. So far she'd managed to stitch his leg together, but not his arm or his ribs.

"Do I have a choice?"

"Good point."

Sakura sprinted across the river toward where her Mirrored Clone was fighting with Shinren. Beneath her, under the water, long dark shapes materialized. Crocodiles! The deadly reptiles were faster still in the water. She could not outrun them… they started to circle around her…

Fukki Numazu laughed in the distance. "You're dead!"

He was not wrong, though it took longer than Numazu expected. Sakura made more Mirrored Clones, sacrificing them like exploding depth charges to hold back the onslaught of crocodiles. Kankuro used his banged-up puppets Karasu and Kuroari to carve up more crocodiles, then released poison to paralyze several swamp-nins. The Dreamstone River ran red with blood.

"Sakura!" Shinren called to her. She was still in the midst of fighting a team of stone-nins. Shinren had managed to knock one out with her Reflection Mirror, but the others were closing fast. Sakura's Mirrored Clone swayed awkwardly at Shinren's side, in no way capable of doing much more than providing chakra support.

It was easier for Sakura to control her Mirrored Clones, however, now that they were close together. Sakura threw one of her chakra-cast kunai to her clone, pulling on the attached chakra string. The glittering string-razor-sharp-stretched taut between them from one Jewel Island to the next. The clone dove underwater, slicing crocodiles apart by the dozen with the sharp thread. Meanwhile, the sand-nin boy Ryokan Satetsu joined them in flight. Evidently he was running for his life.

"Cr-r-r-roc-" he stuttered.

"We know!" Kankuro screamed.

Satetsu turned toward the swamp-nins, then opened his mouth and shrieked. "Wind Release: Shatter!" A supersonic blast of sound unexpectedly burst from the throat of the stuttering, inarticulate sand-nin. Sakura clapped her hands around her ears though she wasn't even in the cone of attack. High-pitched waves of vibration propagated outward, shattering every single brittle or pressure-sensitive object in its area of effect... including eardrums. Swamp-nins collapsed in the water, writhing, blood leaks out of their ears. Packs of crocodiles went belly up, momentarily stunned.

But not Fukki Numazu.
The bastard was made of reeds, immune to sound-based attacks, and his Reed Transformation attacks were deadlier still. His bamboo staff was like some kind of shotgun, spraying jagged reed bullets indiscriminately. Sakura had no choice but to engage Numazu directly just to stop him from picking them off at range. Her fists against Numazu's staff, Shinren's Secret Truth Reflection against Numazu's lightning jutsu. Kankuro and Satetsu fought off the seemingly endless mob of crocodiles. Yet for all that they were always outnumbered, always on the run. Sakura knew the desperate, exhausting fight could end in only one outcome. The death of the United Countries.

And then Numazu finally had them. Swamp-nins and crocodiles pressing in on all sides, chasing them like a pack of frothing dogs, closing off every avenue of retreat. Numazu brought his hands together. "Lightning Release: Electromagnetic Murder!" A storm of crackling blue lightning grew from his palms, larger and larger—

"HUMAN BATTERY: LIVING DEATH!"

Numazu faded.

That was the best word she could find to describe it. Numazu faded… the color draining from his face, the light from his eyes, the spark from his body. The jutsu killed Numazu instantly. In a single second, all the electrical energy in Numazu's body had disappeared… right down to the neural impulses in his brain.

Sakura did not turn to behold her rescuer. She already sensed him. Sensed all three of them, three flashes on the dim edges of her chakra field.

It was Team Darui.

Their entrance to the battlefield was as flamboyant as Kirazu Raiki's translucent white silks. A spinning copper arrow thundered across the water, impaling three swamp-nins in a row. More arrows followed, then copper shuriken, then black lightning. The Black Lightning exploded from the tips of Raiki's pale albino fingers, shooting outward to devastate all their enemies. Confederacy genin fell left and right.

The battle was over.

The Confederacy was either dead or fleeing. Sakura spotted Jibachi flapping away on his clay dragon, a copper arrow stuck through its flank. The Mizuho jutsu had disappeared, too. "The mist-nins are gone," said Yukari, appearing through an ice mirror. "Them and Jibachi. Ran as soon as they saw our reinforcements. Sure know how to cut their losses, those bastards."

Raiki shrugged. "They'll be back."

"What happened?" Sakura asked him.

"Got ambushed in Kesa Village. Same as you. Damn roaches everywhere, and a Barrier Trap to seal the bargain." The boy grinned, showing his painted black teeth. " Took us a while to catch up."

"Casualties?"

"Less than the Confederacy," said the cloud-nin Fukunaga Kazuno. The stiff, proper warrior had not a trace of pride in his voice. "Too many."

Many of the sand-nins in Satetsu's group had been killed, lost either in Kesa Village or in the running battle to the Jewel Islands. Satetsu dropped to his knees when he was told about the sand-nins's deaths, including that of his teammate and friend Hattori Bakan. Bakan had heroically fallen...
defending the others in the first ambush. Most of the others were injured, even Raiki, who sported a
gaping red wound down his leg. Of Sakura's group, Temari had third degree burns; Kankuro broken
bones; Kuina burns and a spear through her shoulder; and Shinren a nasty scar on her face. Shinren's
teammates Yuntoku Yuu and Tadao Minbu were both dead.

Too many, just like Kazuno said.

Sakura knew it was only the beginning. The Second Trial was not even half over; there were still
two more Locks to unlock. There would be many more battles to fight.

Numazu was dead, but Jibachi was alive, and all of Team Dayu.

And Sosano.

A chill went through her.

There was no time to dwell on it. She was needed, now, to attend to their injured. Sakura and the
mist-nin Tsunaga Kuina were the only two medic-nins among the UC party. They scrambled to
triage the most serious injuries as best they could. Sakura made several Mirrored Clones, which sped
up the process considerably, though it gave her a terrible headache.

By the time they finished, it was already past noon. Temari's eyes swept over the ruined battlefield.
Many of the Jewel Islands still burned, sending acrid flumes of smoke into the sky, blurring the sun
in a dirty brown haze. The Dreamstone River was strangely calm, a sheet of clear green glass.
Plovers circled overhead, diving down into the river to snatch up fish. "Let's go," she said.

"Wait." It was Shinren. "Let us mourn our dead."

"We're too exposed, out here."

"They will not attack us." The aging river-nin paused, her face set in lines of grief and resolve alike.
"It is their dead too."

They dragged the bodies to one of the Jewel Islands. Somehow the island was untouched by the
battle, though it had been at the center of the Mizuho storm. Ancient mangrove thickets soared into
the air, roots sprouting out of their trunks like the buttresses out of a stone cathedral. At the base of
the island was a large cave, half-collapsed and open to the riverbank. Shafts of light pierced through
the holes in the cave's roof to illuminate the lichen-crusted walls within. To Sakura's surprise, the
walls were not empty. There were faded pictures carved on the walls—strange animal gods, men
with the heads of beasts, kami with three eyes and a hundred arms.

"What are they?" asked Kankuro.

"Shiva idols," said Sakura. "The gods of the underworld."

This is a graveyard. Long ago, the indigenous people of the Scar had used this cave as a burial place.
Sakura walked beneath the bones of the long-ago dead. How fitting she should come to it now. Who
had they been? How had they lived? Sakura remembered the ancient funeral prayer she'd heard in
the Untouchable Village. The Prayer of Life, it was called. The Prayer of Death. Fleeting alas are
moments, subject to rise and fall. Having begun, they cease; their subsiding is bliss. So life goes on
and on.

In the Earth Country, they buried their dead below soil and stones, and so the UC genin did for the
fallen stone-nins, the Confederacy ninjas they'd killed. But for the river-nins of Kawagakure they
fashioned crude rafts out of hollowed mangrove trunks. Shinren explained that in the River Country
the dead always returned to the water from which they drew their first life's breath; the mother river that made possible human civilization. They'd float the corpses down the river, and then light them on fire from a distance. A pyre of flame on the glittering water.

"It is one of the most beautiful sights you can imagine," said Shinren. "I know that sounds strange. Yet it is true. I lived through the Third Ninja War, as did my teammates Yuu and Minbu. You are too young to remember it. Soldiers dying in the hundreds every day—friends, neighbors, family members. The situation was so desperate that even those with little shinobi talent were forcibly conscripted. I was one such conscript, as were Yuu and Minbu. We were hardly the most useful soldiers, truth be told. Yet it was our duty to defend our home. After the Battle of Kannabi Bridge… you know the story of that battle, I imagine. One of the last decisive battles of the war, and a complete rout for the Earth Country and her allies. Thousands fell in a single morning, massacred by Namikaze Minato the Yellow Flash of Konoha. The Yellow Death, we called him. Somehow our team survived… but most of our friends did not. In Kawagakure the funeral rafts filled the Haven River from one bank to the other. Five thousand of our comrades, set afire with such a blaze that you could see it even from the Grass Country. After the war most of the conscripted genin retired from the military… returning to their ordinary lives. But we three made a pact that day. We vowed to continue on."

"Why?" asked Sakura.

Shinren smiled sadly. "For our children. For my daughters, and Yuu's son, and Minbu's little twins." The river-nin lowered her head slowly, tiny jade rings tinkling in her graying hair. At her feet, the corpses of the genin Yuntoku Yuu and Tadao Minbu lay still atop wooden rafts, kindling and stones wrapped all around them. "And for those who we left behind in Kannabi Bridge. We fight so that such a war can never again engulf the River Country. Yuu and Minbu gave their lives in that cause today. And so shall I, as long as I still draw breath. Haruno Sakura, young kunoichi of Konoha. I beg you to remember my words now. The dead are not dead."

Sakura frowned. She didn't understand.

Nor did the sand-nin Ryokan Satetsu. "Bakan's d-dead. My f-friend."

"The dead are not dead," Shinren repeated. "Not as long as we remember them, and keep them in our hearts. The dead live in us."

She knelt to push the rafts into the water. Sakura and Temari helped her, wading chest deep into the river. Ripples danced across the surface of the Dreamstone River as the rafts drifted from the banks of the Jewel Island and gathered speed, sailing downriver for Iwagakure. They would never make it there, of course. The weight of the stones would drag the bodies down to rest in the soft mud of the riverbed, there to lie in an unseen watery grave.

Shinren threw two shuriken, spinning them to spark a flame. Her aim was true; the rafts took fire almost at once, like two blooming red flowers, wreathed in leaping flames. Together the UC genin watched the funeral pyres as the burning rafts receded in the distance.

Higeru Shinren began to sing.

"Hearken to the fire's voice and water's sound.  
Listen to the sobbing of the wind tossed woods;  
that is the breathing of the ancestors.

Those that are dead are not ever gone;  
they are in the brightening shadows and in the thickening gloom."
The dead are not beneath the ground;
they are in the quickening trees;
    they are in the burning wood.
They are in the flowing water;
    they are in the still water.

    They are in the heart;
    they are in the crowd.
The dead are not dead.

At first her voice was a solitary one. Slow and soft, tears dripping down her lined cheeks. Then Temari joined in the song. Then Satetsu, stuttering through the lines. Then Sakura. And then suddenly it was everybody had taken up the cry at the same time, all at once, spontaneously, instinctively—as if for one impossible moment all that had happened in their lives, all the pain and the suffering and the joy and everything, everything, had been captured in those words, in that strange river-nin funeral prayer. The song of their combined voices filled the sky like rolling thunder. "The dead are not dead. The dead are not dead. The dead are not dead. The dead are not dead—"

"The… dead… are… not… dead!"
The Second Trial: Shikkotsu Forest

The rain lashed around them, a thousand cold gray whips upon their backs.

It rained often in the Gorge of Mists. Yet the rains never lasted long. As often and as unpredictable as a child's tears. The first rain started soon after Sakura and her allies left the Jewel Islands, tracing the banks of the Dreamstone River toward Shikkotsu Forest. In sunlight, the Musashi Plains were a paradise of gently rolling hills, of wild green grass and herds of antelopes and prides of lazy lions. Rain made the world seem sluggish and muddy and gray as a granite wall. Tendrils of fog writhed along the ground like pale white snakes.

Sakura did not speak much, nor did the Sand Siblings. The Battle of the Jewel Islands had drained them of more than just their chakra. It had also driven the fledging United Countries coalition apart. Ryokan Satetsu, Mukade's son, had fought with them in the battle, but in the aftermath his feud with the Sand Siblings had flared once more. In the end, the coalition had split into two factions. From the Jewel Islands, there were two viable paths through the Gorge of Mists. One went north, through the heart of the great Shikkotsu Forest. The other path went south, skirting the famous spiritual sanctuary of Lake Takenouchi. Temari led her people north, Satetsu his people south. The two paths would meet again at Mount Echigo, on the western end of the Gorge of Mists, but it was unlikely the two factions would arrive at the same time. They might not see each other in the Second Trial again.

_We're fools_, thought Sakura. _We should have stuck together_. Both Trials had repeatedly proved the importance of strength in numbers. Yet petty conflicts had divided their strength in two. Even Shinren, the sole surviving river-nin on Team Eneki, decided to go with Satetsu instead of her. Shinren explained she needed to find another team of river-nins around Lake Takenouchi.

Only Team Kikuko and Team Darui stuck with Sakura, Temari, and Kankuro. The cloud-nins walked point, scouting the way ahead—nobody wanted to get ambushed again—though Sakura could sometimes hear snatches of ribald banter between the homosexual lovers Raiki and Kazuno. Behind them, the mist-nin Uchiku Onome hummed folk tunes in the rain.

"...I loved a maid as fair as summer, with fire in her hair..."

"My god, do you have to sing that again?" complained Yukari.

Onome giggled. "Oh, but it's so romantic."

The song was _"The Pirate and the Princess,"_ perhaps the world's most popular folk song. Even Sakura knew the tune well. The fair maid was Kikuchi Orino, the daughter of the Fire daimyo, and the man who loved her was the Dancing Ninja, head of the Silla Brotherhood. According to the song, the Dancing Ninja kidnapped Orino in order to hold her for ransom, but ended up falling in love with her instead. The scandalous romance was one of the many legends surrounding the Silla Brotherhood... and as far as Sakura understood it, at least in this case, the truth was not so far from the legend. The Dancing Ninja's successful ransom of the Fire daimyo's daughter emboldened the outlaw gang to try the same thing a year later, this time in the Earth Country. _But Lee Sheptamer killed Enyo Kayura, and Sougon Sawar killed the Dancing Ninja in the Battle of Three Wolves. That was the end of the Silla Brotherhood._

The song mentioned none of it. _Summer fades, and shriveled leaves blow in an autumn wind._ Nothing lasted forever.
Towards evening the rain stopped again. They were approaching Shikkotsu Forest now; rows of tall trees loomed large in the waning light. Pine and cypress, aspen and sentinel trees. But there was something odd about the trees in the forest; strange white veins that seemed to crawl up their trunks and wreath their needle leaves like garlands. When Sakura got closer she saw it was a kind of pale, reflective lichen. The lichen made the trees of Shikkotsu Forest look like a string of ancient white pillars.

The Forest of Bones, some called it.

The gloom was deepening around them. Raiki led the way forward into the enigmatic forest, sticking closely to the winding dirt path called the Purplepine Road. A relic from the days when the forest was still inhabited by the great Shiva empires, the Purplepine Road now had no other travelers beside themselves. Lantern bugs moved slowly through the trees, their little lights like so many drifting specks of dust. The cloud-clear sky was rich with stars, like fresh dirt sprinkled with a thousand seeds.

They made camp by the side of the road, next to a cave covered in strange pale white grass. Shadows draped the cave in black curtains, and through the trees a chill wind pierced Sakura's flesh, even at the height of summer. There was a worn, cryptic inscription carved into the mouth of the cave: THE FORGETTING GRASS CAVE.

"What's it mean?" wondered Raiki.

"I think it's a reference," said Sakura. "To the poem, by Okki of Kyouko." Only the last two lines of the poem survived. She recited it from memory. "The Forgetting Grass withers with frost; and no trace of it remains."

"What an uplifting allusion.

Sakura laughed. "Worried?"

"What, a fairy like me? We cloud-nins are incorrigibly neurotic, it's true. Darui-sensei says it's because of the thin air. I say it's because we don't get enough sex. You should see what I have to do every night just to coax Kazuno into bed." The albino boy tittered, bringing up a hand to delicately cover his lips. His bright red eyes glittered with glamor and threat alike. "But make no mistake, leaf-nin. An abundance of caution does not equal a lack of strength. Kumogakure is the largest and most powerful ninja village in the whole world. And we do not fear anyone."

"I did not say you did."

"Come now, Sakura. Why do you think we joined you?"

A dangerous question. The Fourth Raikage, Juukan Aae, was famous for his isolationist international policy. Aae had repeatedly rebuffed overtures from both the United Countries and the Confederacy, remaining steadfastly neutral in the conflict between the two power blocs. For the most high-profile Kumo team to ally with Team Tsunade in the Second Trial was a major political statement.

Sakura knew the answer. "Because you owe us a debt."

"The debt is repaid."

Sakura glanced around. It was just the two of them in Forgetting Grass Cave, the others spread around the perimeter of their camp. Temari caught Sakura's eye for a moment, then turned away again. "Is it?" she said softly. "We saved Dee from death at the hands of Team Keel. The mist-nins will not soon forget that… nor will the Confederacy. In the Jewel Islands you saved us from death at
the hands of Team Dayu and Team Jidaei. The Confederacy will not forget that, either. Sougon Sawar remembers every time he has ever been slighted in his life."

"You are wrong." Kirazu Raiki grinned, showing his painted black teeth, all the fashionable rage in the Lightning Country. A lightning bolt of electricity shot through his body from the inside out, illuminating the boy's bones like a X-ray. "If I betrayed you now, and brought your severed head to the gates of Sougon Castle, the Tsuchikage would forgive my transgressions in an instant.

*The sins of blood cannot be washed away with a piece of paper.*

Sakura shivered. "But you haven't."

"No."

"The ninja world is divided. The United Countries are one side, and the Confederacy on another. Kumo is the only neutral major power remaining. The Fourth Raikage controls the balance of power. Tell me, Raiki. What does he want? What can the United Countries offer him?"

"Ah. It's not quite that simple."

"Why?"

"Because Raikage-sama wants nothing except to be left alone. The last time he tried to meddle in the affairs of other people, he bungled it so badly Kumo was almost drawn into a world war. A sordid business… or don't you leaf-nins remember?"

"You mean the Undeclared War," said Sakura.

"You know your history."

The Undeclared War as a cold war between Konoha and Kumo at the beginning of the Postwar Period. While allies and victors in the Third Ninja War, Konoha was weakened by the Kyuubi Attack and Kumo aggressively pressed its advantage. A series of border raids quickly escalated into full-blown skirmishes and furious threats on both sides. There was even talk from Kumo of an outright invasion of the Fire Country. However, the Fourth Raikage never dared to declare open war, spurning his more hawkish advisors, instead opting for more nefarious ways of weakening Konoha's power.

One of the casualties of the Undeclared War was Neji's father, Hyuuga Hizashi. Towards the end of the conflict, under pretense of a peace treaty between between Konoha and Kumo, the cloud-nin ambassador Kirazu Fushimi tried to kidnap the baby Hinata in order to obtain the secrets of Byakugan. However, he was killed by Hyuuga Hiashi in the attempt. Kumo denied all allegations of kidnapping and demanded Hiashi's corpse as recompense for the death of Fushimi. Hiashi's twin brother Hizashi willingly sacrificed himself in Hiashi's place, forestalling open war and protecting the Hyuuga clan. For his part in the Hyuuga Affair, the Raikage lost Kirazu Fushimi, the head of the Kirazu clan and one of his closest advisors. The Undeclared War ended soon after that.

Kirazu Fushimi was Raiki's father.

*Our fates are all tangled and twisted together. The history of this world is drenched in blood.*

Tsunade-sensei and Sougon Sawar. Maito Gai and Densuke Tosuken. Gaara and Mukade, Temari and Satetsu. Orajuchi and his Untouchable siblings. Neji and Raiki. *Sosano and me.* When would it end?

"The Raikage is wise," said Sakura. "He knows how precious peace is, and how hard it is to
preserve. Once, long before the Undeclared War, leaf-nins and cloud-nins fought side by side against a war of aggression waged by the Earth Country. So it can be once again. If Kumo joins the United Countries… with your power added to our united strength, we shall have peace for a generation."

"A conversation for another time." Raiki smiled, then stood up from where he lounged in the pale white grass. "Come, I'll escort you out of this dreary cave."

Sakura took Raiki's hand. The albino boy's skin was as smooth as it was pale, as delicate as it was dangerous. His body was a battery of living energy; an electric charge ran through his palm into her hand and up her arm. Raiki frowned unexpectedly. "What's that?" he asked sharply.

"What?"

Raiki stared at her curiously. "I thought you were a chakra sensor."

"I am. Well, sort of."

"Don't you sense it? The other chakra?"

Sakura shook her head. "Where is it?"

"In your body, Sakura. Right here." He reached up with his other hand to tap her forehead protector. "How can you not feel it? Unless… unless the chakra signature was hidden on purpose. The chakra's concentrated in your sensory cortices, Sakura. It's responding to everything that you see, or hear, or touch, or smell. Someone's spying on you."

_Someone's spying on me? _But who could have put this kind of chakra into her brain? Sosano? The Tsuchikage? Kikuko? Baki-sama? Nothing fit. Then Sakura remembered a woman's voice saying, _the next time you try to chop off Sougon Sosano's head, don't miss._

The Hokage.

It explained everything. How Tsunade-sensei knew what had happened during Sakura and Sosano's first meeting. How Tsunade-sensei seemed to know where Sakura was at all times. How Tsunade-sensei had such detailed knowledge of the battle around the Pillar of Heaven, as if she'd been there herself.

Sakura had assumed that the Hokage kept tabs on her, of course. But this… planting a bug in Sakura's own head. This was far beyond that. The Hokage could see everything that she ever did. Even when Sakura was crying alone in her room, even when she was sitting on the toilet. Even when she made love to Sosano…

"Fuck," said Sakura.

Raiki laughed. "Your boyfriend?"

"Worse."

Sakura went to sleep that night fuming about Tsunade's invasion of her privacy. The next morning it began to rain again; a light shower that turned all of Shikokotsu Forest into a tangle of glistening white dew. It was the fourth day of the Second Trial. They had to make it to Mount Echigo by nightfall, on the western end of the Gorge of Mists, or they'd be too far behind to reach the finish line in time. Raiki pushed them at a hard pace, so hard Kankuro began to complain his stitched bones were breaking again.
Past noon they passed the Grove of Emperors. Emperor butterflies, in fact. Millions of the butterflies had returned to Shikkotsu Forest for their annual summer migration, each one as big as her hand, and congregated in the Grove of Emperors so thickly that the sentinel trees were literally covered from top to bottom in a layer of golden butterflies. It was one of the most extraordinary sights Sakura had ever seen, a natural miracle. She wondered if the Hokage was watching.

After the Grove of Emperors came a long stretch of dense, hilly wilderness. Fog grew as the day cooled, curling between the tall white trees like long smoky fingers. It was so humid and misty that Sakura could almost choke on the vapor. Cuckoo birds flitted from branch to branch overhead, and their feet trampled through beds of wild flowers, purple glories and blue irises and yellow mountain roses. Gradually the hills of Shikkotsu Forest became mountains; ascending higher and higher to the foot of the Dreamstone Mountains themselves. When Sakura looked back, she could see the vast river valleys of the Gorge of Mists stretching below her.

She almost did not notice when the ruins appeared.

It was an abandoned Shiva temple. Pyramids and towers and walls of crumbling stone, ancient sculptures choked all over with vines and trees and pale white lichen. The scope of the temple complex was colossal—the biggest temple Sakura had ever seen in her life. Even now, five hundred years after the coming of the Sage of Six Paths, the wildness of Shikkotsu Forest had barely nibbled at the outer edges of the temple.

When Sakura entered the center of the complex, she understood why. The central buildings were not made of stone at all. They're made of bones. Spiked ribs and fragmented skulls, great curving tusks and spinal columns stacked one upon the other. Yellowed bones shaped and carved into fantastical shapes, into shrines and sculptures and avenues and gates.

"The Cathedral of Bones," said Temari.

The Earth Country had five great Shiva Cathedrals, all abandoned except the Cathedral of the Faith in Hiroshiki—one for each of the five pagan gods. The Cathedral of Bones was dedicated to the worship of Khiton the Strength-Spinner, the Fire God and the God of War. There had been no shortage of wars between the Shiva empires of the Scar. Each solider who fell, each beast who burned, was immortalized in the very walls of the great pagan temple. So the Cathedral of Bones was built atop the bones of animal and human sacrifices. The God of War is the patron god of shinobi.

Sakura shivered. "A haunted place."

"No," said Temari. "A sacred one."

The sand-nin girl knelt before the shrine of bones. Kankuro knelt with her, and then the mist-nins. Raiki look on amused for a moment. Then he shrugged and got to his knees as well. Kazuno and Jouda followed Raiki's lead.

Sakura knelt last of all.

"Let us pray," whispered Temari.

She said nothing. Only spread her Giant War Fan before her, the three purple stars staring up at the sky. It was so silent in the Cathedral of Bones that Sakura could hear the slow, regular breaths of every member of her party. Sakura bowed her head to stare at the plaza of bones underneath her feet. The dead are not dead, she thought. The souls of the dead were in their hearts; they were in the crowd. These fallen soldiers, these fallen ninjas were not ever gone… not truly. Somehow Temari's prayer had brought them back to life.
Was that faith?

Something touched Sakura's leg.

It was a slug, twice as long as her sandaled foot. It had slimy white skin, striped with blue, and two waving eyestalks. More slugs quickly slithered out after the first. A veritable torrent of white slugs, converging into the plaza of bones from every direction. The stream grew so large than it engulfed the ninjas of Sakura's party, leaving them standing in a patch of bare dirt surrounded by slugs.

"Is that…" started Kankuro.

"Yes," said Sakura.

Katsuyu.

_The Queen of the Scar._ The mountain slugs of Shikkotsu Forest were one of the Six Sacred Animals of the Scar, famous for their immense durability as well as their deadly poisons. Katsuyu was their leader… and mother, it was said by some, for all the slugs had originally budded off from Katsuyu's body, and in time would return to their mother's womb once again. Katsuyu herself could divide into many smaller independent bodies, telepathically linked, and then reform again into her full size at a moment's notice. This ability of transformation and recombination made Katsuyu one of the most powerful animal summons in the whole world. _Tsunade-sensei's personal summon._

Evidently Katsuyu had chosen the Cathedral of Bones as her place of residence. The legendary Queen of the Scar reformed now atop the shrine of bones as if it were a throne. Slug melted into slug, growing larger and larger, until the size of Katsuyu dwarfed even the colossal cathedral ruins around her. The giant slug leaned over to peer at Sakura, her long eyestalks waving in greeting.

"Katsuyu."

"Sakura-chan," rumbled the giant slug in slow, deep, sonorous tones. "Mistress Tsunade told me you would come."

"Has she been spying on me again?"

"Mistress Tsunade watches you closely. She wants to protect you."

_But not Tenten, nor Asuma, nor Nonou. Not Yuu and Minbu._ Sakura forced herself to smile. "That's one way of putting it. Director Doi would call it cheating."

"Not if the other side has already cheated."

Sakura looked around at her teammates and allies, then back to Katsuyu. "Did Tsunade-sensei ask you to help me?"

"Yes."

Katsuyu bent down toward the ground, beckoning Sakura to approach. Sakura gingerly placed her hand on the crown of Katsuyu's massive head. The slug's skin was slimy and surprisingly warm; the chakra underneath it vast beyond comprehension. Katsuyu opened her mouth and a scroll of paper rolled out on her jagged tongue. _A summoning contract._ Sakura knew. In order to summon Katsuyu, she had first to sign this contract in her own blood—a proof of their covenant for life.

Sakura took the scroll. "Thank you."
"Use your blood to summon me, and I will come. I, Katsuyu, the Queen of the Scar, shall not deny you. No more than I denied my masters before you. Not Mistress Tsunade. Nor Mistress Seurin, though it broke my heart."

The name jolted Sakura. "Seurin Shadowstar?"

"None other."

"I never heard of Seurin summoning you. The Sougon clan is known for summoning white-tailed deer, isn't it?"

"Seurin-sama did not summon me often. She preferred Tajima, the Matriarch of the white-tailed deer of the Valley of Spears. Still, she was the first Sougon to ever summon me… the first ever to tame my wildness. In time, she introduced me to her best friend, a young woman named Senju Tsunade. I met Mistress Tsunade at this very place in which you stand, Sakura-chan. She was not much older than you are now."

Sakura unrolled the summoning contract. There were only two names on the entire sheet: Tsunade's, and Seurin's. So it was true, just like Sosano said. Her sensei and Sosano's mother had been best friends once.

"Tell me about them," said Sakura.

"Fate goes ever as fate must. They were born in the same year… the year of the Shadowstar Comet. They grew up a world apart, and by the time they met they were already mortal enemies, their hands covered in the blood of the other's countrymen. Six years of peace and friendship could not overcome a lifetime of hatred and distrust. And so war came again, and so in the end Mistress Seurin died by Mistress Tsunade's hand. I was only glad I was not there to see it. They were the greatest kunoichi of all time."

Katsuyu lapsed into silence, her eyestalks drooping. Can you hear us, Tsunade-sensei? Are you spying on me now? "What would you have done, Katsuyu?" asked Sakura. "If they'd both tried to summon you, during the Battle of Deathtrap… who would you choose?"

The legendary slug's words rumbled slowly through the heights of Shikkotsu Forest. "Who? Seurin Shadowstar."

"Why?"

"Because she was on the right side."

Sakura nodded. Then she bit down on her finger, letting her blood well from the cut, and signed the summoning contract in fresh red ink. Seurin Shadowstar, and Tsunade-sensei, and me. Now, with the right jutsu and enough chakra, she could summon Katsuyu.

It was done.

The giant white-and-blue slug took back the contract in her mouth. "Farewell, Sakura-chan. We shall meet again." Then Katsuyu split again into thousands of smaller bodies, little slugs budding off from her skin like beads of water. The slugs slithered off the shrine of bone and out of the central plaza. In an instant Katsuyu was gone, without a trace.

Sakura turned to look at her comrades. The cloud-nin Kirazu Raiki laughed. "See, Kazzy, I told you it was a good idea to stick with the leaf-nin. Look at the size of that thing."
"A most impressive and noble beast," acknowledged Kazuno.

Temari glared at the cloud-nins sweetly. "You like slugs, do you? No wonder you're slower than a tumbleweed in a desert. Get your asses moving, now!"

None of them tried to contradict Temari. The party pushed on from the Cathedral of Bones with all due speed, making their way west. From the heights of Shikkotsu Forest the ground now sloped sharply downward, and soon Sakura found herself back in the great grassy valleys of the Musashi Plains. Yet this was the western end of the Musashi Plains, and the geography here was quite different from before. The Dreamstone River had been reduced to a merely respectable tributary of its ordinary form. Wetlands gave way to drier, rockier soil, and herds of grazing white-tailed deer gave way to giant birds, lions, xand other kinds of exotic local animals.

And there was something on the horizon.

It was nearing sunset. The sun was a red disk in the west, the sky painted in hues of rose and ocher. Amid this splash of color rose an enormous, singular mountain, its peak thrusting upwards to the vault of the heavens. Even in the sweltering heat of deep summer, the crown of the mountain was still covered in snow. The mountain of time, the locals called it. The mountain of destiny. *So vast the four seasons are alive together in the span of a single mountain.*

Mount Echigo.

They'd arrived at the Second Lock.
Mount Echigo loomed above them, so immense that Sakura could not see the top of it, hidden in a sea of clouds.

The Hokage had told her about it.

_It is a place unlike anything you have seen before. It is a place so old that the stones speak of the scars of a thousand ages… so untamed the wild beasts cry in the night before rushing rivers in the black caves… so vast the four seasons are alive together in the span of a single mountain… and the men who live in that place have eyes so cold and hard, so brilliant and terrible, so strong to their utmost extremity, that it is a wonder they are not the undisputed masters of the world._

"I never saw anything so big," said Kankuro, appropriately awed.

Even the cloud-nins of Kumogakure did not contradict him. They had lived atop a mountain their entire lives, yet not even the Cojira Mountains could not challenge the sheer size of Mount Echigo. In the entire world, only the Ice Spear was taller, and Mount Echigo was far greater by total footprint and volume. It was so large that after walking for much of the previous night they still had not reached it.

"The earth-kin call Mount Echigo the mountain of time," said Sakura. "In the legends a climb to its top was supposed to turn back time, to cause change and transformation in the journeying pilgrim. Even the seasons change as you climb. It is summer at ground level, of course, just like it is now. But two thousand meters up the air has cooled enough that it becomes spring. Pine and cypress, budding flowers and singing birds. In yet another two thousand meters the mountain has turned to autumn. Forests of bursting red and gold, muddy rains, biting winds that sing through bare branches. And the peak is covered in a winter that never ends."

"Poetic," acknowledged Temari. "I am a proud shinobi of the Wind Country, the daughter of sand and desert. Yet there is a great beauty about this place… this land so unlike my home. I shall not deny it." She laughed, showing the edge of her white teeth. "I only wish that the natives would stop trying to kill me."

That put a damper in their conversation for a while.

By mid-morning the party had finally walked close enough to Mount Echigo to see the small village nestled at its eastern base. Here the two roads through the Gorge of Mists met once again, merging into a path that cut straight up the mountain. Straddling the path on both sides was Single Branch Village. The village had evidently been named for an iconic image in Kishimo Jiraiya's writings. _A bird is content with using but one branch of a tree, why not man?_

Sakura unrolled the map which the chuunin examiners had given them at the Overlook. They'd almost walked through the whole of the Gorge of Mists, and had only to climb Mount Echigo to reach the Second Lock, marked by a red dot in Senso-ji Temple, the famous Kiyome temple at the very top of Mount Echigo. From there it was a short distance through Fuwa Valley to the Gorge of Stones. The Third Lock was at the end of Gorge of Stones, next to the Ice Spear itself.

With two days remaining in the Second Trial, they ought to just make it.

If nothing went wrong.

"You hear that?" asked Jouda, the bearded Hoka pygmy boy on Team Darui, hopping from one foot...
to the other. "From the village."

Temari listened. "Fighting."

The fighting, however, proved less deadly than Sakura expected. It was more like a sparring match. A jeering crowd of genin, old ladies, and rowdy drunkards had gathered in a circle on the village green, egging on the two combatants in their center.

Sakura knew them both.

Sosano.

And a boy in a green jumpsuit.

Lee.

"Lee!" Sakura shouted, forcing her way to the front of the crowd. "Lee, what are you doing?"

Rock Lee's face was seamed with anger, with jealousy and grief. His black eyes were dull as acrid smoke. "Sakura-chan. I'm avenging you!"

"He challenged me to a duel," Sosano explained placidly.

"You damn roach!"

So saying, Lee aimed a roundhouse kick at Sosano's face—evidently not his first attempt. Sosano dodged Lee's attacks easily. Toying with him. The crowd roared, jeering at Lee's futile assault, each blow too slow by half. Sosano smirked. "Oh dear, this will not do. Don't you see your head is shaped like an egg? Eggs shouldn't dance with stones, little boy."

"Shut up! I'm gonna make you eat your words!"

"An unsatisfying sort of food, whatever a man's appetite."

Lee did not seem to comprehend the riposte. He attacked again, and again Sosano dodged; again Sosano taunted him. Every word Sosano spoke seemed to draw blood. Lee shouted in frustration at the futile duel, helpless and humiliated.

Then a curtain of chakra billowed around him.

Lee's opened his Chakra Gates! How many? She could not tell. When Rock Lee rushed forward, his footsteps left smoking imprints on the grass, and his punch was so quick and strong it nearly took off Sosano's head. Only by drawing his katana at the last moment did Sosano parry the crushing blow.

"Stop, Lee!" Sakura shouted. "Both of you!"

Sosano grinned. "Sakura. I see you, but I cannot obey you. I'm afraid I must teach this upstart ape a lesson."

His pupils became golden flames. Bright red blood vessels seethed across the envelope of the Enshogan eye. Waves of burning heat sloughed off the edge of his sword… then waves of bone-chilling cold. Fire and Ice, the unique fighting style of the Sougon clan. The perfect balance of attack and defense.

He attacked.
Now it was Lee's turn to dodge, dancing to avoid the deadly cut of the dreamsteel blade, the alternating waves of heat and cold. Sakura could hardly follow the speed of the battle. Sosano and Lee were a blur of whirlwind motion, trading blows and parries as if at the center of a great burning storm. The jeers of the crowd turned to cheers of awe at the impressive taijutsu pyrotechnics.

But the crowd knew nothing. Lee was still losing, Sakura understood, Sosa was still toying with him. *Like he toyed with me.*

"Damn you!" shouted the leaf-nin boy.

Sosano smirked. "You move fast. Can you move as fast as I can see?"

Walls of heat gradually formed from the very air, closing the two combatants on all four sides. Even from the safe distance of the crowd Sakura flinched; the heat of the smoldering fire was incredible. Sosano's Enshogan eyes burned as bright as the sun behind him. "Do you see, boy? Walls of superheated air, hot enough to melt steel. If you try to go through it the only thing left will be your bones."

Lee didn't listen. He ran at Sosano again, only for another wall of fire to materialize before him, blocking his path. Lee spun and kicked the wall—using his chakra cloak to shield him from the heat, using his strength to blow aside the air that held the wall together. Yet even as Rock Lee pummeled through the first wall, a second wall appeared behind it…. a wall of ice. The wall was so cold that it sucked the very kinetic energy from Lee's body, freezing his forward momentum. *The perfect balance of attack and defense.* Lee screamed as the sudden blast of cold gripped his outstretched legs. The leaf-nin boy stumbled backwards, sprawling in the grass. His legs were numb and frozen blue from the thighs down.

Sosano laughed.

"I'll kill you!" Lee screamed. "You fucking Sougon cockroach. You murdered Tenten. You… you violated Sakura-chan! On my honor as a man! I'll kill you!"

"Not today," said the Prince of Dawn.

He stretched out the palm of his hand toward the fallen boy, and then his eyes were golden flames.

*Sosa's going to use Bakudan!* Sakura was about to intervene when another shinobi made the first move. Surging out from the crowd, spinning, a blur of whirling chakra—

"Kaiten!"

Sosano's Bakudan erupted.

And did nothing.

Hyuuga Neji stood unscathed in front of his defeated teammate, his eyes as white and blank as his spotless white robes. His Kaiten had absorbed the entirety of Sosano's attack. *Kaiten,* the defensive jutsu famed the world over as the "Absolute Defense." An unbreakable shield of chakra generated from within Neji's own body, able to block even a direct Bakudan onslaught… the jutsu itself known as the "Absolute Attack."

"Enough," said Hyuuga Neji.

Sosano nodded. "Hyuuga. A pleasure, as always."
The two shinobi stared at each other across the village green. Sosano, all in gray, his golden eyes inflamed with coiled, explosive death. Neji, his blank white eyes pulsing with the power of the Byakugan. The prodigy of the Hyuuga clan versus the scion of the Sougon. The Byakugan versus the Enshogan. The United Countries versus the Confederacy.

*The Eyes of the Three Secrets.* Of all the great shinobi bloodlines in the world, three were the most famous, said to be descended from the Sage of Six Paths himself. Three eyes with the power to see into the hidden depths of reality. The Sharingan could see thought. The Byakugan could see spirit. And the Enshogan could see life itself.

When the Eyes of the Three Secrets clashed, the world shook.

But not today.

Sosano deactivated his Enshogan. Burning eyes faded into an inky darkness. Neji followed suit shortly after, helping pull Rock Lee to his feet. "Are you all right, Lee?"

"Just numb, that's all."

Lee glared at Sosano, his face hot with hate. Sosano had turned his back to the two leaf-nins. He walked toward Sakura and tried to kiss her. Sakura demurred, both because she was angry at Sosano for agreeing to duel Lee, and because she was embarrassed. She'd never kissed Sosano in front of Lee before, and she didn't want to throw Lee into another frenzy of outrage, not right now. Instead Sakura punched Sosano in the shoulder. "You damn fool."

The stone-nin boy grinned. "Miss me?"

*Of course I did. I thought of you every day and every night.* "You shouldn't have fought with Lee."

"I told you. *He* challenged *me.*"

"So?"

"Ah. You can never argue with a woman."

Sakura turned to consider the rest of the genin gathered in Single Branch Village. It was a mix of Confederacy and United Countries ninjas… all of them eyeing each other uneasily. There seemed a sort of truce between the two sides. Besides the duel between Sosano and Lee, open battle had not broken out.

Sosano's two teammates on Team Sawar, the bat-boy Bakura Orajuchi and the jingoistic Haghira Geigin, Doï's son, stood at one end of the village green. The rest of the Confederacy clustered around them. Beside Team Sawar, there were several other stone-nin teams, including the B-rank Team Chegga. Scattered mist-nins, swamp-nins, and river-nins rounded out the ranks of the enemy alliance.

At the other end stood the United Countries. Sakura spied the new Team Ranka among a considerable contingent of leaf-nins. The two Sarutobi twins, Hiraru and Kanetsu, had teamed up with Hatsutori Yashi after Auni's death.

Team Gai had also acquired a new member. Tenten's replacement, the repurposed Shimura Anake, lounged in a tree and smirked at the absurdity of existence.

Finally, there were the rain-nins. *Team Tosuken.* Mukai Aumono, Kyoroku Erima, and Junichiro Tenshe. The strongest genin team in Rain, led by Hanzou the Reaper's own grandson. Aumono
stared at Sakura with undisguised dislike, his handsome face steeped in aristocratic arrogance. He told me he'd rather kill me than make an alliance. But they were allies, nonetheless. The Hokage and Lord Hanzou had decided that, and all they could was follow orders.

"What happened?" Sakura asked.

"Oh, a battle here, a skirmish there," replied Sosano breezily. "Not much worth mentioning, really. Four days tramping through the fog and rain to Mount Echigo, another day spent relaxing in the idyllic paradise of Single Branch Village. In truth, I was rather hoping to run into you. We heard about what happened at the Jewel Islands, of course. Team Gai and Team Tosuken showed up together late last night."

"You didn't fight them?"

"Like around the Pillar of Heaven? The last time we fought each other, an earthquake swallowed us up and everyone almost died. I am convinced it was a sign of divine displeasure, Geigin's passionate arguments to the contrary. We all want to pass the Second Trial, do we not? This morning Hyuuga Neji and I arranged a temporary truce. Of course, your fuzzy-browed friend did not agree. Thus, the encounter you witnessed just now."

"Rock Lee, he…" What could Sakura say? I make my own choices, Lee, why can't you understand that? "He blames you. For Tenten's death."

"A falling rock killed Imagawa Tenten."

"And for what happened between us."

"You mean he loves you."

"Yes."

Sosano's slanted eyes crinkled in amusement. "Ah, that's most understandable. You are the most beautiful woman in the world." The boy leaned forward to whisper in Sakura's ear, brushing his fingers deftly around her waist as he pulled her close. There was a distinctly hard object beneath his robes. "Here, I brought you a gift."

Sakura giggled. "And you are the most scandalous man."

"I knew you'd like it. Now where's my kiss?"

"Maybe tomorrow."

Their banter was interrupted by Hyuuga Neji. The leaf-nin boy's expression was as chilly as his eyes. "Sakura. I'm sorry for the aborted welcome, but we need your help. There are several wounded UC genin back in the village inn. We tried to patch them up, but we've no medic-nin of your skill in our group. And I think Lee's legs may be more injured than he is letting on."

She glanced back toward the center of the village green, where Rock Lee was hobbling around on one foot. "Of course."

Sosano inclined his head. "And then, Hyuuga?"

Neji looked from Sosano toward Mount Echigo. Fog was coming in with the wind, rolling in long white waves over the upper reaches of the mountain. Sakura thought the fog looked like flowing robes, or like a shroud for the dead. The mountain of time. The mountain of change and
"Then we climb."

So climb they did.

From Single Branch Village, the road rose steeply until it intersected Mount Echigo and then became a series of stone steps, crisscrossing back and forth across the face of the mountain. UC and Confederacy genin walked in divided clumps, each to his own. There was not much risk of external attack, Sakura judged. Who would dare? The most powerful and influential members of both the UC and Confederacy had banded together to meet the challenge of the Second Trial. It was a hopeful, even politically consequential, symbol of cooperation between the two opposing ninja alliances.

Yet a fragile symbol it was. Their truce was one of convenience only, not trust. Even now the two groups walked as if battle could break out at any moment, constantly scanning the other sides for signs of weakness or betrayal. Mutual talk was cagey, devious, or outright hostile. If external attack was not imminent, internal division was a constant risk. The only two relationships that seemed to truly bridge the divide were Sakura and Sosano, and, to Sakura's surprise, Temari and Bakura Orajuchi.

The two of them walked together like bosom friends, talking in low whispers. Sakura gathered they were speaking of Temari's experiences in the untouchable village, Kashima Village. Orajuchi's two older siblings, the twins Kurobachi and Kurotsuchi, had been exiled to Kashima Village as the price for their father's military failures, condemned to forever live their lives as outcast untouchables. Sakura and her friends had helped them as best they could... but it was not enough. Not enough until the whole untouchable caste system had been destroyed forever.

As Orajuchi listened to Temari's words, tears rolled down his leathery, bat-like cheeks.

Others gossiped about the Second Trial. The albino cloud-nin Kirazu Raiki asked Neji if he had seen Team Keel, the hated enemy they'd been hunting all week in a quest of vengeance. Neji shook his head, but Aumono nodded. "I saw the mist-nins," he said in a bored voice. "Or I saw their work, anyway. A dozen corpses staked to the ground. They'd been ripped apart from the inside out, tortured, flayed, and then raped so many times their guts were full of jagged holes."

"Hoshigaki Makera," said Raiki. A lightning bolt flashed through his body, radiating threat, and his fists gripped his twin copper chakrams so hard Sakura saw the metal stretch. "The same thing he did to Dee. When I find that overgrown shark, I'll gut him up like a fish on a hook."

Raiki threw one of his copper chakrams at a nearby sentinel tree. The spinning chakram went right through the trunk in a flash of crackling electricity, circled around in the air, and then returned to Raiki's outstretched hand. The ancient tree fell to the ground with a thud.

"Where?" asked Jouda.

Aumono shrugged. "Lake Takenouchi, a few days ago. Before we met up with Team Gai."

Sakura's skin crawled. Lake Takenouchi... that's where Shinren and Satetsu went. "Were the victims sand-nins? Or river-nins?"

"Not shinobi at all. They were Takenouchi villagers."

"Obscene," pronounced Fukunaga Kazuno. By instinct his fingers found Raiki's own, finding comfort in his lover's touch. "Team Keel is a blight on the face of the earth. They must not be allowed to live. Or justice has no meaning."
Silence for a few moments.

Yukari grinned to break the spell. "Do you know why Hoshigaki Makera is called the Little Monster?"

"Because of his uncle," said Sakura. Hoshigaki Kisame was a S-rank missing-nin working for Akatsuki, and he had already earned the epithet Monster of the Mist.

"No, not quite. Makera has certain sexual… predilections. They all stem from the same cause."

Yukari wagged her pinkie. "It's said that Makera's little monster is no bigger than my little finger, if you understand me. And, well, a man must compensate for his frustrations…"

Sakura doubted the joke was true, nor did she think it was very funny. Still, it served to move the conversation onto other, less charged topics. For a while the genin bantered on about the weather, about the taste of Iwa food, and about their exploits back home. Later on, Neji sidled beside her.

"How well do you know Shimura Anake?" he asked.

"Anake?" She'd fought with him in the Battle of Red Rock Cliff, and then again during the First Trial. The genius prodigy with blue eyes and a smirking face, the boy who always made a joke about everyone and everything. No, she did not like him very much, but he had been a good comrade. Ino and Chouji had trusted him. "Why? Did Anake do something in the Second Trial?"

"No more than usual. You know what he's like… but no, that's not it. I mean there is something very strange about Shimura Anake. At first I didn't notice it. You wouldn't, unless you knew what to look for. But whenever I glanced at him with the Byakugan I had this nagging feeling in the back of mind. So I looked more carefully… and then I saw it. Anake's whole body is like a blur. It's as if I see through it, but I don't. Not really. Sakura… there's some kind of seal hidden in Anake's head. Something impenetrable even to the sight of the Byakugan."

Sakura stopped in her tracks. "What?"

"It's directly behind his forehead protector. In his skull. Whatever it is, it's… being sealed somehow."

"And you can't see it with the Byakugan?"

"No."

Sakura tried not to stare at Anake. The young leaf-nin boy seemed to be just the same as ever; conceited, droll, insolent, sighing at the absurdities of the shinobi lifestyle. Beneath his metal forehead protector and spiky black hair, sharp blue eyes stared up toward the clouds that swirled around Mount Echigo. What's hidden in your head, Anake?

"I don't know." She thought back, memories racing. "Asuma-sama told me that Anake's old team was killed on a mission. Some kind of Akatsuki trap. They wanted to kidnap Anake and steal a secret power from him. This thing in his skull you're talking about… it might be it. But I never heard anything about it before. Some kind of sealing jutsu? A medical implant? You know, Anake's grandfather… his grandfather is Danzou the Whisperer. The leader of ROOT."

"I know."

"Did you ask Anake about it?"

"No." Neji searched her face. "Nor should you. I suspect Shimura Anake is one of the most dangerous genin in the entire Second Trial. We should keep our doubts to ourselves, for now."
When Sakura nodded, he added, "Just two more questions. First, why did the Fifth allow Anake on the United Countries Embassy?"

"You think she knows?" The question was stupid even as it left Sakura's mouth. Of course she does. "The Hokage… she doesn't tell me everything. Maybe she had no choice. Maybe Danzou demanded it. Tsunade-sensei despises ROOT, I know that much."

"All right. Second question. Where is Gai-sensei?"

"In the Rain Country, isn't he?"

"Yes, that's what he told us. But it's very odd. I've been looking for him ever since Tenten… I've been trying to get him a message. No one seems to know where he is, or what he's doing."

Sakura frowned. "Well, Gai-sama said it was a secret mission."

"The Fifth mentioned nothing to you?"

"I told you. She doesn't tell me everything."

Neji stared at her. Does Tsunade tell you anything? his face seemed to say. "Let me know if you hear news, will you?"

As he walked away Neji turned to glance at Team Tosuken. Sakura noticed the gesture. The rain-nins… did they know something that Neji and Sakura didn't? Did they know where Gai was? If so, then why keep it a secret? The thought was an uncomfortable one… even disturbing. We are no true allies, only friends of convenience. Densuke Tosuken himself had tried to personally kill Gai atop the Asylum, before the Akatsuki attack. He blamed Gai for the death of his comrade Mukai Mamoru… would he let such a grudge go?

Mukai Mamoru was Aumono's father.

Sakura shook such thoughts away soon enough. The climb up Mount Echigo was one of the most extraordinary of Sakura's life. Like everything in the Scar, it seemed bigger than mundane existence, bigger than the petty conflicts of human life. The mountain held Single Branch Village as in a shadow; a black body that cut into the sky and extinguished the sun. The lower reaches of the mountain were covered in deep, summer forest. Through leafy screens Sakura saw great granite terraces in sun and shadow, barely wide enough to rest her knee, with depths behind her sheer a hundred meters. A dry ravine emerged from under boughs, and a fallen sentinel tree made a pasture of bursting wildflowers.

Along the stony path was scattered all manner of houses, or small Kiyome temples, or moss-marred tombs. There were travelers as well. Sakura saw a peasant hauling bamboo cuttings on his shoulder; a red-cheeked girl leading a cow; and an old man in a thong who kowtowed to the ground with every sixth step he took. Mount Echigo was the holiest mountain in the Earth Country. Even now, when the whole Scar had been closed to outsiders for the Second Trial, the natives still climbed Mount Echigo as a pilgrimage of faith. The old man would climb for weeks until he reached Senso-ji Temple on the peak.

The stone staircase switched back and forth across Mount Echigo's eastern face. The going was slow but steady. By mid-afternoon they'd climbed up around three thousand meters above ground level—leaving the sultry summer behind, embracing the fresh spring chill. Mist rolled across the lower peaks like painted curtains.

Sosano informed her they had come to the place known in local lore as the Walkway of Monkeys.
The mist-nin Unchiku Onome squealed in delight when she saw the roving packs of golden monkeys, some of them carrying babies on their back. The monkeys were indeed cute… until they tried to steal the party's food. Then Sakura and the others beat them back with a vengeance. The monkeys called to each other noisily, chittering in high-pitched squeaks, scampering around with their golden asses pointed up in the air.

After enduring monkey taunts for the better part of another two hours, the stone steps diverged in two. One path led toward a fog-wreathed Kiyome temple, aglow from within with soft yellow lanterns. The other snaked up into the thinning forest. It was starting to get dark. "This way," said Sosano, choosing the forest path.

"Why?" complained Shimura Anake. He pointed at the chuunin exam map. "That path goes to the middle of nowhere."

Sosano shrugged. "Suit yourself, if you like."

He began to climb the forest path. Sakura followed, and then Orajuchi and Geigin, then Team Darui and Team Tosuken. Anake and the rest had no choice but to follow. The winding steps were steep and treacherous, the narrow stones worn smooth by a howling mountain wind. Pilgrims rarely came this way up the mountain, Sakura guessed. But Sosano seemed intimately familiar with it.

Then they came to the restaurant.

It was nothing more than a shack leaning against a cliff. The walls were made of bamboo, the door closed and splashed with cobwebs. Over the door hung a small dusty sign: NARATAKI NOODLE STAND. Sakura had never seen it in her life, yet somehow she gasped in recognition.

"It's the little noodle shop hidden in the Scar," she whispered to Sosano. "The one you told me about. The one you said that you build… if you could've been born as somebody else."

"Closed, I'm afraid." Sosano brushed some of the cobwebs from the sign. "The proprietor passed away last year. She was a wizened old lady, local to Mount Echigo, with the most generous and simple heart you could imagine. My uncle Shirasu brought me here when I was little. It was my mother's favorite restaurant, he told me. And it was mine as well. I'd climb up here after a long day's hike and then the old lady would bring out a big bottle of hot tea and a steaming plate of noodles. The best damn thing you ever tasted in your life. That's the secret about cooking, you know. It's not about what you cook, it's about who eats it and when. Why, to tell the truth, I don't think that old lady knew how to mix her spices at all. She was really the most wonderful woman in the world. Her grave lies over there, with her husband. Her grandchildren come up every day to burn incense, and to collect herbs to sell down in the village."

"Fascinating!" Anake shouted from behind them. The leaf-nin was oddly tense, his voice on edge, as if distressed. "It's already night. Do you want us to sleep with the old woman too?"

"Just a little further."

It was not quite night. More like twilight—the western sky behind Mount Echigo painted in bands of sunset gold. Shadows muffled their every movement. They were on the upper slopes of the mountain now, not far from the permanent snow line, and a fierce wind blew in chilly gusts. Like autumn, Sakura thought. Many of the deciduous trees were already bare of leaves, and those than remained had crowns of red and yellow and pink. Drifts of wet, rotting leaves swirled against their feet as they walked.

Above them, on the edge of a sheer pointed cliff, appeared a large building. It appeared to be
abandoned, or ruined. Sakura could not tell what it was until they had almost reached its foot. A
hollowed-out stone building, with a rounded dome that had cracked and then caved in. Holes in the
walls revealed rows of dusty shelves, bird droppings, and a huge cavernous, circular room. In the
center of the room, a rusted metal frame pointed up at the sky.

"An observatory," Sakura said, surprised. It had not been marked on the map.

Sosano smiled. "We'll make camp here tonight."

While the other genin grumbled, whining about sleeping outside in the chilly dark instead of inside
the Kiyome temple, Sosano led Sakura around the perimeter of the ruined observatory and then
climbed onto its broken roof. The stars were coming out. Twinkling amid a blue-black sky, arrayed
like so many gems across a veil of hidden silk. Sakura was surprised to see how clear it was.

"We're just above the cloud line of the Gorge of Mists," explained Sosano. "The Observatory was
built to take advantage of the clear sky at this height. But it was abandoned during the Third Ninja
War for lack of funding. It's much the same story as that Zoo you live in, back in Iwa."

The Zoo had been an actual zoo for exotic animals before the Third Ninja War. The stone-nins had
sold all their animals to pay for the invasion of Konoha; Sakura could not say she was very
sympathetic.

"I'd rather live here. At least it doesn't smell so bad."

Sosano laughed. "Look at those stars."

"They're very beautiful."

Unexpectedly, Sosano's eyes began to burn. He had activated his Enshogan. "You do not know how
ture you speak. The stars… a hundred billion suns strewn across the galaxy. A hundred billion
distant worlds. A normal human eye can only detect the visible light from the tiniest fraction. But the
Enshogan can see them all. Can you imagine it, Sakura? Heat is not like visible light. When I look at
the night sky with the Enshogan, I do not see scattered white pinpricks. I see a vast canvas of
glowing radiance. The entire sky, illuminated with energy like a red-hot furnace. Illuminated with
heat and motion and life. My mother conceived the idea for her greatest jutsu on a night like this."

Seurin Shadowstar.

Sosano's mother. Sawar's wife and older sister. Doi's lover. Tsunade's best friend. One of the greatest
kunoichi that had ever lived. Seurin Shadowstar was all of those things, and more. She was dead.
The Hokage had cut out her heart with a chakra scalpel in the Battle of Deathtrap Mountain. For
the last battle of the last war.

Sakura said, "You mean Distant Starlight."

"Yes."

"It's one of the most famous jutsu of all time. It's said that Seurin Shadowstar could summon all the
light in the world into herself. Even the light in other people's bodies, even the light from the stars in
the sky. She would become a glowing battery of unstoppable heat. No one could stand against her.
Distant Starlight was the ultimate jutsu of the Enshogan."

"Ah... a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. You know your encyclopedias well, Sakura. But you
do not know the truth."
"No?"

"How could you? You have never seen Distant Starlight for yourself. My mother is dead." Sosano closed his eyes, shutting off his Enshogan. Took a deep breath before he spoke again. "I did not know her either. Oh, I'd hear stories, of course… so many stories. In every one she was perfect. Always. A perfect ninja. A perfect woman." The boy shuddered. "But not a perfect mother. No, not at all. She gave birth to me and only a few weeks later she put on her ANBU uniform and went to Deathtrap Mountain and she died. My father always said she would have never been killed, if not for the weakening that had resulted from the postpartum strain. From making me. My mother was too weak to use Distant Starlight properly, he said. Was that the truth? None of us will ever know."

_Do you hear us, Tsunade-sensei?_ The Hokage had surreptitiously planted a chakra bug in Sakura's head, allowing her to see and sense everything that Sakura did. _Do you hear Sosa's words? Do you feel guilty for all the grief you have caused him?_

"Sosa." Sakura's voice was a shadowed whisper. "Sosa. Why did you try to kill yourself?"

"Which time?"

It was not the reply she expected. Sakura hissed, sucking in her breath. _My god, how many times? Too many times._ She stammered, "In Kashima Village."

"Didn't my blacksmith Yone tell you the whole story?"

"He did. But…"

"But you do not understand why."

Sakura shook her head. "Did… did you really think you could bring your mother back to life?"

"Did I? One can never truly understand the mind of a ten-year-old. I was trying to get away, I suppose. From my training, from the pressures and burdens of being the Sougon heir. From my father. I hated my father. He was… he was the cruelest man you could ever imagine. He would call himself a man of justice. There is no creature on earth half so terrifying as a truly just man. Remember that, Sakura. I thought if I could bring my mother back… but it was all wrong. A nightmarish folly. Later on I realized my childish mistake."

"Childish?" There seemed nothing childish about it.

"Oh, yes. One cannot force the hand of fate. That is the law of _enishi_. Fate goes ever as fate must, and none of us can ever escape. The stone keeps to its path. The man endures until he is finally stopped by a force stronger than himself. I tried to kill myself when I was ten years old, on the village green of Kashima Village, but it was not yet my time. I know that now. That day was not the day I died."

Silence, for a time.

_And when will you die, Sougon Sosano?_ But Sakura did not ask the question. She did not dare to ask it, for then Sosano might actually tell her the truth. Instead she whispered, "But first we'll live."

"You are a quick learner." The stone-nin boy wrapped his arms around her. Strong and firm and gentle. His breath was summer smoke, his dark face haloed by a wreath of distant stars. His kisses were soft as silk, his powerful body warm in the chill air of the mountain night. Yet even then a grizzled voice seemed to echo in her thoughts. _I'll tell you true, ninja-sama, and I pray you listen before you throw away your sense. Stay away from Sougon Sosano. He's cursed, he is. But she did_
not want to think. She only wanted to feel. She only wanted to love, and to escape, and to forget.

Fate would wait till the morrow.
The Second Trial: Treasons of Time, Part 1

Before dawn Haghira Geigin found Sakura and Sosano huddled together beneath the broken observatory roof. Sakura was half-naked beneath Sosano's robes, her skin covered with a sheen of dry sweat from their sexual gyrations the night before. They're gone on for hours—Sakura a wildcat in heat, Sosano terribly aroused with her every lightest touch. He'd spent himself in her a dozen times, it seemed like, and always came back for more. Now Sosano was snoring softly against her breast.

Geigin eyed her with unmitigated dislike. "Put on your clothes, ape. It's time."

Haghira Geigin was the third member of Team Sawar. Unlike his teammates, however, Geigin was a fanatical xenophobic nationalist. He hated every hidden village that was not his own, especially Konoha, and did not even trust his Confederacy allies. He is the exact opposite of his father, Doi Dragonsight. It was all the more disconcerting how much alike they looked. The same spindly, skeletal frame; the same long neck and round ears; the same grim voice. Haghira Doi was Sougon Sawar's greatest rival, the leader of Iwa's internal opposition to the Tsuchikage's reign. The fact that Doi's only son was now Sawar's most fervent disciple was an irony too rich for words.

Sakura suspected the root cause had much to do with a teenage rebellion against his neglectful father. Sosano had shared the story with her one night. Doi and Sawar had been rivals for the love of Seurin Shadowstar. Even though Seurin eventually married Sawar, as per centuries of Sougon tradition, she had chosen Doi as her true lover. Seurin spent far more time with Doi than with her brother-husband; they did everything together. The only thing they could not do was have a child. This was apparently a source of great distress for Doi. After the announcement that Seurin was pregnant with Sosano, Doi had gotten drunk and knocked up a nameless prostitute on the Street of Beggars. Nine months later was born Geigin.

By this time Seurin had already been killed in the Battle of Deathtrap Mountain. According to certain rumors, after Seurin died Doi had gone to Katsu-ji Temple and vowed before the Sage of Six Paths that he would never take a woman into his bed again. Ever since Doi had been as celibate as a Kiyome monk. As for Geigin's mother, the nameless prostitute, Doi absolutely refused to have anything to do with her... and in fact exiled her from Iwa. Thus Geigin grew up having never even seen his mother. By law the heir to the Haghira clan, one of the Six Sacred Clans, Geigin was nonetheless burdened with the knowledge that he was his father's unwanted child. The son of a prostitute, instead of the son of Seurin Shadowstar. Oh, yes. The relationships between Geigin, Sosano, and their fathers are twisted indeed.

She stared back at Geigin, meeting his cold sneer. "My name is Sakura."

"I know your name."

"Then you should use it."

"Bitch." A vein popped on Geigin's temple. "Sosano is a disgrace to our village for consorting with the likes of you. Sawar-sensei is right. Women are a man's most dangerous and vile weakness."

"You should try it sometime. Maybe you'll like it."

"Maybe I'll kill you."

Sakura smiled her sweetest smile. "Is that another thing you've never done?"
Geigin flew into a rage at that. The stone-nin boy was quite prone to rages, Sakura was finding out. He stomped his feet, cursing, and almost drew his weapons. Attacking Sakura when half of their party was made up of United Countries genin was not the most well-thought plan; and even Geigin reconsidered it after a moment. All he managed to accomplish was to wake Sosano. The two teammates had almost a kind of master-servant relationship: Sosano the haughty and superior master, Geigin the sullen and resentful servant.

Sosano told Geigin to go away, so he did.

Later, fully dressed, the two lovers rejoined the party of ninjas. It was still dark as together they began climbing the narrow stone path from the Observatory up to the mountain peak. The way was steep, but not long. Soon they had passed the permanent snow line: the place above which glacial ice covered Mount Echigo year round. *The winter that never ends.* Everywhere that Sakura could see was covered in sheets of blue crystal ice, dark and shadowy in the starlight before dawn. A fresh coating of hoarfrost covered the stairs, so slippery they had to use their chakra to cling to the path and not fall. Sakura found her breath steaming in a chill winter wind.

"You're cold," observed Sosano.

"Sasuke used to call me a spring girl." She shivered. "He used to tease me, when we were little kids, I'd get so mad. He thought I was weak because I liked flowers. Sasuke was born in the dead of winter, you know. Snow falling from the sky, ice glittering on a frozen river. That was always his favorite."

"Spring is the season of change. Of rebirth and renewal. It fits you well."

"But not you."

"No," said Sosano. "I always preferred summer."

*For those who love life, and never want it to end, summer is the saddest season of them all.*

And then they were there.

The sun had risen above the horizon by now, though they could not quite see it yet. A thick layer of clouds surrounding the top of Mount Echigo blocked the view to the valley floor. No doubt it was raining below, in the Gorge of Mists—in Single Branch Village, and the Musashi Plains, and Shikkotsu Forest, and the Jewel Islands, and Kesa Village, and Biwa Valley. But from this height she could see none of it.

Instead she saw the temple. A great white edifice built of marble and white dreamstone, bestriding the icy peak of Mount Echigo like a diamond spire. In style and form it was exactly opposite to the great Shiva Cathedrals, the pagan shrines of the ancient Earth Country. There were no pyramids here, no gargoyles or sprawling mazes or ornamental bones. Like all the great Kiyome temples, it was a building of perfectly elegant proportions. Rows of fluted columns, straight walls at right angles, a circular vaulted ceiling that curved upward to the center of heaven. A great marble statue stood at the temple gates. The statue was of a faceless man holding a dark hourglass—the rod of fate and reincarnation. *Atropus the Death-Judge, the Earth God and the God of Time.* This was his holy temple.

"The Temple of Time," she whispered.

*Senso-ji Temple.*

Sosano smiled, then led the party forward. Unexpectedly, the closer they got to Senso-ji Temple the
warmer it became. "Mount Echigo is a geologically active volcano," Sosano explained in reaction to the Sarutobi twins' exclamations of surprise. "It does not erupt in the usual way, however. Instead the smoldering heat from its magma core is directed upwards to the hot springs underneath Senso-ji Temple, where its geothermal energy is released and then dissipated. It's said that the Sage of Six Paths himself used his legendary Rinnegan eye to construct Senso-ji Temple. The smoking hot springs of Senso-ji Temple are famous for their restorative properties. Pilgrims journey here from all over the world to seek a new existence for themselves… to be reborn, either literally or figuratively."

The hot springs were indeed impressive. The pools of steaming mineral water flowed in orderly channels and baths all around the inside of Senso-ji Temple. Sakura saw that the circular dome of the temple actually had a hole in its very center, allowing the steam from the baths to escape. From the holy waters wafted an almost intoxicating sensation of warmth and life and spiritual profundity.

But it was not the hot springs that caught Sakura's eye. At the back of the temple, large floor-to-ceiling windows looked out the western face of Mont Echigo, right at the cliff's edge. The sun had finally risen over the thick cloud layer beneath the temple. Rays of golden light shone across the sea of clouds—a white heavenly carpet that stretched from horizon to horizon as far as the eye could see, a view around the world.

It was dawn over Mount Echigo.

Temari knelt down in prayer. She recited the famous sutra from the Kiyome sacred texts:

There is not even a moment of calmness
In the heart of this passing life
The wind is already blowing
Through the hollow of our bones.
Oh, God, we yearn for Kindness—
Kindness at all cost.

Rock Lee was less religious. "Hey," the leaf-nin boy said loudly. "Where's the Second Lock?"

Sosano seemed to want to make another joke at Lee's expense, but Sakura shot her boyfriend down with a withering look. He wisely closed his mouth. This was no time to start another fight between the two quarreling rivals. "That's a great question, Lee. It's what we came here for."

"On the terrace," said Neji.

The Lock was just like the other ones.

A tall rectangular slab of shimmering white metal. It stood on the western terrace of Senso-ji Temple, surrounded on all sides by hot springs, pale and proud in the warm steaming air. And in the center of the Lock, there were etched the keyholes they needed to use. Just like they'd done before with the other Locks, each genin needed to put in his chuunin exam key into the Lock and turn it in order to activate the Lock. Unfortunately…

There were three keyholes.

"Not this shit again," complained Kankuro.

"Three?" Temari frowned. "Two dead keys for one live key?"

During the First Trial, they had needed two chuunin exam keys to open the Lock under the Pillar of Heaven. One live key, still activated by being pressed against the skin of the genin who wore it. And one dead key—forcibly taken from another genin in the exam. Dead keys, cold and dark. If a genin
lost contact with his key for more than ten seconds, the key would go dead. Each dead key could also only be used once. Mathematically, that meant that that only half of the teams in the First Trial could possibly pass.

Was the same thing going to happen here, during the Second Trial? Were they going to be weeded out?

"No," said Hyuuga Neji. He was staring at the keyholes with his Byakugan. "That's not what this Lock is about. It doesn't matter how many dead keys we have—and we've picked up quite a few along the way, I assure you. Look—these keyholes are special. Only specific kinds of keys will work, in combination."

"What do you mean?" asked Sakura.

"I'll show you."

Neji took out his chuunin exam key from the necklace beneath his robes. The shimmering silver key was devoid of markings, except for two. First, one golden stripe had been etched along its radius, to signify that it had been activated in the First Lock. Second, there was a number etched in the side of the key—the number '300', representing the registration number of Neji's team. Neji, Lee, and now Anake all had the same numbered key.

There were three keyhole slots in the Lock—two below, one above, placed in a relation like an equilateral triangle. The two below are live key slots, Sakura saw. Neji inserted his key into one of the two live key slots. A number suddenly appeared on the surface of the Lock: black against the shimmering white. The number was…

… 300.

"Oh, dammit," whispered Orajuchi. "Does that mean—"

"Yes. There are three keyhole slots, you see? Two live keys… and one dead key, above them. We do need a dead key. But only one special kind… a key with the same team number as the others. All the keyholes are like that. All the keys need to be same team number, or the Lock won't turn. Two live keys. And one dead key, which will disappear as soon as it's turned."

Sakura finally understood. Director Doi had warned them at the Overlook, when the Second Trial had begun. Three Locks will you pass along the way. Each Lock must be activated with your chuunin exam key, and each Lock also involves a choice. All choices are valid… though not all choices will allow you to pass the Second Trial.

Lee rubbed his head in confusion. "What does it mean?"

Temari stared at him. "It means that only two people from each team can open the Lock. Only two people out of each team of three can pass the Second Trial."

And one person has to sacrifice himself.
And one person has to sacrifice himself.

Atop Mount Echigo, atop Senso-ji Temple beneath a sea of clouds, everyone stared at each other for a moment. At their teammates. The people they had fought with, bled for, struggled for. Their best friends. Each team had three people. But only two could open the Second Lock—could pass the chuunin exam. Sakura stared at Temari and Kankuro, and vice versa. One of the two Sand Siblings, Temari or Kankuro, had to give up their own key for the good of the others. Or Sakura herself.

A beat of silence.

The leaf-nin Shimura Anake laughed. He seemed particularly unhinged today. "Haha! What a joke! What a splendidly ironic twist. Get all the teams fighting among themselves, like rats scrabbling over the last bit of cheese! Internal dissension!"

"It's supposed to mimic a real mission," said Sakura. "That's what Director Doi told us. As shinobi, we're supposed to follow certain rules. Complete the mission. Be loyal to your comrades. Protect the innocent. Defend the village. But there is always a tension between those different rules. We all do our duty, when there is no cost to it. Yet soon or late in every man's life comes a day when it is not easy, a day when he must choose. That's what the Second Trial tests: the inevitable choices we all have to make during the course of a mission. How far will we go, to finish this chuunin exam? What are we prepared to sacrifice?"

"I see," said the rain-nin Kyoroku Erima. "What is more important to us? Our teammates? Or ourselves? And if we have to leave a teammate behind… which teammate?"

Sosano laughed. "Geigin… your father really outdoes himself, sometimes."

The spindly stone-nin boy scowled. "My father is a sentimental fool. I see nothing challenging at all about this supposed test. At least the First Trial involved some intelligence and skill. The Second Trial is an absurd joke. So it far it is nothing more than a wilderness hike. Frightening some untouchables to open the First Lock… it took no more than effort than taking a piss in the woods. As for this Second Lock? That's even easier. You'll pass, and so will I. Orajuchi can go to hell."

"Hey!" said Orajuchi.

"Our teammate does not seem willing to give up his chuunin exam key," observed Sosano.

"Of course he will. You and I are the strongest genin in Iwa. Orajuchi is just some B-rank flunky. If one of us has to be left behind, he is the obvious choice. Only a fool like my father would think this transparently simple solution presents any sort of intractable problem."

"That's where you're wrong, Geigin. Orajuchi is my best friend. What makes you think I'll leave him behind, over you? Maybe I just like him better."

"You—" Geigin sputtered, his jaws working in rage.

Sakura suspected that Sosano was not being serious. If she knew him—and at this point Sakura knew him quite intimately well—Sosano was just flaunting his superiority as leader of Team Sawar. He did not actually care about the chuunin exam at all. Whether Orajuchi or Geigin passed made no difference to him. Of course, Geigin cared very much. That meant Orajuchi would probably end having to step aside, given the politics of the situation. Orajuchi was a nobody, a half-untouchable
really, and Geigin was the son of the Chuunin Exam Director. *The bat boy will give up on his own,* Sakura thought. *He's submissive and obedient, just like his untouchable siblings in Kashima Village.*

The decision was not up to Sakura, though.

The cloud-nin Fukunaga Kazuno cleared his throat and drew himself in a very dignified manner. "I believe this is a private matter between each individual genin team. We should each settle this in our own way, without interference or judgement for the choices of others."

Kazuno's advice was accepted. Each of the teams scattered a little ways from each other across Senso-ji Temple, talking in low voices and hurried whispers. Sakura guessed it would not be quite that simple—talking had a way of leading to other things—but for the time being, there was no harm in trying the suggestion.

"This is stupid!" complained Kankuro.

The word said it all. Sakura stared at the sand-nin boy; he colored slightly and looked away. Kankuro was obviously biased toward his sister and himself—the two Sand Siblings who'd lived and fought together for their entire lives. *He wants me to voluntarily give up my key, but he doesn't want to say it, because it's embarrassing.* The embarrassment was an improvement from outright hostility, to be sure. A year ago Kankuro had been trying to kill her.

Temari, unexpectedly, did not agree with her brother. "Sakura is the leader of the United Countries," she said quietly. "She must go on for political reasons. I will withdraw."

"Sister!" said Kankuro. He was shocked.

Sakura spoke up. "The last time this happened, during the First Trial… Anake suggested we draw straws. I think it's a good idea. All of us want to pass, but someone has to step aside. This is a fair way to decide."

"A deft diplomatic speech," said Temari. "I commend you, Sakura. But it is transparently self-serving. No, Tsunade has for some reason held you up as the mascot of the United Countries. If you do not pass the Second Trial, it will be seen as a sign of the Hokage's weakness. You must go on. As for Kankuro and myself… he will make a fine representative for Suna. I'll step aside."

"Why?" asked Kankuro. "I can withdraw too!"

"Because I'm your big sister."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"No." Sakura surprised herself by speaking. "No, if one of you withdraws… it should be Kankuro. Temari, you must to go on."

Temari met her gaze. Her eyes probing, testing, questioning. "This has little to do with you, Sakura. It's between my brother and myself."

"The Third Trial is a public, one-on-one knockout tournament. The better Team Tsunade performs, the more matches we win, the better the UC will look. You're stronger than Kankuro. You'll do better."

"Will I? That is a pure hypothetical. Kankuro is one of the strongest ninjas in the exam."

"But you're stronger."
"I don't agree."

"What if you face Misain Sebi in the first round? Or Sougon Sosano… or Hoshigaki Makera the Little Monster?" Sakura pressed the point like rubbing salt on a wound. "You can win, maybe. But Kankuro won't. All he would do is get embarrassed, or worse. Do you want that to happen to your little brother?"

"Enough."

Temari's face was seamed with displeasure. She's angry, Sakura thought. Good, I wanted to make her angry. Sakura had pressed the argument that she knew would reach Temari in a vulnerable spot… that, and the implied subtext of the argument. Kankuro did not see it, but Temari understood. In fact, Temari was right about the Third Trial. All the matchups in the tournament were hypothetical; and in the ninja world your ability to win a fight depended heavily on the matchup. Sakura didn't know if Temari and Kankuro—or herself—would do better. Nobody knew. But there were two things that could be known. First, if Kankuro faced a psychopath like Makera, he would be at risk of being killed. Second, if Temari faced Makera instead of her brother, she would have the opportunity for revenge that she so greatly desired. If Temari wanted to protect her family… and if she wanted her vengeance… then she ought to step forward.

And me? Why did Sakura want Temari in the Third Trial, instead of Kankuro? She was not even sure herself. Then Temari laughed. "All right, Sakura. We've had a strange sort of rivalry, you and I… if I face you in the Third Trial, I swear, I will give you the most glorious and profound beating that I can possibly manage."

And then Sakura knew why. Of course. One woman to another, one kunoichi to another. Sabaku Temari was the strongest young kunoichi that Sakura knew. Ever since they'd first met on the streets of Konoha, in some way, Sakura had admired her; feared her; wanted to be her. She was flattered that Temari now considered Sakura her rival.

Sakura grinned. "And the same to you, Temari."

Kankuro was scratching his head, looking puzzled. "Did I… did I miss something? I feel like I missed something."

Temari clapped her brother on the shoulder. "Sorry, Kankuro. I'm afraid we're leaving you behind. It's for your own good."

"Oh, sister. I knew you cared about me."

"Don't tell anyone."

Activating their keys in the Second Lock was exactly like expected. Kankuro gave Temari his chuunin exam key; the glowing silver key went dead and blank after ten seconds. Then they inserted all three of their keys into the Lock and turned. The registration number of Team Tsunade—'266'—flashed in black above the keyholes. There was an audible click as the keys snapped into place, and then a brief flash of red light pulsed from the Lock's metal surface. The live keys are activated.

Kankuro's dead key dissolved quickly into cold silver liquid, while Sakura and Temari's keys now had two golden stripes. Two of the Locks of the Second Trial had been opened. Only one was left.

Around the Second Lock, different genin teams were reaching their own decisions about who would pass and who would step aside. Some teams, like Team Tsunade, had made amicable decisions that all of the teammates accepted without further dispute. The cloud-nins of Team Darui, for example, had chosen the albino Kirazu Raiki and the pygmy boy Imidori Jouda to continue. That was
surprising to Sakura, considering Kazuno was Raiki's lover, but neither of the two boyfriends seemed in the least upset about it. Team Sawar had also reached a consensus. As predicted, the bat boy Orajuchi had voluntarily given his key up to Geigin after a series of heated gesticulations on Geigin's part. Sosano shrugged indifferently. The three lesbian mist-nins of Team Kikuko actually drew straws: choosing Touin Yukari and Uchiku Onome to go forward by lottery.

Some teams, however, were not so amicable.

The two Sarutobi twins, Hiraru and Kanetsu, had ganged up on their new and much weaker teammate, Hatsutori Yashi, and forcibly taken his key away from him. Yashi actually started to cry, whining tearfully about the corruption and unfairness of Team Ranka. Team Tosuken was doing scarcely better. The three rain-nins Mukai Aumono, Kyoroku Erima, and Junichiro Tenshe were all shouting threats and insults at each other. Bad blood, Sakura thought. It was hard to see could these teams could recover from such a internal conflict.

Team Gai was the worst.

"Fuck Tenten!" Shimura Anake declared suddenly.

This was an insult that could not be brooked. "Shut up, you bastard!" Rock Lee shouted, immediately rushing Anake and slamming him to floor. The two leaf-nins rolled on the floor, punching and kicking at each other. Team Gai's shouting match had descended into a violent brawl.

"Stop!" shouted Sakura. This is what she had feared would happen—the tensions within each team exposed by the Second Lock had devolved into chaos. "We can't fight among ourselves... there are still enemies out there! Neji, do something."

Neji stood aside, staring at his teammates with cold white eyes. And did nothing.

All the genin had gathered around now to watch the brawl. Anake was shouting more insults at Tenten's memory. Rock Lee picked up the other boy and threw him bodily into one of the hot spring baths inside the main circular dome of Senso-ji Temple. Anake came up with a steaming splash... and two kunai in his hands. They're trying to kill each other, Sakura thought. They're on the same team, and they're trying to kill each other in the middle of the chuunin exam. Rock Lee leaped forward, spinning into a Konoha Leaf Whirlwind. Anake dodged—and Lee's brutal kicks slammed into the marble wall behind him instead.

"Interesting," observed Raiki dryly. "The wall took no damage at all. I would've thought it should split in two."

"Senso-ji Temple is indestructible," Sosano responded. "No one knows why... perhaps because it was created by the Sage of Six Paths. No physical process or force can harm anything in the temple. Not taijutsu, not ninjutsu, not even the passage of time... in other words, Senso-ji Temple is immortal. It can only be affected by spiritual jutsu."

"Don't you care about the fighting?" demanded Sakura. "Lee, Anake, stop! This is madness!"

She dove between the two of them before the situation could get any more out of hand. It almost looked like Team Tosuken and some of the other stone-nin teams were ready to join in on the action. With her own fists she drew herself up between Lee and Anake.

"Sakura-chan!" protested Rock Lee. "That bastard—he spit on Tenten's grave! I'll kill him!"

What happened to you, Lee? she thought sadly. Sakura remembered Lee as a sweet, innocent little boy. The boy who'd given her a jar of fireflies as a token of his love. Where had that person gone?
He died when Tenten died, he died when I betrayed him by choosing Sosano. Anger consumed Lee's round glassy eyes; jealousy seamed every line of his plain face. Against Anake, against Sosano, against Sakura herself. She could not reach him with words, she knew. Instead she turned to the other leaf-nin boy.

"What happened to drawing straws, Anake?"

Anake laughed insolently. "That was a joke, Sakura. There's no such thing as luck. There's only the strong and the weak. Imagawa Tenten was weak… so she died. I was strong, so I replaced her on Team Gai." There was a sinister edge in his voice. "Now this pea-brained green boy wants to challenge me to a fight. Very well, we shall see who is the stronger. That is the person who shall go on."

"You're both missing the point. If the Second Lock is supposed to be about the duty of sacrificing for your teammates… we're all failing. This is stupid. We have to work together."

Anake derailed her. "Sakura, you fool. Half the teams here are fake in the first place… just like you and the Sand Siblings. Just like me on Team Gai. Team Gai? Maito Gai's not my sensei. I barely spoke two words to Gai in my life. In fact… I can't fucking stand Gai or his two self-righteous students. We're all in this for ourselves, don't you see? That's what being a ninja is about… that's what strength is. The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must. That's the true duty of the shinobi."

Sakura had never heard the boy speak so seriously. He was not joking at all. "You're wrong," she said. "We have a larger duty to our people. To our country, to the world. That's what the United Countries is all about."

"The so-called United Countries is just as fake. We're not allies of these people… Rain or Sand. We're enemies. Don't you see that, you naive little fool? Our so-called alliance is drenched in blood and based on lies. Suna attacked Konoha on December 7th and slaughtered thousands of our people. The Sand Siblings were right at the forefront of that massacre. They were directly responsible for it, they were the masterminds of the terrorist plot to destroy Konoha. And now you dare to call that bitch your friend?"

Temari finally spoke. "We were wrong," she said quietly.

"Words are wind, and worthless as paper promises. Isn't that what you say in your country, sand-nin? And as for the Rain Country… well, that one's a doozy, isn't it?" Anake laughed—a laugh of pure malice. It chilled Sakura to her bones. "Why don't you tell them the truth, Aumono? Why don't you tell our dear friend Rock Lee here what happened to his sensei, Maito Gai the Butcher Beast? Why did Gai disappear after we left Amegakure?"

Aumono hovered near the edges of the crowd. Hostile dark eyes flashed from a pale face, beneath a mane of long tangled hair, the same color as his armored wetsuit of plate and scale. The rain-nin boy spoke in a voice like gravel on stone. "So you know."

Hyuuga Neji had not moved during this entire exchange. Not when Lee had been fighting Anake, not when Sakura had intervened, not during Anake's insults. Only now did Neji stir… curling his fists into a battle stance, his eyes pulsing with the power of an activated Byakugan. And he asked, "Know what?"

Shimura Anake answered. "Rain's help didn't come for free. Why do you think Rain joined the United Countries? In exchange for his help, Lord Hanzou the Reaper, Aumono's grandfather, asked for Maito Gai's soul to seal the deal. Our Queen Bitch, the great Tsunade, the great appeaser, folded
to the demand like a cheap tent. Gai told you he was on some kind of secret mission, did he? Let me tell you the truth. You sensei… Maito Gai… is in the Asylum!"

"Is this true?" asked Neji.

Aumono did not answer for a long moment. Then suddenly he laughed. "Of course it is, you stupid ape. Maito Gai murdered my father. Do you think Lord Hanzou would forget that? The Butcher Beast never left the Rain Country alive."

There was a general stunned silence.

"NO!" shrieked Rock Lee.

He attacked Aumono in a grieving rage, his body swirling with a cloak of pure chakra. Lee had opened all his Chakra Gates, it seemed—all five of them. Erima and Tenshe went to Aumono's defense while Neji went to help his teammate. And all of a sudden the entire party had erupted in chaos. Dozens of ninjas fighting amid the steaming hot pools of Senso-ji Temple.

Sakura ducked as a giant spinning shuriken almost decapitated her. This was even worse than she had possibly imagined. Anake's revelation had destroyed the alliance between the leaf-nins and the rain-nins. Even the Confederacy was getting in on the act. "Attack them!" Geigin was shouting at Sosano. "Attack them, they're divided among themselves, this is our chance!" But Sosano made no move to intervene. Anake stood in the middle of it all, cackling hysterically.

Sakura herself was stunned. She was not sure what to do. She couldn't believe what she heard about Gai. The Hokage sacrificed him to the Asylum? To be tortured to death for all eternity, just like all of Hanzou's other sacrifices? How she could Tsunade-sensei doing something like that?

"Shimura Anake!" shouted Aumono, clouds of poisoned senbon needles twisting and snaking from his hands. "You know my secret, but I know something about you too! You're a creature of Danzou the Termite—some twisted experiment. You've been trying to assassinate me from the beginning! That's your secret mission!"

"We're being surrounded!" Neji suddenly interrupted. "An ambush—"

Dozens of ninjas appeared from all around the ring of Senso-ji Temple. Surrounding them. It was the Confederacy. The other Confederacy, not Sosano's group. The remnants of Team Yorai and Team Jidaei, who'd attacked them in the Jewel Islands, including the stone-nins Chuzuru Jibachi and Chuzuru Ukio. Makoto Mazu and Team Muro of Blood. Yasunari Tontero and Team Bae of Grass. And the most dangerous genin team of them all… perhaps even more dangerous than Team Dayu. The infamously sadistic, psychopathic mist-nins, the ones who Sakura had first met while they were raping Dee. Team Keel. The plastic, smooth-skinned Hiroshi Fue. The short, white-haired Houzuki Suigetsu. And the person who led them all. The boy with skin like gray sandpaper scales. The boy with a face like a shark, dead black eyes without white. The boy with a thousand sharp teeth that glinted between his cold lips.

"It's true," said Hoshigaki Makera. "The little kid is a fucking traitor."

Anake grinned. "Ah, my evil shark friend. You're late."
Hoshigaki Makera laughed. He laughed and laughed, as dead and unfeeling and terrible as a saw on a stone, and when he was done, his hands formed a deadly hand seal. "Water Release: Ultimate Water Shark Missile!" he shrieked.

A huge spear of water shaped like a shark exploded outwards at the ambushed genin. Temari raised her Giant War Fan and tried to deflect the attack with a scythe of cleaving wind, but the spear absorbed it—actually growing stronger in proportion to the chakra it absorbed. Ultimate Water Shark Missile was Makera's most powerful jutsu, able to consume chakra from anything in its path—even a shield like Neji's Kaiten.

The only thing that saved them was Sosano. "Absolute Zero!" he shouted, his Enshogan eyes burning. A thin barrier of zero kinetic energy appeared before them: a wall so cold that even the light that passed through was frozen, or nearly enough as to make no difference. Makera's Ultimate Water Shark Missile hit the Absolute Zero barrier and stopped. Hanging there in suspended animation.

The shark boy grinned languidly. "Sougon Sosano." His voice was amused, utterly confident—an apex predator circling his cornered prey. "Is that your best trick? I see your panic… I smell it. The stench of your fear."

The Absolute Zero barrier began to crack.

"Run!" shouted Sakura.

She took her own advice just before the barrier shattered, and the Ultimate Water Shark Missile exploded outward again, free from its temporary prison. Even Sosano's Enshogan could not hold in the colossal energy of Makera's Ultimate Water Shark Missile for long. But it bought them enough time that they weren't hit directly. Instead, as the ambushed ninjas scrambled to dodge left and right, the spear of churning water hit the far wall of Senso-ji Temple. The indestructible marble wall suffered not a scratch—but neither did it absorb force. A wave of rushing water flooded the temple in all directions, drowning Sakura all the way to her chest. She was almost carried away by the current, channeling chakra to her feet to grip the floor.

And then chaos.

Absolute chaos. Jutsu flying through the air, spells of mass destruction from all the five elements: earth, water, wind, fire, and lightning. Genin fleeing up the walls of the temple and then being cut down like so many dying flies, corpses splashing down into the temple's steaming hot spring baths, staining the clear holy water with rivers of red blood. By the sheer number of people involved it was the biggest battle of the chunin exam so far. Bigger than the battle under the Pillar of Heaven. Bigger than the battle in the Catacombs, or in the Jewel Islands. But it was all taking place in a far more confined space. Everyone packed into Senso-ji Temple or fighting across its various terraces. Sakura could not have run from the battle even if she wanted to.

Sosano and Makera were fighting in the middle of the temple. So was the rest of Team Keel, and Team Jidaei, and the cloud-nins of Team Darui, and Temari and Kankuro. Temari and the cloud-nins would not be denied their revenge. Geigin was fighting there, too… but on the other side. Evidently he had decided to join Makera's forces against his own teammate, though he didn't dare attack Sosano directly. That was just how much he hated the United Countries.

Sakura herself had another matter to take care of.
"Anake!" she screamed. "Why?"

Shimura Anake was backed into a corner of the temple, near the Lock by the south terrace. The leaf-nin boy stared at her with insolent blue eyes.

"Because it was my mission."

The ambush had been Anake's plan all along, Sakura realized. He'd secretly contacted Team Keel and planned a coordinated assault on Sakura's group. Anake had probably originally intended the ambush to happen last night, at the Shiva temple they'd passed yesterday. Only Sosano had unexpectedly led them up another path to the Observatory. So they'd changed the ambush to Senso-ji Temple. Anake had intentionally exposed the secret of Maito Gai's imprisonment in the Asylum in order to cause a rift between the leaf-nins and the rain-nins. The United Countries had been divided just in time for Makera and his group to attack at the most opportune moment.

But to what purpose? Was Anake a Confederacy traitor? No... he was only using the Confederacy to achieve his own ends. He'd told them himself. Anake wanted to break up the alliance between Leaf, Rain, and Sand. If Team Tsunade and Team Tosuken were killed here, on Senso-ji Temple, how likely was it that the United Countries could long survive their deaths? The whole point of the chunin exam was to forge deeper bonds between their villages. That wouldn't happen if the Sand Siblings were dead, it wouldn't happen if Aumono was dead. *If I am dead.*

"Who gave you the mission?" Sakura shouted. "Was it Utatane the Sleeper? Was it ROOT?"

"Ah, that would be telling."

"ROOT gave you the mission to assassinate Aumono." She was sure of it now. "And... and the Sand Siblings too, I bet. And me."

"Not you." Anake laughed. "You're a leaf-nin, Sakura. A misguided, dangerous leaf-nin perhaps, but still a leaf-nin. Get out of my way, and I won't bother you at all."

"You traitor."

"Funny, I was about to say the same thing to you. Or do you deny that you do have a unique talent for... *consorting* with the enemy? The Sand Siblings. Hanzou's frog whelps. My god, the Tsuchikage's own son is your boyfriend!"

"I won't you get away with this."

"You have no idea how powerful I am, Sakura. I *will* kill Mukai Aumono. I'd prove it to you, but he seems to be doing a good job of dying on his own."

That was true. Aumono was currently being besieged on all sides, his armored wetsuit already badly shredded. It was not the Confederacy that was attacking him, however. It was Rock Lee and Neji. *Utter madness*, Sakura thought. The real enemy was literally at their backs, but they had decided to kill their ally instead. Lee had gone completely unhinged, burning all of his Chakra Gates in a blaze of rage and grief. Neji was more aware of the situation, but even he was largely ignoring the Confederacy. *United we stand, divided we fall."

"Neji!" she called. "Neji, stop! Don't you see, this is Anake's plan? You're falling right into his trap!"

Neji ignored her.

Aumono laughed. "Words are wind."
I'll have to stop them myself, Sakura thought. But first, she had to deal with Anake. He was far too dangerous to leave untouched behind her back. She brandished her chakra-cast kunai and rushed at him—

Anake took off his forehead protector.

Sakura skidded to a stop and gasped. Neji had warned her. Neji had warned her, but even so she was not expecting to see the truth that lay behind Anake's headband. It was…

... an eye.

An eye implanted in the middle of Anake's forehead.

The Sharingan, she thought for an instant. But it was not the Sharingan. Nor was it the Byakugan, though it seemed to have elements from both. It was white and blank like the Byakugan, except around the missing pupil there were also strange red cracks, like Sharingan tomoe, like the Sharingan viewed through a shattered mirror. And behind the cracks was a darkness—a darkness more than the absence of light. A darkness like something from beyond the grave. Death, she thought. This eye is death.

The boy with three eyes shook his head. "You should've gotten out of my way, Sakura. Now you die."

"Amnesia!" Sakura cried, unsure what to do, flinging her best genjutsu at him—

"SOUL EYE!"

Sakura survived the doujutsu attack only by luck. The cracks in Anake's third eye opened—widening—unfolding into a black maw. When Sakura saw it, she felt a chill in her very soul. A spiritual jutsu, she knew, like Death Demon Seal, like Torment. And Anake focused that otherworldly eye, and looked at her…

... until the mist-nin Unchiku Onome got in the way.

Onome hadn't intended to block Anake's line of sight. She was simply dodging a grass-nin's attack; Team Kikuko fighting Team Bae on the domed roof of Senso-ji Temple. So Onome's interference was accidental. It was a most fortunate accident for Sakura, however. Anake looked at Onome, and then in a single glance Onome's soul was sucked out of her body. Sakura literally saw the glittering orb of the mist-nin's soul leave her head, travel through the air, and then disappear into the depths of Anake's Soul Eye.

The eye closed.

Sakura stumbled backwards, stunned. Onome dropped dead to the ground at her feet, an empty body without a soul. Sakura could not believe it. She stammered, "You—that—"

"I told you, Sakura. I'm far more powerful than you can imagine."

What could that Soul Eye be? What kind of twisted ROOT experiment could have produced such a monstrous doujutsu? Sakura could scarcely comprehend it. It explained everything about Anake's past, about the seal in his body that was opaque even to the Byakugan, about why Akatsuki had tried to kidnap him.

Suddenly she realized that Shimura Anake was the most dangerous genin in the chuunin exam. Not Makera. Not Sosano. Of all the shinobi fighting in Senso-ji Temple, this leaf-nin traitor was the
greatest threat.

He could kill them all.

Unless they stopped him first.

"SOUL EYE!" Anake shouted again. His third eye cracked opened—

Sakura dove underground before he could finish the jutsu, using her earth elemental affinity to move through the rock underneath temple floor. When she popped up again, she made sure to do so with multiple Mirrored Clones, the better to confuse Anake's Soul Eye. Instead of hitting her, he'd glanced at several ninjas behind her and sucked away their souls instead. The attack was indiscriminate—both United Countries and Confederacy genin had fallen victim.

"Stop!" she screamed at Neji, Lee, and Aumono. She'd surfaced right in the middle of their petty battle, interrupting it forcibly. "Look at what Anake's doing! We've got to stop him before he kills us!"

Neji had observed everything with his Byakugan. "Actually… I believe he only wants to kill the rain-nins."

"That's right!" laughed Anake. The boy stalked toward them across the temple. "Just get out of the way, my dear teammates. I'll avenge Maito Gai for you!"

Rock Lee was confused. The twist of events had left his head spinning. "Anake—Neji—what's going on?"

"It's complicated. Suffice to say, Anake wants to kill the rain-nins, just like we do…"

To Sakura's dismay, Neji stepped aside, giving Anake a clear path toward the battered Aumono and the other two rain-nins. Anake grinned.

And then Neji suddenly attacked.

His palms glowed as they blasted out an intense beam of white chakra. Gentle Fist: Vacuum Palm! The searing laser sliced into Anake's chest and pierced the boy's heart. Anake fell limp to the ground.

"… but we have a duty to kill traitors first," Neji finished.

"You killed Anake!" Lee shouted, shocked.

"Oh, did he?" an insolent voice asked, very amused.

Impossible, thought Sakura.

But she was wrong—it was Anake. The boy appeared in the same place he'd been standing before…as if from thin air, or as if he had never left. Sakura's head whirled in confusion. Anake's body on the ground had completely disappeared.

Anake shook his head. "Neji. I'm so disappointed in you. And here I thought you were on my side."

"What the hell?" asked Sakura. "How did he—some clone jutsu—"

"No clone," said Neji. "I killed him."

"Well, not exactly. I can't really be killed, you see. Not as long as my Soul Eye is activated. It's
exactly like Lord Hanzou's Death Soul Salvation jutsu… the rain-nin knows what I'm talking about. As long as I have souls stored up in my Soul Eye, I can always come back from any injury. No matter how fatal." He cackled wickedly. "In other words… I am immortal!"

Aumono stared at the leaf-nin boy with utter contempt. "Ten years ago, ROOT stole the secrets of my grandfather's power. They must have used it to create… this."

Sakura understood. Anake's Soul Eye is like Hanzou's Asylum. Mukai Hanzou the Reaper resurrected himself from death by sacrificing the souls of the people he had trapped in the Asylum. Anake did the same thing, only he dispensed with the Asylum altogether and stored his stolen souls in his Soul Eye doujutsu. Every time he came back from death or injury, Anake used up one of those souls. When he needed to replenish his stock of souls, he'd use the Soul Eye to steal more as desired. Just like he'd stolen Unchiku Onome's soul. God, how do we stop him?

Anake did not wait around for them to find out. "SOUL EYE!" he shouted again.

They tried to scatter out of the way of Anake's glare—except Anake had focused more carefully this time. His Soul Eye attack hit all of Sakura's Mirrored Clones, causing them to crumble to mud. It also hit Neji and Rock Lee. Neji's body surprisingly proved to be a clone… … but not Lee.

In an instant his soul was sucked away into Anake's Soul Eye. Rock Lee fell to the floor, a motionless corpse.

"Lee!" screamed Sakura.

A lethal cutting attack suddenly cut off Anake's head. It was Aumono, bursting from the ground behind Anake, a blade of chakra slicing out from his outstretched fingertips. Reap, Sakura knew. Anake's head rolled along the ground, spraying blood, and then sunk into a steaming hot spring bath.

"All the power is in the eye!" shouted the rain-nin boy. "If we destroy it, he'll die, and the stolen souls will come back! We've got to work together!"

Anake answered Aumono's plea before Neji did. The traitorous leaf-nin had returned to life unharmed once more, the monstrous eye in his forehead pulsing with black evil. "SOUL EYE!" he screamed.

This time his attack hit not just the rain-nin Kyoroku Erima, Aumono's teammate, but also the Sarutobi twins, who had been fighting someone else entirely, and then several random genin between them. Glittering souls streaked across the battlefield into Anake's Soul Eye. The field of attack seemed to be getting wider each time he opened his Soul Eye. Anake screamed, falling to his knees. Blood leaked out of the eye and flowed down his face.

He can't control it! Sakura thought.

The Soul Eye is an experimental prototype, it's unstable! Anake shrieked in agony.

Sakura rushed him, trying to get close enough to stab a kunai into his Soul Eye. But she was too slow. "SOUL EYE!" Anake cried in a bloody rage. His attack was so wide and broad that it struck an entire temple wall. Sakura's soul was nearly sucked in herself—she survived only by diving behind a most unfortunate grass-nin near her. More than a dozen souls were sucked into the Soul Eye. Anake's wild and indiscriminate attacks were now attracting attention across Senso-ji Temple. Even Sosano had turned toward the source of the disturbance.

"Use genjutsu!" a voice shouted. It was Neji, fighting together with Aumono, running at Anake from opposite sides. Sakura understood. At once she unleashed a chain of genjutsu against the kneeling Anake. He managed to bat most of them away, but not the last. Her Binding genjutsu froze Anake's
muscles, for at least a moment, preventing him from moving his head. "Reap!" shouted Aumono, slicing off Anake's head with his deadly cutting attack. The head spun in the air… right toward the waiting Neji. Neji placed his hand against the Soul Eye and fired at point-blank range. "Gentle Fist: Vacuum Palm!" he screamed.

The searing force of Neji's Vacuum Palm not only destroyed the Soul Eye, it went right through Anake's head and out the back of his skull. The entire top of the leaf-nin's head had been blown off. Only Anake's two normal eyes remained, young wide blue eyes, the color of the sky. The eyes came to rest against his headless corpse, staring up at the hole in the roof of Senso-ji Temple.

This time Anake did not come back.

_He was a ROOT operative_, Sakura thought numbly. _He was a traitor_. Yet Shimura Anake was also a shinobi of Konoha… just like her. Anake was the first leaf-nin she'd ever fought and killed.

All around Senso-ji Temple, dead corpses were getting up again. All the souls that Anake had stolen with his Soul Eye had been returned to their original owners. Rock Lee climbed to his feet, scratching his head. He probably had no idea what had happened.

Aumono spat on Anake's corpse. "If a man paints a target on his chest, sooner or later someone will loose an arrow at him."

Neji stared at the rain-nin. "This isn't over."

"Oh, I look forward to it."

In the center of Senso-ji Temple, Team Keel was surrounded by Sosano, the Sand Siblings, and Team Darui. The mist-nins seemed to be losing… even Hoshigaki Makera looked a little beat up. But his teammate Hiroshi Fue only laughed. "Ah, the little ape boy's dead, is he? Time for Plan B!"


But instead of aiming the jutsu at Sosano or anyone else, the shark boy pointed it at the hot spring underneath his feet. The Ultimate Water Shark Missile drilled directly downwards, splashing water everywhere, and then seemingly disappeared.

Then the ground began to shake.

"What the hell?" shouted Temari. She and Kankuro leaped backwards, next to Sakura, fearing the worst. Sosano did the same. "What did Makera do?" she demanded. But all her questions were answered soon. They were answered when the marble floor pulsed up and down, and the hot springs seethed and burst, and a geyser of molten lava erupted in the middle of Senso-ji Temple.

It was a volcanic eruption.

Mount Echigo was erupting, right under their feet.
Mount Echigo was erupting, right under their feet.

The traitor Shimura Anake was dead, his Soul Eye doujutsu destroyed, the souls he'd stolen returned to their rightful owners. But as soon as one crisis was averted another took its place.

"Makera's jutsu started a chain reaction in the magma underneath the temple!" shouted Sosano, his eyes burning bright. "I can't stop it!"

All around them, the hot springs of Senso-ji Temple were erupting. Geysers of molten lava erupted in great jets of smoking red, shooting into the air and splashing across the marble floor, washing over the dead corpses of the genin who had already fallen in the battle. The survivors interrupted their ongoing fights in order to save their own skins. Team Tsunade ran out the back of the temple, toward the western face of Mount Echigo. Rays of golden light shone over a sea of rolling white clouds. Inside the temple her friends had been fighting and dying, but outside, somehow, it was still dawn. The majestic, utterly impersonal vista made Sakura catch her breath. Time does not care for our petty struggles, she thought. The treasons of time destroy all. Below their feet, the mountain ended at a steep cliff that plunged straight into the sea of impenetrable white mist… a sheer vertical drop into nothingness. When Sakura looked back, a tidal wave of lava was flowing after them.

"This is just too fucking ridiculous!" complained Kankuro.

Temari grinned. "Jump!"

She jumped.

Sakura hesitated only a moment before following. Leaping into the unknown depths, leaping into the impenetrable haze of the Gorge of Mists. It was not as bad as she feared. At first Sakura picked up so much speed that the icy clouds nearly whipped the skin off her face, but it was only a moment before Temari caught her. Vortex. The vortex of spinning air churned underneath Sakura's body, created an upward movement that slowed her descent and cushioned her from the wind. She was still falling, but not nearly as fast.

Several genin were falling with her. Temari and Kankuro, of course. Onome and Kuina of Team Kikuko. Sosano had tagged along for the ride as well, along with Team Gai—or what was left of Team Gai, anyway. The Vortex supported them all, Temari straining to keep the jutsu from collapsing. Sakura could not tell where everyone else had gone. Everything around her was a white fog.

Then they broke through the cloud layer and crashed into the lower slopes of Mount Echigo. It was not exactly a soft landing—Sakura smashed into a tree—but they survived it without any more broken bones. They must have fallen near two thousand meters.

"Fucking Sage!" shouted Kankuro. The string of obscenities that emerged from his mouth was quite a monologue to behold. "I hope those mist-nin bastards got themselves killed!"

"No," said Sosano.

Next to the stone-nin, Hyuuga Neji nodded. "I see them."

The two scions of Iwa and Konoha stared up at the impenetrable white clouds. Sakura strained to catch a glimpse of their enemies, to see Hoshigaki Makera emerging from the mist… but what
appeared instead was lava. An immense cascade of lava and ash gushed down the slopes of Mount Echigo. An avalanche, Sakura thought. An avalanche of molten rock that would bury them all in burning death. High above them, the mountain was roaring, erupting in its full fury, so loud that she could barely hear her friend's shout.

"There!" mouthed the mist-nin Tsunaga Onome.

Sakura followed her pointing finger. A raft of water was... *surfing* the wave of onrushing lava. And on this raft stood three grotesque figures.

It was Team Keel.

Suigetsu's bloodline power, she knew. The mist-nin's bloodline, *Hydration Transformation*, gave him the ability to transform into liquid water at will. He could change his body into any shape or form he wanted. By transforming himself into a raft, Suigetsu could simultaneously move at high speeds downhill and also protect his teammates from the lava underneath. Steam billowed from the undersides of the raft.

"Sougon!" Neji shouted. "Are you prepared?"

He laughed. "Are you?"

And then the tsunami of lava was upon them—

"GUARDIAN LATTICE!"

"BLAST WAVE!"

The two jutsu combined together as one. Neji's intricate net of glittering chakra blades, Sosano's wave of exploding heat. The strength of the combined assault pushed back the river of onrushing lava and diverted it aside into separate channels. It was an extraordinary feat of pure skill and strength. Sakura should not have been surprised. They were the two great shinobi prodigies of their generation... Neji and his Byakugan, Sosano and his Enshogan. *The Eyes of the Three Secrets*. For perhaps the first and last time, Hyuuga and Sougon fought together against a common enemy.

Then Team Keel attacked.

Leaping from the river of lava toward Sosano and Neji's position. Hiroshi Fue and his endlessly regenerating body. Houzuki Suigetsu and his body made of liquid armor. And Hoshigaki Makera, his body like that of a monstrous shark. Team Keel had only just begun to fight.

"Sakura, run!" shouted Sosano.

His words were drowned out by a flood of lava. Team Keel collided with their victims in a roiling cloud of ash, magma, steam, and burning rock. Sosano and Neji disappeared into the devouring maw, swallowed by the immensity of Mucho Echigo's eruption. Sakura turned and ran. There was nothing else she could do... nothing she could do to help except die.

But she wanted to live. Stumbling, racing, half-falling down the mountain. Running as fast as she could to escape the tsunami of lava that crashed at their heels. Mount Echigo sloped steeply downwards, then narrowed, funneled the fleeing ninjas into a winding, rocky canyon. The mists returned as well. Thick clouds of blue-white vapor shrouded the entire canyon in a bitter gloom. Sakura could hardly see anything in the thick fog.

"Where are we?" shouted Kankuro.
"Fuwa Valley!" Sakura screamed back. "This is the end of the Gorge of Mists!"

Mount Echigo was an asymmetrical mountain. In fact, its western face was thousands of meters shorter than its eastern half. This was because of the uneven elevations on either side. Whereas as Mount Echigo faced the low-lying Musashi Plains to the east, the western half of Echigo bordered the Gorge of Stones—the third great canyon of the Scar, and by far its highest by elevation. They had reached the soaring heart of the Dreamstone Mountains at last.

Only one thing still lay between the Gorge of Mists and the Gorge of Stones.

Fuwa Valley.

_The Valley of the Nest of Wasps._

It was one of the most majestic sights in the whole Scar… or so the books said. Sakura was not able to appreciate it properly. It was not just the fact that everything was covered in mist. It was not even the fact that a river of molten flame roared behind her, destroying all in its path.

It was the giant wasp that buzzed out of the sky and snatched Temari away.

"Sister!" Kankuro screamed.

The wasp was as large as a five-story building. Wings buzzed noisily as it descended through the mist and wrapped its six bristling legs around Temari's body. The wasp had even tried Temari to impale with a giant stinger, dripping yellow venom, but Temari had blocked it with her War Fan. Now Temari was struggling to free herself as the wasp carried her away. A skinny boy with mismatched eyes peeked his head over the top of the giant wasp. Chuzuru Jibachi. Wasps were the special summon of the Chuzuru clan of Iwa. "You're next, bitch!" the stone-nin cried, licking his lips with his long red tongue.

Kankuro and Sakura ran after Temari, but the way was blocked by more giant wasps. And not just giant wasps. The Scar was home to the so-called Six Sacred Animals of the Earth Country. The bats of the Weeping Caverns. The white-tailed deer of the Valley of Spears. The great lions of the Musashi Plains. The slugs of Shikkotsu Forest. The spiders of Kannon Chasm. And the wasps of Fuwa Valley. Billions if not trillions of wasps lived in nests along the walls of the valley. Aroused by the eruption of Mount Echigo, aroused by Chuzuru Jibachi's summons, they had all come out in force. The swarm of wasps was so thick it stretched across the breadth of Fuwa Valley like a yellow and black wall. Little wasps buzzed angrily around Kankuro and Sakura, stinging with violent prejudice.

Kankuro yelped as the wasps stung him, stabbing at his exposed skin, his feet and hands and face. Sakura suffered no less painful a fate. _Damn venom_, she thought. The poison was hardly crippling in small doses, but it made it impossible to break through the wasps to the Gorge of Stones on the other side. Sakura turned back to look the way they'd come. A wave of volcanic lava roared through Fuwa Valley, funneled by the narrow canyon walls to a shocking height. In seconds they would be drowned in molten fire. It was an unfortunate situation. Behind them, lava. Before them, wasps. And everywhere fog, separating Sakura from the others. Of those who'd leaped off Mount Echigo only Kankuro was left.

"Up!" shouted Sakura.

There was nowhere else to go. Sakura leaped up on the side of the canyon wall. Volcanic lava gushed under her, melting the rock in a steaming hiss. The air was filled with fog and ash and buzzing wasps. She could not see anything… but she could _sense_ it. If Sakura concentrated,
projecting out a chakra field from her tenketsu, she could vaguely perceive the other people around her, like formless ghosts at the very edge of her vision. She was not alone. The battle of Senso-ji Temple had shifted into Fuwa Valley. Ninjas fighting, screaming, dying, falling into the lava or being swarmed by wasps. "Temari!" she heard Kankuro's voice scream. And then Neji's voice pierced the ashen gloom. "Lee, no!"

A body tumbled past her, a flash of green spandex.

"Lee!" Sakura shouted.

Sakura caught his wrist just before he fell into the churning lava. Rock Lee staggered against the cliff face below, a large part of his jumpsuit torn off. Blood flowed underneath; it looked like a few of his ribs were broken. "Sakura-chan!" the boy cried, eyes wide. "You saved me!"

"Not for long," laughed a feverish voice.

It was Hiroshi Fue. The mist-nin appeared from the mist in a bloody state. There was a hole in his chest where Lee's punch had gone through his heart. But Fue seemed none the worse for it. Even as Sakura watched, the hole closed up and became smooth, undamaged flesh. Fue's bloodline, she knew. Shinsei, or Ultimate Rebirth, was the bloodline of the Hiroshi clan of Kiri. It allowed Fue's body to regenerate extremely fast, easily surviving otherwise fatal wounds. Like his other teammates on Team Keel, Fue could not be killed by ordinary methods.

"He won't die!" Lee shouted.

"Don't let him hit you!" Sakura started—

She spoke too soon. Hiroshi Fue ran at Rock Lee, spinning an oversized shuriken in each hand. Lee tried to kick Fue in the head. Fue did not bother to dodge the blow. Instead he freely accepted the attack in order to close the distance between them. Fue's head snapped backwards at a right angle, his neck breaking, but his shuriken slashed deeply across Lee's chest. Lee reeled backwards, crying in pain as blood spurted outward.

"Do you like it?" the mist-nin laughed. "I call this Sheathing the Sword!"

"Amnesia!" Sakura shouted. The genjutsu did very little. Fue snapped his head back into place with a grin. His bloodline, his unique body chemistry, seemed to give him resistance to ordinary forms of genjutsu.

This is bad.

Fue leaped at Rock Lee again. He was obviously going to use Sheathing the Sword again. It was an ancient jutsu… perhaps the oldest of all. The user of Sheathing the Sword attacked the enemy without regard for his own body, freely accepting a fatal wound in order to deliver an equally devastating blow to his opponent. In effect, the user sacrificed his own life in order to kill the enemy. But in the hands of Hiroshi Fue the calculations of Sheathing the Sword became utterly perverse. He could not die, so the only way to counter Fue's attack was to not let him get close in the first place.

Lee was either too stupid or too blind to see it. The leaf-nin boy stood his ground instead of running. Instead it was Sakura that intercepted Fue's attack, using her Chakra Enhanced Strength to punch away the ground beneath the mist-nin's feet. Fue flipped backwards, avoided the crater in the side of the cliff face. Not far under them, a tidal river of lava gushed through the Valley of the Nest of Wasps. The lava grew higher with each passing second.

"Stay with me!" Sakura shouted at the injured Lee, pulling him along the cliff.
Hiroshi Fue chased them. Sakura tried to slow him down by throwing a chakra-cast kunai at him. The dagger barely fazed him, just as none of their other attacks had fazed him. But when Sakura ran closer to the lava, Fue paused for just a moment before following.

Sakura saw the hesitation.

*He's afraid of the lava,* she thought. Fue's body could regenerate even if it was plunged into molten rock, of course. But the regeneration of Ultimate Rebirth was not unlimited. It had to be sustained by chakra... if Fue ran out of energy...

It was their best chance.

"Lee! I need you to use Front Lotus! Can you do it?"

He would need to open his Chakra Gates again. The boy stared at her with round, glassy eyes, uncomprehending. Then Rock Lee's face broke into a grin. "Sakura-chan! Anything for you!" He gave her a thumbs up.

"Then do it, now!"

Sakura rushed at Fue with coiled fists. Fue's shuriken nearly sliced off the side of her face—taking with it a lock of her hair instead—but she was able to trip him with a chakra string, sending the boy rolling off the side of the cliff. The distraction proved fruitful when Rock Lee seized Fue by his armpits and leaped into the misty air above Fuwa Valley.

"FRONT LOTUS!" screamed Lee.

The powerful taijutsu was one of the iconic techniques of Maito Gai's Strong Fist Fighting Style. Lee pummeled the restrained Fue with his fists and kicks, then pile-drove him into the ground headfirst.

Except it was not ground beneath them.

It was lava.

The helpless, ravaged Fue crashed into the lava with a great splash of fiery spray. Just before Lee fell into the lava too Sakura yanked him back, pulling on his legs with chakra strings. Lee was burned by the lava, but not as seriously as Sakura feared. Below them, the mist-nin Hiroshi Fue of Team Keel was screaming. He tried to climb out of the lava, but his body, already damaged by Lee's Front Lotus, could not regenerate fast enough to recover a capacity for effective movement. Lava burned through the boy's skin and flesh and ate through his limbs and eyes and mouth. Sakura threw a chakra-cast kunai into his head for good measure. Fue disappeared beneath the waves of churning lava...

"Ah," said a voice out of the mist. "That's one down."

Sakura looked up.

Sougon Sosano smiled at her wickedly. The stone-nin boy was covered in gray ash; his unsheathed sword dripping with blood. Yet he himself seemed scarcely hurt. His slitted eyes danced with golden flames.

"Sosa!"

"Surprised to see me? I'm still alive, for the moment. Alas, I am not as efficient as you. The shark Hoshigaki Makera lives still. We fought each other to a stalemate."
"And the others?"

"Hard to see, with all this lava and ash. My Enshogan is half-blinded. I will tell you that the eruption of Mount Echigo continues unabated. Another tsunami of lava is coming…” Sosano glanced at Sakura and Lee, shrugging. "We are in trouble."

This was an understatement.

*If we don't get away from Fuwa Valley soon we'll die.*

Just like Hiroshi Fue did.

"We need to get to high ground," said Sosano. He looked at her. "Sakura--"

"Yeah. I can do it."

Well, she hoped, anyway.

"Sakura-chan!" gasped Rock Lee. "We're surrounded!"

Lee was on his knees, doubled over from his wounds and from the exhaustion of opening so many Chakra Gates for his Front Lotus jutsu. He leaned on Sakura's shoulder just to keep from falling over. Yet his eyes were fierce with stubborn determination. The lava had swept around their cliff face to both left and right, isolating them on the summit of a rapidly shrinking island. A sea of molten fire stretched in all directions.

"Lee," she told him urgently, "hold on tight!"

Then she bit her thumb to draw fresh blood, pressing it to the ground.

*"Summoning Technique!"

It was the first time Sakura had used the jutsu for real. She'd learned the hands seals before, of course, but she never had anything to summon. Only in Shikkotsu Forest a few days before had she signed the necessary summoning contract with Katsuyu. Besides the summoning contract, she also needed chakra. The more chakra she poured into the jutsu, the bigger the animal she could summon. No holding back now…

There was a giant blast of white smoke.

Katsuyu, the legendary Queen of the Scar, appeared beneath them.

Sakura had only managed to summon about half of Katsuyu, but it was enough. Quite abruptly Sakura found herself far above the sea of lava, her feet resting atop the slimy white flesh of the giant slug. Katsuyu reared up to a very considerable height.

Katsuyu waved her long eyestalks at her. "Sakura-chan. I have come."

"Get us out of here!" she shouted.

"There, the Black Tower!" said Sosano. He pointed at the air in front of him, though Sakura could not see anything through the mist and ash. "The Black Tower marks the western boundary of Fuwa Valley. It is the beginning of the Gorge of Stones, and much higher in elevation than the valley. We'll be safe from the lava there."

Katsuyu needed no other prodding. If she stayed where they were, even her tough hide would be
worn down by the river of molten rock. The giant summon slithered forward, charging for the Black Tower in the distance. Giant wasps tried to attack them, but Katsuyu pushed them back, spitting deadly sizzling acid left and right. In an remarkably short time they'd reached the end of Fuwa Valley.

A sheer cliff faced them there. High above, in the mist, loomed the obsidian stone ruins of an ancient building—the abandoned, collapsed watchtower called the Black Tower. The cliff was too steep and too high for Katsuyu to climb easily. Yet by twisting her body she could make a sort of ramp for the three genin to climb. A tsunami of roaring lava rushed toward them from behind, higher than ever.

"Up!" shouted Sosano.

He ran onto Katsuyu's eyestalks and leaped off, falling into the ruins of the Black Tower. Sakura followed, helping to support Lee with her arms. "Thank you, Katsuyu!" she shouted. "I'll have need of you again!" The Queen of the Scar nodded, then disappeared in another giant puff of smoke. It was none too soon. The wave of lava crashed against the cliff face, swamping all of Fuwa Valley in its molten wake. Looking back, all Sakura could see were clouds of lava and ash, and the smoldering peak of Mount Echigo rising from the sea of fire like a demonic pyramid, throwing hellish flames into the sky. Had anyone else besides them survived? She could not tell.

"Neji!" cried Lee.

Sakura looked to Sosano. "Can you see them?"

"No. I can't see through all the smoke." Sosano shook his head, breathing hard. "But we must move on, and quickly. Any survivors of the battle will be all be headed for the same place. The Third Lock is at the base of the Ice Spear. The sooner we get there, the less likely it is that we'll have to fight anyone again... a prospect I think we can all agree is most unpleasant."

And so they turned away from Mount Echigo.

And looked west.

_Toward the final Gorge of the Scar_. The most famous Gorge of them all... the canyon of ice and stillness, the secret heart of the Dreamstone Mountains themselves. The most desolate and the most starkly beautiful place in the entire world.

The Gorge of Stones.
The Second Trial: The Gorge of Stones

They rested for only a short while before pushing on: making for the Ice Spear with all deliberate speed, as Sosano suggested.

Sosano and Lee were both in bad shape, Lee especially. She bandaged their wounds, temporarily mended their broken bones with chakra stitches, and generally fussed over them like a worried mother. By comparison, Sakura herself had only suffered minor cuts and bruises through the entirety of the Second Trial thus far. The result was pure blind luck; she could've easily been killed a dozen times over. However, Sakura was weaker than before, too. Her chakra reserves were running dangerously low.

The Gorge of Stones was the third and final of the three gorges of the Scar. The Dreamstone Mountains soared around them, the rock bare of vegetation, carved by the bting, howling wind into fantastical shapes of stone. Even the valley floor lay thousands of meters above sea level. They were not yet high enough to reach the line of permanent glaciation, where the Dreamstone Mountains became the Dreamstone Glacier, but they were plenty high to feel the wintry chill. The clouds of ash, smoke, and fog all around them did not help. The sky was overcast with a suffocating gray silence.

"Where are we?" Rock Lee asked her.

"Oranda Valley, I think." Sakura unrolled the chuunin exam map and smoothed it against her thigh. The Gorge of Stones was no bigger than the Gorge of Winds, and the main river valley snaked westwards in a tight curve. They had only to follow the tributaries of the Dreamstone River to reach the Ice Spear, the river's ultimate source. But she was not sure exactly where they were, at the present moment. The headlong flight down Mount Echigo had confused her sense of direction. "The Rainbow Lakes are over here, to the north. We should find the Dreamstone River and then follow it upstream."

She need not have bothered. "I know a faster way," said Sosano. "All the secrets of the Scar are known to the Sougon. Follow me."

The better way involved climbing around the sheer edge of the crater called Kannon Chasm. From the Black Tower, instead of marching straight west, they took a circular route around the main Oranda Valley, moving south and then west across winding mountain switchbacks. The serpentine path was a shortcut to the Dreamstone Glacier, according to Sosano, but Sakura was not quite sure if she believed him. More likely he was trying to avoid another fight with the mist-nins of Team Keel—who were no doubt taking the more obvious route west.

Kannon Chasm was a vast, deep crater that ran across the western width of Oranda Valley. It looked like the earth had simply collapsed in on itself, as if down a giant sinkhole. When Sakura peered down into its depths, she could see nothing but darkness. "Sixty years ago Kannon Chasm did not exist," Sosano informed her.

"An earthquake?" Sakura guessed.

"None other. The Shadowstar Earthquake."

_The Shadowstar Earthquake._ The familiar name sent a shiver down Sakura's spine. _So this is where it happened._ Three generations before Sakura's time, only a decade after the founding of the hidden villages, a mysterious, invisible black comet had streaked across the night sky of the world. Only detectable through its blotting effect on the stars, it had been named the Shadowstar Comet, and
subsequent analysis had deemed it in fact a miniature black hole. The comet's gravitational effects caused a massive earthquake in the Earth Country.

The Shadowstar Earthquake had destroyed wide swaths of the Earth Country, including Iwagakure and Hiroshiki, and thrown the northwest into social and economic chaos. By exposing Earth's economic vulnerability and highlighted the strategic importance of the resource-rich lands to the east, the Shadowstar Earthquake had even helped to bring about the First Ninja War, ending the short period of peace which had begun the Age of Enmity. That was not only the historical footnote. Sosano's mother, Sougon Seurin, had been born right in the midst of the earthquake itself, subsequently receiving the nickname of Seurin Shadowstar.

"The epicenter of the Shadowstar Earthquake was here, in Oranda Valley," said Sosano. "Much of the Gorge of Stones was destroyed in the grinding of plate and crust, creating Kannon Chasm in its wake. A great loss for the student of history… you see, the most ancient and remarkable buildings of the Shiva empires were built here, on the eastern slopes of the Gorge of Stones. Kannon Chasm has swallowed almost all."

Sakura saw. Entire villages and even cities had tumbled to the bottom of Kannon Chasm, littering the rocky slopes with ancient debris. Sosano pointed out the highlights as they went. There was Sekigahara-machi Graveyard, also known as the Tomb of the Lost, one of the greatest Shiva graveyards. There was Katsuge Village, a town of hermits and mystics that had been continuously inhabited for thousands of years right up to the day of the Shadowstar Earthquake… perishing with all hands lost.

Still, Kannon Chasm was not barren of life.

Far from it, in fact.

"Spiders!" Rock Lee yelped.

"Ah… the last of the Six Sacred Animals of the Scar." Sosano smiled, eyes closing to thin, arched slits. "In the olden days, you know, giant spiders were worshipped by the pagan Shiva as gods. Human sacrifice was quite common."

Sakura shuddered, having been most recently attacked by a giant wasp, among other arthropods. The spiders were just as big. They crawled along the sides and bottom of Kannon Chasm in a vast swarm of legs and venomous mandibles. Quite diverse in color and shape, the predominant form of spider seemed to be very large, very black, and very spindly. Their appearance reminded Sakura of the stone-nin Haghira Geigin, and his father Haghira Doi. No accident, perhaps—these spiders had been bonded to the Haghira clan since the Age of Blood.

Sosano avoided them by skirting around the rim of Kannon Chasm, to Sakura's relief. The party of three pressed forward. As they moved past the crater deeper into Oranda Valley, the Gorge of Stones began to display clear signs of glacial erosion. Jagged hillocks. Striated granite slopes. And, above all, shallow pools formed from glacial depressions, colored multiple hues by mineral deposits. The Rainbow Lakes. Sakura could see two of the major Rainbow Lakes in the distance, their surfaces shimmering dully in the overcast light. Iwata Lake and Hakone Lake, Sosano named them. "On a clear day, they are the most beautiful bodies of water in all the Earth Country."

"I hate this place," said Rock Lee, shivering.

He said it more than once, and quite loudly. It was written on every line of his face as well. Sosano walked point, a little ways ahead; Rock Lee's eyes bored into the stone-nin's back like a sinister black drill. The leaf-nin did not much like keeping company with Sosano, to nobody's surprise. Just
yesterday, in Single Branch Village, Lee had been trying to kill him.

Sosano returned the mutual dislike. He did not speak to Lee directly, wisely, but his snide, superior looks were more than enough to express his low opinion. The slightest provocation on Sosano's part set Lee off like a powder keg, sending him into an uncharacteristically choleric rage. More than once Sakura feared the two of them would come to blows. Only the three of us left, in all this vast wasteland, and we can't stop fighting each other.

There was no one else.

Who was left?

Who had survived the eruption of Mount Echigo? Neji? Temari or Kankuro? The mist-nins of Team Kikuko? The cloud-nins of Team Darui? Team Keel? Sakura did not know. After all the devastation of the long destructive battle, she could only assume the worst. Perhaps all her enemies yet lived, waiting ahead in ambush, and all her friends had died.

Even Maito Gai.

Gai had died two months ago, only she'd never known it until this very morning. His soul sacrificed by the Hokage to Lord Hanzou the Reaper… his body martyred in the Asylum, to be tortured for all eternity. Sakura remembered the Asylum well. She remembered a little soulless girl, her face twisted into a grotesque expression of hell, as if she was screaming, but no sound came out. A fate worse than death. A living nightmare.

Rock Lee did not mention the matter of his sensei—at least not out loud. Perhaps he was trying to pretending that everything was still all right. Sakura could hardly believe it herself, even though the rain-nin Mukai Aumono had admitted the truth out of his own mouth.

Lee could not hide his misery, however. The leaf-nin boy was disoriented and vague, switching between bright-eyed determination and sullen, distracted silences, overstressed. When they stopped to rest in a small mountain cave for a spell, Sakura saw tears in his eyes.

"Lee…"

He cut off her words. Her words that were only half-formed in her own mind, unsure what to say. "Sakura-chan." Rock Lee's voice was mournful as he tried to smile. "Sakura-chan, don't worry. I'm glad you're here."

"Me, too."

Sosano glanced back. "We must keep moving."

She saw the wisdom of the suggestion. The Second Trial is the only thing keeping Rock Lee together. As long as they pushed toward the Third Lock, there was no time to dwell on the horror of what happened to Gai-sama, on the devastation wrought by the Battle of the Temple of Time. We must do our duty. The end of their mission was in sight.

Only a day and a half of the Second Trial remained.

Soon a great, towering wall of stone loomed before them. The stone blocks were extremely ancient: weathered, crumbling in a dozen places, encrusted with long strands of of pale white lichen. Sakura was surprised the curtain wall still stood. It had to be extremely thick… thicker even the great village walls of Konoha.
"What is that?" she asked.

Sosano grinned. "Why is it that when one man builds a wall, the next man immediately needs to know what's on the other side?"

"Because he knows the first man has something to hide."

"Ah… and so it is. Once, very long ago, this holy place was said to hide the secrets of immortality. Instead, its collapsed ruins are a monument to the hubris of man." Sosano led them to the base of the huge wall, and then through a long, dark crevice. "Welcome to the Cathedral of Hearts."

The Cathedral of Hearts was the last of the five great Shiva Cathedrals of the Earth Country. Like each of the other temples, it was dedicated to one of the five pagan gods—in this case, the goddess of peace and love called Tethis the Tear-Wiper.

Even after hundreds of years of abandonment, Sakura could see why. She saw it in the shape of the elegant, curving walls. She saw it in the delicate, almost gossamer construction of the temple pyramids—so unlike the Cathedral of Bones, so much more beautiful. And she saw it in the hearts. They were made of a kind of white stone, she thought… until she felt at the surface of the hearts, and realized it was glazed porcelain. *A thousand fragile hearts.* They dotted the walls, columns, and doorways of the temple complex. Unfortunately, only a few had survived the ravages of time intact. The rest were destroyed; cracked into pieces, or fallen to shards and trod underfoot by passing animals.

The statue of Tethis the Tear-Wiper was made of porcelain as well. It stood in a courtyard behind the curtain wall, sheared in two, with its upper half resting in pieces on the ground. In its original state, the idol of the Water Goddess must have been at least two stories high. Water still trickled through a reflecting pool at her feet. The water was part of a clear, icy brook that snaking through the center of the Cathedral of Hearts. The little stream was so shallow that, if Sakura waded across, the water would not even have reached to her thigh.

Sakura knew it.

"The Dreamstone River," she said.

"Yes." Sosano gestured grandly to the sweep of the stream, flowing west to east. "Though, to be precise, a strict geographer might not call it such… it is a tributary of the Dreamstone, technically speaking, instead of the main channel. It matters not, in any case. To reach the final headwaters of the Dreamstone River we have only to walk upstream. The greatest river in all of creation, reduced to such a tiny, stunted flow. We are truly close to the end of the world."

Sakura did not dispute it. When she looked back, the temple's great curtain wall blocked off the rest of the Gorge of Stones, the way they'd come. When she looked forward, toward the center of the temple…

… there was nothing there. Only a large, dark sinkhole. *The Shadowstar Earthquake.* The earthquake had destroyed the main complex of the Cathedral of Hearts, leaving the Dreamstone River to make a channel around the hole, with the remains of yet another collapsed wall on the far side. Broken porcelain hearts littered the cracked ground around the sinkhole. "So the secrets of immortality are no more."

"A rich irony. The Sage of Six Paths was said to have converted the pagan hordes to Kiyome on this very spot. Eternal life he promised them, eternal glory. But he is dead… and so are all those who used to live in the Gorge of Stones. We are the only ones left."
"No!" shouted Rock Lee.

The outburst came from nowhere. The boy grabbed at Sakura suddenly, gripping her shoulders so hard with his fingers that he left bruises. Sakura had to push him away with all her strength. Lee stumbled backwards, but his frenzied black eyes brooked no rebuke. "Let's go back! We've got to go back!"

"Lee—"

"We shouldn't have ever left. We abandoned them! Neji… our friends…"

"We cannot turn back," said Sosano.

The stone-nin's voice was cold as ice, hard as weathered rock. Rock Lee did not seem to hear him. He dropped to his knees at the foot of the shattered statue of Tethis the Tear-Wiper, splashing the pool of reflecting water, scattering the broken porcelain shards. His fists pounded the ground, cracking it with their fury. Tears spilled from his eyes.

_He's having a nervous breakdown_, realized Sakura. The accumulated, horrifying stresses of the Second Trial had finally caused Rock Lee to snap. _He's lost his mind._

"All the lava, all that smoke. I was so… I was so scared. I couldn't… I could only find you, Sakura. You were the only one. You told me to keep going, so I did. I shouldn't have listened. I should have —went back. Now Neji's gone… just like Tenten. Just like Gai-sensei—"

"Lee—"

"They're dead!"

"We don't know that—"

"We abandoned them! We've leaf-nins, Sakura. We're not like those damn roaches, we're supposed to help each other! But we ran away. _We're worthless cowards!_"

"No, Lee." Sakura tackled Rock Lee to the ground before he could hurt himself, hugging him close to her. The fierceness of Sakura's embrace calmed the boy down. "Lee, listen to me. It has nothing to do with cowardice. It's triage. The chances of finding Neji in the chaos were one in a thousand. If we tried to help him, we would have put ourselves in great danger for no reason. Can you understand that? You have to make decisions. You have to choose what's most important." _Kill the girl, and let the woman be born._ "Two lives are more important than one. Three lives are more important than a tiny probability of success. What would be the point of going back, if we all died in the process?"


Sakura was speechless.

The boy in the green jumpsuit shook his head slowly. His face was so close to hers that they were almost touching… almost kissing. Lee's sweet, dumb face, round as a mooncake and topped with thick fuzzy eyebrows and eyes like two big glassy black buttons. The face of a stubborn, loyal leaf-nin, the face of this boy she knew so well. And every word he spoke drew blood. "A shinobi protects his comrades, or he is no shinobi at all."

"Who told you that, Lee?"

"Gai-sensei did."
The near wall of the Cathedral of Hearts exploded.

It happened all in an instant. One instant, they were alone, and then the next, the walls of the stone courtyard were crumbling in an eruption of dust and smoke, trapping them between massive piles of rubble. The Cathedral of Hearts trembled beneath their feet like a frightened child.

Several dark shadows appeared amid the smoke.

"Ah," said Sosano. The stone-nin boy had activated his Enshogan. He shook his head ruefully, sighing in a dramatic fashion. "We're surrounded. Again."

"Bad?" asked Sakura.

"In the Earth Country we have a saying, too." Sosano laughed. "It's always darkest… just before it goes absolutely pitch black."

In the desolate ruins of the Cathedral of Hearts, beneath a gloomy, cloud-choked sky, Team Keel walked out from the billowing smoke.

*Shit.*

And, then, Team Dayu.

*Oh, shit.*

An entire team of monsters that did nothing but use water jutsu.

And Mizuho.

Together.

*Oh, oh, shit.*

Then it began to rain.
The waterfall-nin Misain Sebi laughed a psychopathic, pyromanic laugh. "Mizuho!"

The rain lit on fire.

"Kinetic Transfer!" Sosano shouted.

The Enshogan jutsu formed a dome of icy air around the three of them—Sosano, Sakura, and Lee—draining away the heat of all it touched. Water droplets froze solid, and the Mizuho fire disappeared with it. For a single shining moment, even as a rain of burning fire engulfed the Cathedral of Hearts, cold snow slowly drifted down on the broken statue of Tethis the Tear-Wiper.

One moment.

Then Hoshigaki Makera attacked from the other side.

The shark boy was bloody all over, his tough sandpaper skin scraped off in places—signs of his previous, inconclusive battles with Sosano. Yet the bare fact of resistance only seemed to make Hoshigaki Makera more aggressive. He led right off with his strongest jutsu. "Water Release: Ultimate Water Shark Missile!" the mist-nin shrieked.

"Mizuho!" shouted Misain Rei.

The two attacks combined as one. Makera's gigantic spear of water sprouted with burning, living flames. Sosano could not deflect it with the Enshogan, not with all his energies focused on stopping Sebi's Death Rain. Instead he brought his hands together. "Earth Release: Diamond Wall!"

It was a far stronger defensive jutsu than Earth Wall, made of dense, diamond-like stone. Its glittering, reflective surface could block almost any ninjutsu attack. Yet when the Ultimate Water Shark Missile hit Sosano's Diamond Wall, the Mizuho-powered flames broke through it like a tidal wave—engulfing Sosano in an ocean of fire.

"Sosa!" Sakura screamed.

She did not have time to help him. Makera leaped toward her, a thousand white teeth exploding from his gaping mouth. Suigetsu ran at his side… the short boy transforming himself into liquid water, wrapping himself around Makera like a protective body-suit.

Sakura did the only thing she could do.

She punched the ground.

Her Chakra Enhanced Strength shattered the stone courtyard floor, sending Sakura, Sosano, and Lee sprawling down to the hidden levels underneath. The underground temple. Makera's teeth attack flew overhead, missing them by less than a second.

"Summoning Technique!" she shouted.

Katsuyu appeared in a puff of white smoke. Sakura wasn't able to summon as much of the giant slug as she wanted to, this time, but it was enough to plug the hole in the temple floor. Katsuyu's tough slimy skin absorbed the firestorm of Mizuho rain, shielding the genin which crouched beneath her bulk. "Katsuyu!" Sakura cried. "We're in trouble, you've got to hold them off!"
"As you command, Sakura-chan."

"Bakudan!"

The wall next to them exploded, revealing a large, slanting corridor beyond. Sosano appeared amid the smoke and the darkness, his eyes glowing, his dreamsteel katana red-hot with power. The boy's gray robes had been charred black by Mizuho fire, and his face streamed with fresh blood.

"Sosa—"

"Come with me, now!"

Sosano leaped headlong down the corridor. Sakura grabbed Rock Lee by the wrist and pulled him after her. They were not a moment too soon—for in the very next heartbeat, a gigantic, poisonous tentacle slammed into the stone where they'd been standing, drilling right through Katsuyu's body above.

**Kawai!** The mist-nin Onira Kawai's powerful bloodline, Black Thread, allowed him to manipulate the unique black tendrils woven throughout his flesh, like the stitches of a rag-doll. Kawai could send out missiles of black tentacles from his body in almost limitless quantities, creating a web of deadly death. Sakura knew the tentacles were already burrowing deep in every direction. Sosano slashed at one tentacle blocking his way, slicing it apart, then used Bakudan to open another passageway.

Sakura panted with exertion. "We've got to escape—"

"No. We must fight." Sosano shook his head. "I'd hoped to avoid further battle by going this route. But Hoshigaki Makera had other plans. He's tasted my blood, and he'll stop at nothing until he gets it all."

Finally Sakura understood. Makera was an apex predator. He didn't care about the Second Trial. He only cared about killing Sosano—Sosano, the ultimate prey. *Makera smells the scent of blood in the water*. Team Keel must have tracked them all the way here from Fuwa Valley in the Gorge of Mists... joining with Team Dayu along the way. Makera meant to get his revenge on Sosano at all costs. Even if they somehow escaped from the Cathedral of Hearts, Makera and his allies would just keep on chasing them.

It ended here.

One way or the other.

"What do we do?" Sakura shouted. *How do we fight?*

"I don't know."

It was not the answer she wanted. Yet it was the only answer. Even as they spoke, the ceiling above them exploded, raining down stone and dirt... and burning rain. "Die, you ape bitch!" shrieked Misain Sebi's young, prepubescent voice. A barrage of Mizuho fireballs followed them as they raced deeper into the temple, fleeing the deadly rain on the surface. The underground labyrinth beneath the Cathedral of Hearts was massive, a warren of endless twisting chambers. It was their only advantage, however meager. Their enemies had to split up in order to chase them. If they could exploit that division—

"Water Release: Exploding Darkness Wave!"

The blast of icy black water hit Sakura from behind, breaking through the stone walls like so much
tissue paper. She was flung down violently by the current; and probably would have broken her ribs against the floor, if Rock Lee, in front of her, had not absorbed the blow instead. The tidal wave of water pressed them down flat, the pressure so intense she could hardly even climb to her knees. Makera's jutsu had created enough water to flood the entire underground chamber.

And then…

… then, the fire came.

The black water burned suddenly with hellish light. *Mizuho*. Sebi's Death Rain had combined with Makera's Exploding Darkness Wave, flames roaring through the water. The demon fire only got stronger the more water it devoured. Huge billows of red-orange fire flooded the buried recesses of the Cathedral of Hearts. Within seconds it would wash over them and devour through to the bone. *Just like in the Asylum*, thought Sakura. Just like before, when she'd fought Akatsuki terrorists in a pool of burning flames.

She had no choice.

"Chakra Projection Field!"

She made the field just in time, powering the jutsu with four Chakra Gates open—abandoning her vow not to rely on such a dangerous and self-harming kinjutsu. *I must use it now, or we'll all be killed!* Four Chakra Gates was the most she had ever opened—her absolute limit. The sudden, cascading surge of extra chakra was just enough to hold back the Exploding Darkness Wave. The three of them were trapped in a bubble of air… the wall of burning Mizuho water mere centimeters away. The fire was absolutely blinding. Even when she looked away, the light went right through the eyelids to burn her retinas.

"Sakura!" shouted Sosano. "It's not enough!"

Another Ultimate Water Shark Missile erupted at them from above, barreling through the water. At the same time, Kawai's black tentacles tore out from below, shooting out like the spines on a sea urchin. They were being attacked from all four directions—

"Absolute Zero!"

The upgrade of Kinetic Transfer created a barrier of ice so cold that even the light that passed through was frozen. Like Sakura, Sosano had gone all out, using his most powerful defensive jutsu. The barrier appeared right along the edges of Sakura's projection field, reinforcing it against Makera, Sebi, and Kawai's brutal attacks. But Sosano was right. It was not enough. Even after he added a Diamond Wall, and she'd opened her four Chakra Gates to the maximum limit—even then, with all their defensive strength, the opposing jutsu were too powerful. The Absolute Zero barrier began to crack.

They were still going to—damnit—

"Oh god!" Lee cried out, his voice leaping in shrill panic. The leaf-nin boy's nervous breakdown had only been amplified by Team Keel and Team Dayu's sudden ambush. He stood helplessly between Sakura and Sosano like a bloody, lost child. In his current state, Rock Lee was about as useful as a potted plant—little more than deadweight.

Sakura was not much calmer, truth be told.

*We're going to die.*
What to do? Sosano was already using the full power of the Enshogan. And Sakura had already used her own trump card jutsu, Katsuyu. Katsuyu was the perfect summon for this situation. Her unique molecular durability and ability to split into smaller bodies made her an extremely strong defensive summon—able to hold back even Makera’s taijutsu. But even Katsuyu was not enough to save them.

They were outnumbered, outgunned. There was no way to break out of the trap. Without some kind of miracle they were finished. *Just like in the Asylum,* thought Sakura again, *just like when that Akatsuki terrorist was about to kill me.* Maito Gai had saved her life then, she remembered.

But Maito Gai was gone.

Gai was gone, his soul sacrificed to Hanzou’s whim, tortured for all eternity in the Asylum, and she was here, buried at the bottom of an ocean of fire, surrounded by some of the most dangerous and insane ninjas in the world. In a flash it was if her entire life had flashed before her. Sakura knew—that she had never been closer to a certain death.

There was only one way out.

Raiki had told her the secret.

*Tsunade-sensei.* Tsunade was spying on her with a secret reservoir of chakra she’d hidden in Sakura’s brain. It was a space-time ninjutsu, Sakura was sure. Tsunade could appear physically at Sakura’s side by the same technique. *If I call her, if I beg her to come…*

But would Tsunade-sensei come? Was she really watching? Even if she was, would she dare to intervene? The Hokage had hardly scrupled to put her into life-threatening situations before. In fact, she’d made sure of it. The mission to the laboratory. The Asylum. The Lighthouse and Red Rock Cliff. The chunnin exam. Tsunade wanted Sakura to get stronger, to become more powerful. Only by testing her limits could she reach her full potential.

There was another factor as well. The Confederacy’s assault on Sakura was perfectly legal within the confines of the chunnin exam. If the Hokage intervened, she would be breaking the most fundamental rule of the chunnin exam—the rule of noninterference. Her involvement could not be covered up, not with so many people there. There would be huge political repercussions, including the wrath of Director Doi. Could Tsunade afford to save her apprentice at the expense of losing her alliance with Doi, her only friend on the Iwa High Council?

"Take command!" shouted Sosano.

She scarcely heard him.

He had to grab her by the shoulders—seize her in his arms. "Sakura! What do we do?"

"What?" She did not understand. "You're… Sosa, you're the—"

"No. I'm the strongest, but not the smartest. It's you, Sakura! You must take command! Don't you see, this is why Tsunade chose you lead the United Countries? You must lead us, now, or here we shall die."

His long, calloused fingers gripped her shoulders like a vise. They were warm, almost feverishly hot, and wet with blood. Sakura’s head spun. Too much had happened... what could she do? How could Sosano and Lee place their lives in her hands? *I'm weak,* she wanted to scream at them, *I'm just a useless little girl, don't you understand that?* Sasuke and Naruto had always been the heroes, not her. Never her. *I don't want this trust, I don't want this burden.* Yet she knew even as she railed against
She did want it.

She wanted it more than anything she'd ever wanted in her life.

Sakura closed her eyes, her mind racing with agitated thoughts. Could they really win against the combined forces of Team Dayu and Team Keel? Was it actually possible? If they could somehow use the terrain to their advantage... somehow exploit enemy psychology at the decisive moment. Bait and trap. Deflect and attack. Divide and conquer. The path was extremely narrow, like putting a thread through a needle.

But was there a path?

And then she knew.

"All men must die," she whispered.

Sougon Sosano only smiled. "Not today." Golden flames danced across his eyes, blossoming outward from their center like glittering, molten flowers. "Not like this."

"Can you get us to the surface?"

"The surface?" Sosano frowned. "Yes, but—"

"Then do it, on my signal!" Sakura turned to rouse Rock Lee. "Lee! We're gonna fight back, do you understand? We need you."

"Sakura-chan..."

"I need you." He stared at her, eyes blank with fear and haunting indecision. All around them, their defensive barrier was cracking, splintering. There was no more time. How could she reach him? Persuade him? "Damnit, Lee, don't you remember what Gai-sama said? A shinobi protects his comrades, or he's no shinobi at all. You can't give up!"

Sosano's voice broke in with urgent alarm. "Sakura, the barrier—"

"Now!"

The Absolute Zero barrier shattered.

"BLAST WAVE!"

Sosano put all his strength behind it. The Blast Wave exploded outward, a wave of intense heat that met the Mizuho tide in an enormous hiss of steam and roiling smoke. But even such a jutsu was not enough to deflect the roiling energies directed at them by Makera, Sebi, and Kawai. Sosano did not even try. Instead, he directed the entire force of his Blast Wave...

...downward.

The Blast Wave met the water underneath them and combusted in a violent, chemical reaction. The intense pressurized steam created by the combustion rushed upwards... and propelled them along with it. It was like being fired out from a cannon. The Blast Wave launched them past the incoming Mizuho missiles and then skyrocketed them all the way through the underground levels of the Cathedral of the Hearts into the air, Sosano controlling the ascent with his Enshogan.
"Fuck, it's them!" she heard a voice scream. It was Misain Rei, Sakura could tell, though she could not yet see her enemy. The billowing cloud of steam blocked all visibility.

*Perfect.*

It was just like Sakura had planned. Quickly, Sakura flashed her fingers together into a hand seal. *Mirrored Clone.* Concentrating hard, she made as many Mirrored Clones as she could... and then hid them just as fast. If all went well, the enemy had never noticed.

The steam began to clear, washed away by burning rain.

"Kill her!" Sakura shouted.

She did not have to specify the name. *Kill Misain Rei.* The waterfall-nin girl was the only female on the other side. Rei was a strong genin, to be sure, but not nearly as powerful as the others. As Sakura had predicted, Rei had stayed on the surface with Kawai, while Sebi, Makera, and Suigetsu had chased them underground. She thought she'd be safe here—

The enemy had not expected a counterattack.

"Bakudan!" Sosano shouted.

Rei dodged the Enshohan attack, only for Sakura's genjutsu to strike her while she was distracted. "Amnesia!" Sakura shouted. The genjutsu hit Rei with the multiplied force of four Chakra Gates. Unprepared, it pierced into her mind and disabled her short-term memory circuits. Rei skidded to a stop, a motionless target.

Sakura's chakra-cast kunai went through her chest and out the other side.

She had thrown the kunai with an attached chakra string, flowing earth chakra through the weapon to multiply its impact force. The kunai made a very large hole in Rei's chest, destroying both her lungs and heart. The girl flew backwards in the air and hit the ground like a slab of meat. Mizuho rain fell on her body and lit the corpse on fire.

"*Sister!*" a little boy shrieked.

It was the one of the most blood-curdling screams that Sakura had ever heard. A scream of grief and rage and pain... a brother losing his beloved sister. A little twisted boy losing the only person he'd ever loved.

She'd expected it.

She was counting on it. Misain Sebi had chased them back to the surface only to witness the violent, sudden death of his big sister. Sakura was the cause of it all. She was responsible; and now Sebi would stop at nothing until he killed her.

"*Rei!*" Sebi shrieked again. "*Sister!*

The boy emerged from the hole behind them, covered head to toe in the fiery, protective armor of Burning Skin. His blue eyes were lit with a wild light, his young face contorted in fury. Burning tears flowed down his face like a mighty stream.

"*Mizuho: Water Dragon Bullet!*"

A massive tide of water appeared above his head. Then the water turned into a dragon, all aflame...
and breathing fire. It flew at them, a torrent of demon fire.

"Run!" said Sakura.

Sakura leaped to the left, Sosano to the right. Sakura ran across the courtyard to dodge into a crumbling, pyramidal shrine. Sosano disappeared into another pyramid on the other side.

As expected, Sebi ran straight toward Sakura, driven to enraged madness by Rei's death, screaming curses. Hoshigaki Makera was no less predictable. The mist-nin had only ever been interested in Sosano. Instead of following Sebi, he went after Sosano instead… and took Suigetsu with him, since Suigetsu was wrapped around Makera like a watery armor. The waterfall-nins and mist-nins, who had been so successful combining their attacks, split up without a second thought. They even went so far as to ignore Rock Lee altogether, leaving him in the courtyard with Kawai.

A fatal mistake.

"Lee! Stop Kawai! Don't let him follow us!"

It was another Sakura... rising from the ground behind Rock Lee.

Lee spun in surprise. "Sakura-chan? I thought—"

"No, that was a clone. This isn't my real body, either."

Rock Lee tried to think. He always looked pained when he tried to think, like it hurt him something fierce. "You mean—when you ran away—"

The waterfall-nin Onira Kawai laughed. "You tricked us. You didn't split up at all."

"No."

"I see. So this was your plan all along… trying to divide us, then picking us off one by one. First Sebi, I expect. Then Suigetsu. Then Makera. Only I'm the flaw in this strategy, aren't I? My Black Thread bloodline can control the terrain of the entire battlefield… and I'm too dangerous to be led around by shadows. You needed someone real to hold me off. Some poor sacrifice." Kawai grinned, the black stitches across his pale white face stretching apart like patches on a doll. Slimy, venomous tentacles slithered out from his face and neck and chest, from his detached limbs. A rain of Mizuho fire poured down from the black sky, splattering harmlessly on the waterfall-nin's monstrously grotesque body. "I am not Misain Rei, girl. You have sent this little green boy to his death."

"Stop him!" Sakura told Lee again. "Don't let him past you. Whatever it takes!"

To her relief, Rock Lee finally nodded. "Sakura-chan! I will protect you!"

"You've got to use all five Chakra Gates, Lee. Don't get too close to him, his tentacles are poison, they'll kill you if you so much as touch them. We'll come help you when we can—"

"For Gai-sensei!" Rock Lee shouted, insensible to her words of advice. He launched himself at Kawai in a headlong fury, as if to make up for his momentary cowardice. As Sakura feared, a hundred black threads wrapped themselves around Lee's body… but the immense aura of chakra from five Gates open acted as a kind of armor, repelling both Kawai's Death and Decay poison as well as the Mizuho rain. Rock Lee was a glowing blur of speed and power, pummeling Kawai with savage kicks.

Sakura herself was not so fortunate.
Thick black threads erupted from the stone floor beneath her and pierced right through her head. The mud clone could not take such damage; she only had time to gasp before she dissolved into a puddle of mud.

With that, Sakura lost her vision of Rock Lee.

*One clone down.* Her real body was running underground, heading toward Sebi and Sosano. Her five remaining Mirrored Clones were either leading Makera away or scouting the battlefield ahead. Sometimes it was hard to distinguish the real one from the clones. The Mirrored Clone jutsu allowed her to see through and control her clones just as if they were her own. It was fiendishly difficult to control six separate bodies at once… especially spread over a large area.

But it was working.

Unbeknownst to Makera and Suigetsu, the person they were chasing was *not* the real Sougon Sosano. It was one of Sakura's Mirrored Clones. Meanwhile, Sebi *was* chasing a real person... but it was *not* Sakura.

It was Sosano, transformed into Sakura's appearance.

They'd made the switch during the brief moment when the cloud of steam had hidden them from view. Then, by splitting up, they'd fooled Sebi and Makera into following the wrong people. Now it was time to spring the trap.

Sebi was far within the maze of a stone pyramid, screaming profane insults, flinging Mizuho fireballs indiscriminately at the fleeing figure ahead. He was quite surprised when the real Sakura emerged behind him to cut off his retreat with a single blow, collapsing the hallway behind with a chakra-enhanced punch. When he turned back, Sosano had appeared in the place of the fleeing Sakura.

"I see you," he said, softly, and unsheathed his sword.

It was brutally quick.

Sebi's entire fighting style revolved around Mizuho. Unfortunately for him, Mizuho was perfectly countered by the Enshogan. Any Mizuho he tried to create was instantly naturalized—turned to ice, shattering on the ground uselessly. Even his Burning Skin armor was no protection against Sosano's Fire and Ice taijutsu. Instead Sosano's katana sliced easily through the frozen armor, carving deep, cutting wounds into Sebi's flesh. The little waterfall-nin boy shrieked in pain. All alone, trapped indoors, with nowhere to run, Sebi could only cower in the corner of the dark pyramid, curling into a frightened ball.

He broke.

"No!" Sebi whimpered. "No, stop, don't kill me!" Evidently the idea of death had never really occurred to him. Sebi had burned hundreds of other people to death, no doubt, but he'd never imagined he could experience the same fate. The boy had always been strong, too pampered. Blood poured from Sebi's wounds, washing over his arms and hands. "Please, don't hurt me. Please. I... I won't ever fight you again, I promise! It was Makera. He—he made me! I never wanted to."

The only light in the dark pyramid came from Sosano's burning eyes, from his glowing sword. In that light, Sakura beheld the crying, crawling, bleeding form of Misain Sebi like a dim gray shadow. His face was drained of all color, all artifice. Even his beloved sister was forgotten. What remained was only naked fear.

*He's just a little boy,* she thought. A sadistic, horrible little boy, to be sure, who had caused her and
her friends so much grief. Yet who could blame him? His father was a incestuous tyrant, his sister a
smothering seductress. Who was to say that Sebi could not have turned out differently, in better
circumstances? *He's younger even than I was, when I graduated from the Konoha Ninja Academy.*

"Mercy," the little boy begged. "Mercy! Oh god, please—"

"Yes," said Sougon Sosano.

Misain Sebi exploded. His body erupted in an inferno of golden flame, a bloody storm of skin and
limbs and guts. What remained of Sebi's head rolled against Sakura's feet. Half the boy's face
remained, the flesh burned off, unrecognizable except for one deep blue eye.

Sakura very nearly threw up. She couldn't help it—revolted by the horror of it all, the grisly fate she
had delivered to this depraved child. For a moment she could not speak.

"You…"

"The boy wanted mercy, so I gave it to him. Like putting down a mad dog." Sosano sheathed his
bloody sword in one smooth motion, his voice dripping with amusement. "I'd do the same for you."
"The boy wanted mercy, so I gave it to him. Like putting down a mad dog." Sosano sheathed his bloody sword in one smooth motion, his voice dripping with amusement. "I'd do the same for you."

The two Misain siblings were dead.

Three enemies remained.

Lee was still fighting Kawai in the courtyard of the Cathedral of Hearts… or so Sakura hoped. As for Makera and Suigetsu, they'd chased Sakura's clone halfway around the cathedral before they'd caught her. Ordinarily, Makera would have chased her down in seconds, but Sakura had been greatly helped by Katsuyu, who'd divided herself into hundreds of smaller slugs at Sakura's direction and spat sizzling green acid to slow the mist-nins down.

Even Katsuyu was not invincible, however. Combining their efforts, Makera and Suigetsu had finally blown up the piece of Katsuyu that Sakura had summoned to the temple. Then Makera sank his teeth into Sakura's neck, dissolving her clone into mud. The shark boy roared when he realized he'd been tricked. He sniffed at the air, finally detecting the scent of the real Sosano, on the other side of the temple. Sakura had planned for this, however. "To the crater, they're coming!" she shouted to Sosano.

The crater was the giant sinkhole in the middle of the Cathedral of Hearts, created by the Shadowstar Earthquake. Broken porcelain hearts littered the sides of crater, melted and smoking from the destruction wrought by Mizuho fire. Sebi's Death Rain technique had ended with his death. However, if anything, the downpour of rain had become even more fierce. A deluge of water stormed from the sky. It was very dark—black as night—the roiling, wild clouds impenetrable.

Sakura and Sosano skidded to a stop at the edge of the crater.

Waiting.

Makera and Suigetsu emerged on the other side.

Two against two.

"Bitch," laughed Suigetsu, arrogant beyond measure. "So you killed Sebi, did you?" A head stretched out from the strange liquid armor around Makera's body. The head of a boy made of water, leering at them. "All the better. Nobody to get in our way."

Sakura gripped her chakra-cast kunai tight. "Was Fue getting in your way, too?"

"Fue tripped over a little girl and fell into some lava. Such a pity."

"No lava here." Hoshigaki Makera stood motionless in the pouring storm; a brooding, shadowed hulk. When he grinned, rows of long sharp teeth yawned between his cold lips. "No distractions. Only the rain. And the smell of fear."

"Fate goes as fate must," said Sougon Sosano.

Makera leaped.

He jumped with such force and power that it took him clear across the crater. A giant shark monster, soaring down on them from the sky.
Sakura and Sosano dove forward, over the lip of the crater, running downhill over the strewn, smoldering rubble. Sosano made a hand seal. "Earth Release: Bedrock Coffin!"

Behind them, the ground turned into a muddy sinkhole, swallowing any who entered its area of effect. Makera did not even bother to dodge the attack. The mist-nin ran right through the Bedrock Coffin, using his sheer physical speed and strength to break through the collapsing walls. It had not affected him at all.

But the jutsu was not for him.

*Now!* thought Sakura.

All five of Sakura's remaining Mirrored Clones leaped up from under the muddy earth, blocking Makera's path. As with the Bedrock Coffin, the mist-nin easily ripped them apart with his bare hands…

… and the clones exploded in a shower of mud.

The chakra-laced mud stuck tightly to Makera's body. Or rather, to Suigetsu's body—since Suigetsu was currently wrapped around Makera in his liquid form. Suigetsu hissed as the mud splattered all over him and solidified, dissolving deeply into his liquid body. Hardening it.

"Blast Wave!" shouted Sosano.

The wave of billowing fire hit Suigetsu almost at point-blank range and shattered him into pieces. "Agh!" Suigetsu shrieked. Sakura had turned the mist-nin boy into solid mud, and now Sosano supplied the heat, cracking Suigetsu apart like an overheated piece of clay.

Suigetsu fell in clumps to the ground.

*It worked!* As Sakura had hoped, their combined attacks had forced solid impurities into Suigetsu's liquid form. By so doing, they'd corrupted his Hydration Transformation bloodline technique and forced Suigetsu to temporarily separate from Makera. That was the first, essential step. With Suigetsu protecting and shielding him, Makera was nigh invincible.

But not so now.

"Fire and Ice!" shouted Sosano, thrusting his katana forward in a blur of speed.

His sword went right through Makera's stomach.

The shark creature laughed.

"Sougon Sosano." Black shark blood poured from Makera's torso, flowing down Sosano's burning sword. Yet his eyes gave no hint of fear. Instead they were turning red. The lidless dead eyes bulged with a frenzied, animated brutality. The rest of Makera's body was turning red as well. Steaming crimson vapor wafted from the pores across his swelling muscles, forming a glowing chakra aura around Makera's monstrous, hulking form. "Sad, pretty, little boy. You should not have done that."

The mist-nin screamed.

A scream of terrifying, pure hunger.

"What the hell is that?" Sakura shouted.

"Bloodscent!" shouted Sosano, scrambling backwards. "Sakura, get away—"
He did not finish the thought. Makera suddenly rushed at Sosano with the velocity and the power of a raging locomotive. The mist-nin was a blur of insane speed, his very footsteps shattering the crater beneath him, his sheer speed bending the falling rain into a storm around him. In a single heartbeat he’d crossed the distance across the crater and crushed Sosano in his arms, biting down with his razor sharp teeth.

"Sosa!" Sakura shrieked.

She could not see clearly what was happening. The curtain of black rain, the darkness, the muddy ground, the rubble of the smoking crater—all of it confused the scene of battle. She was still at the bottom of the great crater in the middle of the Cathedral of Hearts, but Makera had driven Sosano almost to its edge, and then around to the other edge again, all in the space of a few seconds. Their insane taijutsu duel was beyond her, she knew, even with her maximum of four Chakra Gates open.

"Stupid bitch."

The voice came from a large and rapidly growing mound of water. Houzuki Suigetsu had reformed from the muddy pieces that Sosano had blasted him into."You thought you'd win by separating us? Wrong again!" Suigetsu laughed loudly, extending his fingers into the shape of a gun. "Hydration Transformation: Water Gun!"

Bullets of water shot out from both of Suigetsu's index fingers. The droplets of water, compressed and then fired with great speed and force, were deadly enough to crack stone. Sakura barely dodged them, trying to circle closer to Suigetsu. The mist-nin boy taunted her sadistically. "Stop running, you little simian bitch. Open your legs, and I'll give you everything you ever wanted."

The pouring rain constantly replenished Suigetsu's water-based bloodline, making him more powerful than ever before. I have to deal with this one first, she knew. Sakura only hoped Sosano could hold out until she was able to help him with Makera.

Suigetsu's overconfidence proved his undoing. The boy had the power the transform his body into a liquid water form at will, making him invulnerable to ordinary physical attacks. Obviously, he thought that Sakura could not truly hurt him. Suigetsu moved to trap Sakura beneath him, extending his body outward into a large, liquid net, watery limbs wrapping around her.

Sakura punched him.

The punch went right through his stomach, like punching the surface of a lake, and stayed there, lodged in the boy's liquid torso. Suigetsu laughed. "Oh, that almost tickles."

Then his body began to shake.

The molecules of water that made up his liquid form vibrated—shaking, oscillating, shivering apart. At first Suigetsu did not understand. His body should never have been affected in this way by a physical attack. But Sakura's punch was not primarily physical. Chakra Enhanced Strength was a chakra-based jutsu. Sakura released a burst of chakra from her fist to create a physical effect… only now she scattered her chakra instead of concentrating it. She pumped earth chakra-flow continuously into Suigetsu's body—using the chakra to split apart the intricate lattice of molecular bonds that allowed him to change shape and form. The lattice that gave Suigetsu molecular cohesion. By the time he realized what was happening, it was too late. "No!" the little, white-haired boy shrieked, unable to move. "No, stop, you're killing me!"

"I know," said Sakura.
Suigetsu exploded.

His body blew apart in a cloud of fine mist. The water drenched Sakura's body and scattered in a wide circumference around the center of the crater. He would never be able to reform. What remained of the mist-nin Houzuki Suigetsu were nothing more than puddles of inert, oddly warm liquid. The rain quickly washed it away.

One more down.

Now Sakura could finally turn her attention to the ongoing duel between Sosano and Makera. Sosano was losing. Losing badly. He was pressed against one side of the crater, pinned there by Makera, barely deflecting the shark monster's savage attacks with Fire and Ice. Makera roared, his body still glowing red with frenzied fury.

Bloodscent, Makera's jutsu was called. She had only ever heard of it. Bloodscent was the final, most terrifying jutsu of the bloodline of the Hoshigaki clan. It was activated when the user entered the final stage of a hunt against a worthy opponent, giving him a huge boost in power in order to finish the job. Makera had entered a state of frenzied bloodlust, greatly multiplying his speed and strength, but at the cost of any rational thought. Having tasted the scent of Sosano's blood, he would pursue Sosano until either him or Sosano had been killed.

How to fight it?

Even Sosano, with all his taijutsu skills, was losing to Makera's overpowering, Bloodscent-fueled strength. How could she help her boyfriend before he was killed? Genjutsu? No, it would never work. The chakra shield around Makera would block any genjutsu attack. But…

Fight fire with fire.

"Sosa!" shouted Sakura. "Hit him with everything you've got!"

She pressed her two chakra-cast kunai together and threw them at Makera's exposed back with all her strength. Attached together by chakra strings, amplified by Chakra Enhanced Strength, the kunai hit the mist-nin with enough force to make a large hole in the curtain wall of the Cathedral of Hearts. Makera, in a blind, singleminded rage, did not even notice.

She did it again.

Again.

This time Makera finally paid attention. He grunted in pain and anger, turning his head to look for the source of the pesky stinging at his back.

It was the opportunity Sosano had been waiting for.

"Blast Wave!"

The wave of burning fire knocked Makera back—slightly. His blood-red chakra shield was still up, protecting him from harm. But Sakura was there, on the other side, hitting Makera from the back with her Chakra Enhanced Kunai. Then Sosano used his Blast Wave again. Makera was buffeted between the two brutal attacks like a slab of gray ham sandwiched between two slices of bread. The shark thing roared, trying to break free, but unable to escape the continuous assault.

Now the disadvantages of Bloodscent became clear. The jutsu had given Makera unbelievable strength, speed, and stamina. But it had also made Makera stupid. In his crazed, berserk state, he was
unable to think clearly. A smarter Makera might have tried to use a water jutsu to block Sosano’s Blast Wave. Instead, the Bloodscented Makera only knew how to use physical force. It was a decisive weakness.

Sosano cast Blast Wave a dozen times. Each attack knocked Makera backward, and with each attack Makera’s chakra shield diminished, sputtering apart in a haze of steam and smoke. Sakura's kunai finally pierced through the shield and lodged into his spine. The mist-nin shrieked, her attacks drawing deep blood at last. A final Blast Wave drove Makera off his feet; he collapsed in a heap, rolling to the bottom of the crater, at Sakura's very feet.

He did not get back up.

Sakura stared down at the fallen mist-nin. For a moment Makera stared back, his eyes a frenzied, engorged red. Then the red faded into dull black. Hoshigaki Makera lay sunk motionless in the muddy ground... unconscious and defeated. The Bloodscent had finally run its course.

Dying, Sakura thought. If Makera's injuries had not already killed him, the end of the Bloodscent would. It meant that he'd completely run of chakra, drained of every last drop of life energy. Within minutes Makera's body would follow—a certain death.

She did not intend to wait that long.

*You killed my friends,* she thought. She remembered the battle atop the Temple of Time. She remembered the ambush in the Catacombs. She remembered hearing the scream of a little girl in a dark tunnel beneath the earth. *You raped Dee. You raped those poor boys, you monster.* The chakra-cast kunai was light in her hands, glowing bright with deadly force. Sakura held it high for the final strike. She would stab him through the eyes, drive the point into his soft, vulnerable brain. It would be the end—

"Sakura!" Sosano screamed.

He barreled into her suddenly, knocking her aside. And not a second too soon—for a slithering black tentacle burst from the place she had been standing. More tentacles shortly followed, exploding out to hover over Makera's fallen body.

"Kawai!" hissed Sakura.

"So you live," replied the waterfall-nin in kind. Onira Kawai rose from the muddy earth like a patchwork, shattered doll. His face was torn in two: literally half his skull missing, with thin black threads wriggling from the holes like maggots. Kawai did not seem to be in very good shape. But he was still standing. "You bastards. We'll meet again."

Then he was gone.

Fled in an instant... burrowing underground, taking Makera's unconscious body with him. Sakura and Sosano did not bother to give chase. There was no chance of catching them, she knew. Both sides were exhausted. And there was no point to it. *We won.* Somehow, Sakura had won. She had taken on the combined might of Team Keel and Team Dayu, the two most dangerous teams in the chuunin exam, and she had survived. Misain Rei and Misain Sebi were dead, as was Houzuki Suigetsu—her mortal enemies reduced by three. Onira Kawai and Hoshigaki Makera were just the next on her list.

But not today.

The storm ended as Sosano cradled Sakura in his arms.
First the rain stopped. It ceased in a single moment, as if the clouds above had been emptied of any water that remained. Then the wind died down, and the black clouds began to break apart. They floated away, dissolving into dazzling immensity. Gray became blue, and then yellow, soft red. The sky was full of light. A red-golden sun blazed across the dome of the world, casting down its warmth over the ruins of the ancient temple. All in the Cathedral of Hearts was silent, except for the soft trickle of water dripping down the sloping sides of the sinkhole in its center. The lingering smell of volcanic ash wafted through the air, mixing with the mountain wind, the scent of fresh-fallen rain. Sakura knelt in the damp earth at the bottom of the crater, Sosano's strong arms close around her body. She could feel the heat of him through his thin gray robes, through the tight fabric of her Konoha genin uniform. 

"He saved me. He loves me." Sakura buried her face in his chest, grateful for the opportunity to let herself go at last—to take refuge in his strength. Such strength. A guarded strength, and dangerous, but gentle. 

"Sakura." Her boyfriend's voice was a whisper. "Sakura, you're crying."

"Am I?" She hadn't noticed.

"Yes. The tears are flowing down your face... shining bold in the sunlight, pooling in your eyes like dew on bright green leaves. They become you, I think. The heart weeps even when the mind does not know. The heart sees true."

They found Rock Lee where they had left him.

The courtyard by the curtain wall of the Cathedral of Hearts had been utterly destroyed, as if some monstrous titan had trampled it over. Perhaps he had. Of the original courtyard, nothing remained, not even the small trickling stream called the Dreamstone River. Only broken stones and heaps of rubble, only fractured porcelain hearts and the bloody, smoking remains of a thousand withering tentacles. The shattered visage of Tethis the Tear-Wiper was buried on its side in a pool of muddy red water, half sunk, a single stone tear falling down its cracked cheek. The goddess of peace. The goddess of love, and of hope.

A boy in a green jumpsuit lay curled against the broken statue.

"Sakura-chan," the boy whispered. He tried to smile, gave a pained gasp instead. "Sakura-chan... I fought him. Just like you said."

She stared at him numbly. Stared at his prone form... stared at the blood that came oozing out in a leaden wave from his legs. Blood that seeped from every pore from his thighs down, drenching the battered green jumpsuit, thin as oil and agonizing in the extreme. Sakura breathed in sharply when she saw it. She knew the signs all too well. Lee, you dumb fool, didn't I tell you? Kawai's tentacles are poison, they'll kill you if you so much as touch them. But touch them he had. Lee had suffered a single, shallow cut on his right ankle. The single cut had been enough.

Death and Decay.

There was no known antidote.

"Sakura-chan," Rock Lee babbled on, utterly oblivious. "Sakura-chan, did... did we win? Did I... protect you?"

_He doesn't know_, she realized. Death and Decay was the deadliest jutsu in all the depraved arsenal of the waterfall-nin Onira Kawai. Kawai sent out a black thread to infect the victim with his own blood, poisonous to all outside the Onira clan. Beginning from the infected area, the Death and Decay poison first caused the victim's blood to change into an oil-like soup, and then, in its later stages,
caused all the cells in the victim's body to rapidly age and then die. Lee's body would eventually shrivel up into a bag of skin and bones. That was what had happened to poor Unchiku Nonou, during the First Trial. It was one of the most painful ways to die ever invented.

"Lee…" she started.

But she could not go on.

Instead Sakura sank to her knees in the mud. Rock Lee stared at her, his glassy eyes wide with pain and confusion… with an inkling of dawning fear. She could not say it. She turned away, unable to meet his eyes. "I can't heal this," Sakura whispered, almost to herself. There was perhaps only one person who could. Tsunade-sensei. She seized on the slender tendril of hope. "Tsunade-sensei!" she shouted aloud. "If you're watching… I can't heal this. I need you, please! Please, Tsunade-sensei, for Rock Lee." For Gai-sama. "Come now. Come now, damn you!"

There was no answer.

"The Hokage will not come," Sosano told her softly. "The Queen of Torment hears you, but she will not help you. That… or she cannot."

Rock Lee shrieked, screaming in pain.

Sakura knew she could delay no longer. She could not heal Lee's wounds, no more than she had Nonou's. Once the blood had been altered, it was already too late. But there was a crucial difference between the two patients. Nonou had been infected by Death and Decay through her chest… while Lee had been cut on his ankle. That meant, in Lee's case, the infection had only spread slowly upwards. To this point, the poisoned area had only barely reached Lee's torso. I can't wait for Tsunade-sensei to come. If Sakura didn't take action now…

"Lee…"

"What?" he cried.

"Your legs… they're infected. The poison's spreading upwards, toward your heart. If we don't…"

"Don't what?"

Sakura forced herself to look into Lee's wide dark eyes. Can I say it? If I say it, will that make it real? "If we don't amputate the legs right now you'll die."

He stared at Sakura, unable to comprehend what she was saying.

"Lee… it's the only way."

"You can use my sword," said Sosano.

Sosano's words shook Lee out of his disbelief. "No!" he screamed.

Sakura took the sword; it started to smoke, heated by Sosano's bloodline power.

"No!" Lee screamed again. He began to struggle with his arms and upper body and head, thrashing about wildly.

"Hold him down," Sakura said to Sosano. It's just a medical procedure, I've done it a dozen times before. Sosano locked Lee's arms and torso in place; his muscles quivered, but the force immobilized Lee enough for a good clean cut, right above the groin. Cut out the poison from the rest of his body.
Tsunade-sensei's not here... only me. I'm in charge.

I have to save his life.

She raised the sword high above her head.

"Sakura-chan! You can't do this!" Rock Lee was crying now, tears streaming down his cheeks. "My legs... I'll be a—a cripple! My dream... everything I lived for..."

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"No! I'd rather die! Sakura!"

The sword glowed white hot.

"Sakura! Let me die!"

Her muscles tensed.

"SAKURA!"

She did not hear him.
They left Rock Lee's legs behind, in the ruins of the Cathedral of Hearts. The poison had proceeded unabated. Within minutes the legs had shriveled to black fleshless stumps, to yellowed bones and flaps of skin dry as leather. Sakura buried them as deep in the icy ground as she could.

"It's done," Sosano said to her afterward. "He'll never love you again."

"I saved his life."

"That makes it even worse."

Sakura put Rock Lee on her back. He was lighter than she expected; though, upon reflection, the reason was all too obvious. His breath was soft and even, almost peaceful. Sakura feared for when he would wake up again.

It did not happen for many hours. They trudged forward into the glacial canyons of the Dreamstone Mountains; into the heart of the Gorge of Stones. A panorama of ice and desolation greeted them at each step. Toward nightfall they made camp in a cave next to the major Rainbow Lake called Inkyoji Lake, Sosano using his Enshogan to make a fire from the stone itself. Then he leaned in to give her a kiss.

Sakura accepted gratefully. She would not make love, though. Not with Lee there.

Sosano only smiled. "We're close," he said. "We should reach the Third Lock tomorrow."

"And then what?" She could not keep the bitterness out of her voice.

"You are questioning yourself. Perfectly natural, after all the things that have happened."

"You killed him. Sebi. Like putting down a mad dog, you said, even though he was just a little kid, crying for his life. It wasn't so different, with Rock Lee. Lee wanted to be a hero, but against Kawai he never had a chance. I should have known. I shouldn't have let them fight."

"It was the logical decision. The situation was desperate, and Onira Kawai had to be removed from the field. You had to take command. How did it feel?"

"What?"

"To be in command. How did it feel, Sakura?"

Sakura remembered standing in a storm of fire, shouting orders, directing the attack. It was like a dream, an impression in sand. She reached back to remember and the details slipped from her grasp. It was pure instinct, not logic… she had not time for rational logic. Each split-second decision followed one after the other, creating their own paths, a flood carving its own channel through the stone of her mind. It was like combat, except a combat of the mind, a strategy of the battlefield. It was like medical triage, except the object was not the maximum life saved but the maximum pain inflicted. In the moment she had no justification for what she had done… what thought process by which she had arrived at her decisions. But that was not Sosano's question. Sosano had only asked her how she had felt. That, she remembered. She remembered a feeling that welled up in her and made her burst with excitement… with arousal. In the moment, ordering Rock Lee to a situation in which in all likelihood he would have died, she had never felt more alive. Command?
It had felt good.

"That I have a lot to learn," said Sakura. "About being a leader."

He laughed. "Is that so? I think you have learned the most important lesson already. The first, and the last."

"What?"

"Never let them see your heart."

They woke to a bitter chill. Frost carpeted the floor of the cave where they'd lay, so cold that as Sakura sat up her uniform cracked, the sweat in the tight fabric having frozen in the night. Yet it was no night no longer. When she walked to the mouth of the cave, the light nearly blinded her. Sunlight, reflecting off great sheets of ice like diamond dust. The glittering ice stretched on and on, as far as she could see, mountain after mountain. The Dreamstone Glacier.

The dawn light made Inkyoji Lake look different as well. In the dusk it had only been a dark, formless thing—a lake much like any other. Now Sakura understood her mistake. The surface of the lake was alive with shimmering colors. Ruby and turquoise, gold and lapis lazuli, diamond and emerald. The kaleidoscope of colors came from the unique mineral deposits dissolved in Inkyoji Lake, Sakura knew. Like the other Rainbow Lakes scattered throughout the lower reaches of the Gorge of Stones, Inkyoji Lake had been formed by glacial erosion, and the minerals left behind prevented it from freezing even in winter. The water was so shallow and smooth it seemed almost like a mirror.

A mirror of shifting color, and sunlight, and endless white ice.

*It's beautiful*, she realized. *Beautiful and so very cold.*

It was the last day of the Second Trial.

"Iwa is the earth and the stones," Sosano said, joining her. "Iwa is the beauty and vastness of the mountains. For it is here, in this place, that we are truly awake. Without your wandering, Sakura, we would have missed this dawn."

Sakura turned away from him. "Very poetic."

"And you are not in the mood to appreciate poetry today, I take it?"

"I should go check on Lee."

He said nothing, only watched her. Rock Lee was still unconscious from the sedatives that Sakura had given him the day before. Sakura injected a fresh round now… perhaps more than was strictly necessary. *If he wakes up, he'll distract us from the mission.*

Distract her. Sakura could scarcely look at him without tasting the bile in the back of her throat. Without his legs Lee was a stunted, shriveled thing. Half a man. When she changed the bandages around the stump where his legs had once been, Rock Lee cried out softly, tossing and turning in a pained sleep. His face was pale with fever, his breath a white mist in the cold dawn air.

*All he ever wanted was to be a ninja. All he ever wanted was for me to be happy, and this is how I repaid his love.*

"Follow me," Sosano told her, when she was done. "We've a long day ahead."
Sakura carried Lee in a makeshift sling on her back, and Sosano led them both up into the Dreamstone Glacier. Ice crunched under their feet as they walked, so slick that Sakura had to channel chakra to her feet just to maintain her balance. Fantastical shapes of stone and snow turned the Gorge of Stones into a bleak, colossal dreamscape. Every so often they came across a stream of glacial runoff. These were the headwaters that marked the very beginning of the Dreamstone River. But even the thin trickles of water disappeared as they climbed higher into the Gorge of Stones, passing the line of permanent glaciation. The great peaks of the Dreamstone Mountains covered by ice all year round, even in the very height of summer.

Toward midday she climbed a windswept ridge, and saw it.

The Ice Spear.

A sheer jagged peak covered in white ice, thrusting skyward to such a height that it seemed to break the sky in two. Mount Enasei near Ashwarren could not compare to it, nor the great Cojira Mountains of the Lightning Country, nor even Mount Echigo. The Ice Spear was the tallest mountain in the entire world.

And the location of the Third Lock.

The end of the Second Trial.

*There will be a choice,* thought Sakura. That was what Director Doi had told them. Three Locks, one for each Gorge of the Scar. Three choices. Three conflicts of duty.

For the First Lock, in Kashima Village, the choice between the mission and protecting the innocent. For the Second Lock, in Senso-ji Temple atop Mount Echigo, the choice between the mission and being loyal to her teammates.

And the Third Lock? *What sacrifice will I have to make this time?*

"It shall not be long," said Sosano. "Nothing remains between us save the Frozen Forest."

The Frozen Forest was a great forest of petrified wood buried beneath the Dreamstone Glacier. Scientists said the forest dated millions of years into the past, as old as the Dreamstone Mountains themselves. The more romantically inclined spoke of the great comet that had fallen from the sky to create the Scar—the trees of living flame that were birthed from the impact itself.

Whatever the cause, the Frozen Forest was long dead. The trees had been buried by glacial ice, and then slowly replaced with minerals deposited by the glacier, petrifying the original organic matter into stone and crystal. *A forest of fossils.* At certain places, where the ice was sufficiently translucent, Sakura could see the fossilized trees locked deep in the glacier below her feet. *Withertrees,* they were named, and no species like them still survived in the living world. Twisting black shapes, impossibly thin, branches snaking upward like so many fingers of flame. The dead trees had long since lost all their leaves.

The most surprising feature of the withertrees were their size. The Dreamstone Glacier was hundreds of meters thick, much taller than any tree that Sakura had ever seen. Even the great redwoods of Konoha's Shadowspring Forest would been dwarfed by the size of it. Yet not the Frozen Forest. The thin trunks of the fossilized withertrees soared up through the ice, and the highest of them nearly reached to the surface itself.

"I never knew trees could be so big," she said.

Sosano's voice was a whisper in the vast glacier canyon. "They cannot… in the current geological
era. But the withertrees of the Frozen Forest are not of our time. Millions of years ago, the climate of the North was much warmer and more humid than it is now. Plants and animals grew to massive sizes never seen before, the withertrees among them."

"And then the climate changed.""Yes. So came the cold, and the ice. So the great living trees of this land were buried beneath the Dreamstone Glacier and turned to petrified stone. The Frozen Forest is a relic of a distant past. Yet we can journey to the Gorge of Stones and see it still, if we know how to look. The Frozen Forest surrounds the Ice Spear for a hundred kilometers in every direction, and extends into the Glacier Country as well. But it is utterly invisible to one who does know it is there, under the ice."

"Are there any withertrees tall enough to break the surface?"

"Only one. We shall reach it soon."

Sosano pointed before him.

She followed the gesture. "The Ice Spear?"

"Now, yes. But once a mountain with no ice on it at all… a mountain covered in primeval life. Once, the home of the largest tree that ever lived."

The Ice Spear loomed larger and larger with each passing minute. They'd been hiking the glacier for the whole day, and now the sun was beginning its slow descent to the horizon. The Gorge of Stones had tapered to a single narrow canyon, a path surrounded on both sides by sheer cliffs a hundred meters tall. Orange light glittered on the blue-white ice between, refracting into strange, hallucinatory patterns. It was so cold that Sakura's fingers and toes and ears had gone entirely numb. A chill wind whipped at her face and seeped deep into her bones. Without the chakra she pumped through her chakra circulatory system, she would've frozen to death in minutes.

Rock Lee lay limp in the sling on her back, as light as a sleeping child. And as helpless. It seemed she'd been carrying him for years, though it had not even been a single day. Had the Second Trial only begun a week ago? How could that be? Sakura felt utterly exhausted. Drained, both physically and mentally.

Sosano noticed her fatigue. "Endure," he told her. "In enduring, grow strong."

"The Will of Stone?"

"Fire burns poorly in a place such as this." He smiled. "Yet the stone keeps to its path."

And at the end of the Gorge of Stones, the Ice Spear.

Up close, the mountain was undeniably majestic. The face of it was so tall and sheer that even when Sakura craned back her head she could not quite see the peak. True to its name, all of the Ice Spear was carpeted in thick ice, tinged golden in the light of the late afternoon sun. Yet for all its beauty, there was a vast desolation as well. This place is the end of the world.

The great Scar that stretched across half the Earth Country ended here. Here, where it had all begun.

Sakura saw it.

A petrified tree grew from the base of the Ice Spear, rising from the ice itself. Or at least the canopy of a tree; the rest of it buried far beneath the glacier. Bare black branches twisted together like a
wreath, each thinner and finer than a strand of straw. Yet together the total effect was simply extraordinary. As if a giant black stone had exploded and then been frozen at the precise moment of its own destruction.

Sakura had never seen anything like it. Snow had fallen in the hallucinatory tangle of branches, slowly melting. Water dripped down from the tree and ran into a trickle under Sakura's feet.


"The Reverie Tree," replied Sosano. "The only tree of the Frozen Forest tall enough to reach above the surface of the glacial ice. By some estimates, it grew for over ten thousand years to reach this height. Then it was buried by the Dreamstone Glacier and turned into petrified stone. Eventually, as is his wont, man discovered the Reverie Tree and turned it into an object of holy worship. Shiva pilgrims would journey through all of the Scar just to sleep beneath its branches. It was said that the kami of the Reverie Tree could impart great visions, dreams of the days to come. Perhaps the stories are more true than we know. Look, do you see? The Third Lock is right there."

Under the great petrified tree, a single slab of glowing white metal.

And a man.

Director Haghira Doi smiled thinly. "So you have come at last. I see you."
Director Haghira Doi was a thin, skeletal man, as black and spindly as the gnarled petrified branches of the Reverie Tree under which he stood. *Like his son Geigin, but different as well.* If Geigin had aged thirty years, and his long neck had extended, and all the fat had boiled off his boyish face, he would have become his father. Geigin was angry, full to the brim with teenage resentment. But the man called the Dragonsight had no anger in his dark slitted eyes; only sadness. *Sad eyes, eyes that have loved and lost.*

The tall stone-nin waited for them by the Third Lock, under the Reverie Tree by the base of the Ice Spear, and when he spoke, his voice carried in the cold mountain wind.

"I see you," he said. "The three very last people in the Second Trial, the only ones still alive who have not yet finished. I am not surprised at all it is you. The leaf-nin Rock Lee is a broken cripple, in no state to finish this journey… but for the other two of you, the final climax arrives. Haruno Sakura, daughter of Arashi the Demonslayer, chosen apprentice of the Queen of Torment. Sougon Sosano, who is called the Prince of Dawn, wielder of the Enshogan eye, brightest scion of the Lords of the Overlook. Welcome, young shinobi. It is time to make your final choice."

Sosano smiled. "I see you too, Doi-sama. I take it that you, yourself, are the last obstacle?"

"Only if you make me so. I am here to offer you a choice." Sakura had a sinking feeling about that. "What is it?"

"The Third Lock is protected by a trap fuinjutsu. Do you see that scroll over the keyhole? The seal can only be opened by sacrificing one of your own jutsu. At the moment you use the jutsu, the scroll will suck that jutsu into itself and steal it… and you will never be able to use that jutsu again."


"You're trying to bribe us," said Sakura.

"On the contrary. No mission can be completed without cost… a sacrifice in the line of duty. A sacrifice of your own honor. Of the bond between your teammates. And of your own life. Many shinobi have made that ultimate sacrifice in order to complete the mission. Of course, the chuunin exam can only simulate reality to a certain extent. So instead of death I will accept the sacrifice of your most powerful jutsu."

A hard knot churned in the pit of Sakura's gut. *This is no easy challenge.*

"Shadow Power Theft cannot steal bloodline jutsu," said Sosano.

"True enough," Doi conceded. "Hand over one of your eyes, and I'll pass you through."

Sosano laughed. "The Enshogan? It wouldn't suit you."

"That's the test. Either hand it over or quit."

"The only choice? No, I do not think so. What if I sacrificed… something else?"

Sakura frowned. *Something else?* For a moment she did not know what the stone-nin boy meant, what he could sacrifice to complete a mission, if not himself. And then she remembered what
remained of Rock Lee's body in her arms, soft and limp, and she did.

"Sacrifice what?"

Sougon Sosano laughed. "Iwa, of course."

"You would betray the village in order to save yourself?"

"That's what you want, isn't it? Don't play dumb, Doi-sama. You want something from me… but not the Enshoghan. You want my secrets. A bribe, in order to be allowed to pass the Second Trial. You would have me betray my father. My family, my village, my country. On every mission, the shinobi can always choose one of two options. Choose the mission. Or choose himself, and betray all that he has been entrusted to him. Yes, I think I shall play the Betrayer in this farce of yours."

Haghira Doi the Dragonsight smiled thinly. "You may look it on that way, if your choose. Yourself or your village. Or nothing."

"Ask away, sir."

"Where is the Annihilation Device?"

Sosano glanced at Sakura. Smiled. "It's under Sougon Castle, in the deepest recesses of the Vault. There is nowhere in Iwa more secure, protected by unbreakable fuinjutsu. To reach the Annihilation Device, you will have to go through each level of Sougon Castle one by one, passing through each of the great Eyeless Gates, until you come at last to the chamber called the Garden of Fate, under the very gravestones of the Sougon clan itself. There is the bomb you fear so much."

"What is its operational status?"

"Operational? Not quite… though that has more to do with politics than with technical obstacles. The Iwa High Council, as you know well, is dead set against the bomb. And Akatsuki hovers in the shadows like a coiled snake. It is not so easy to complete the bomb under such circumstances. But it will be ready soon. Before the end of the chuunin exam, my father expects."

"Is the Tsuchikage planning to use it?"

"My father wishes to preserve the Annihilation Device as a defensive weapon. He has no plans to use it right away."

"What of Akatsuki? What is their part in all this?"

"Akatsuki wants their hands on the bomb to use it in a terrorist attack, of course. Rest assured my father is aware of this fact. My father does not trust Akatsuki, but believes they are a useful tool. He intends to use Akatsuki as a shadow proxy against the United Countries alliance. And the Annihilation Device is his insurance against any threat."

"How do you destroy it?"

"At the core of the Device is a power source made up of souls, both bijuu and jinchuriki—the Annihilation Heart. Without the Annihilation Heart, the Device is worthless. Yet the Heart is not so easy to destroy. In fact, only one jutsu known to existence can spiritually affect souls… Death Demon Seal, or its derived variants. Without such a spiritual jutsu attack, the Annihilation Device cannot be harmed. There, now I've told you all I know."

Doi nodded. "Very well, Sosano. Your answers are satisfactory; you may pass."
The boy laughed, his braided hair flapping in the wind. "Betraying my family was easier than I expected. Words are wind. Why, I think that was the easiest Lock to open of them all." He turned to look at Sakura, who had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. "And you, Sakura? What will you do?"

**Would I ever betray Konoha, for my own ends?**

"I will accept the sacrifice of your Chakra Enhanced Strength jutsu," said Haghira Doi. "Or you may tell me where the Hokage's real body is."

"I don't know," Sakura said.

"Why did Tsunade let Uchiha Sasuke go with Orochimaru? Did she strike a secret alliance with the White Snake?"

"I don't know."

"Not that either? Girl, did the Hokage ever tell you anything important?"

Sakura hesitated. **Doi hates Sawar, doesn't he? The enemy of my enemy is my friend.** But she was not like Sosano, she could not just blurt out secrets entrusted to her in confidence, on a mere whim. *It's all a game to Sosa, this whole chuunin exam, his whole life, but I'm afraid of what will happen if he wins.* Did she dare tell Doi the truth about Anake and ROOT?

"No," she said.

Doi shook his head. "That's not good enough. Give me Chakra Enhanced Strength."

Sakura hesitated on that as well. It was her best combat jutsu, and she would not have lived through the Second Trial without it…

But before Sakura had to make a decision, Sosano stepped forward, smiling. "Let me go first. Just to see if it works."

Doi nodded, and stepped aside. The great glowing white bulk of the Third Lock loomed before them, a window of light against the ice, the gnarled petrified wood of the Reverie Tree. Doi made a complicated set of hand seals, and then the black seal around the Lock disappeared. Sosano put in his chuunin exam key and turned it.

There was a click.

The Lock began to glow purple.

And suddenly waves of chakra energy were billowing off it, flooding the whole area around the Reverie in an unholy black fog.

"What in the six hells—" Doi started.

Sakura could scarcely move. Something was invading her body, pouring through her tenketsu, her skin, her blood, and then out of the other side again like so many invisible bullets. *Radiation!* She had felt it before. She'd felt it in Sunagakure, when they'd discovered the gamma ray generator hidden in the room of Sarutobi Iniden. *This is—it can't be—*

"Sakura!" Sosano shouted. "Get away! I'm bei—"

He never finished the warning. In a mere instant he'd fallen unconscious where he stood, just as Doi
had fallen unconscious. *Hypnotized, they've been hypnotized by the radiation.* Just like in Sunagakure, just like Asuma. Asuma had been infected by the Akatsuki operative Zetsu with microscopic neuro-spores. The spores were triggered by gamma radiation, rendering the victim suggestible to any command…

*I'm infected too.* Sakura could feel her body start to freeze as the spores that had latched onto various parts of her nervous system activated. But she could still think, somehow. For the moment. If the neuro-spores had not yet penetrated her brain, there was a chance… but how long did she have? The spores had already been excited to frenzied activity, they must already be in her spinal cord. Seconds, at most—

With the last of her strength Sakura flowed a chakra field between her own brain stem and spinal cord. The field closed off every connection that the spores could use to invade her higher nervous system.

Unfortunately, it also made it impossible to control her own muscles.

She dropped to the ground like a sack of flour. Behind her, she heard Rock Lee fall off her back, rolling across the slope at the base of the Reverie Tree, but she couldn't even turn her head to see. Snow was under her face, and cold ice. The only things Sakura could move were her eyes and mouth. Smoking gamma radiation still billowed from the Lock, and Sosano and Doi stood by it like two frozen corpses. She dared not drop the chakra barrier protecting her brain, not even for a moment. There seemed only one appropriate response.

"Fuck!" she shouted.

A mocking laugh rang out across the cold white air.

Two figures emerged from behind the Reverie Tree, from within the black radioactive smoke. Sakura rolled her eyes upward in her head, straining to get a glance at their faces. One of them was all too familiar. *Zetsu, the Akatsuki plant-thing,* jaws like a Venus flytrap enclosing a moldy face half-white and half-black. The other figure she did not know. He was tall and dignified, with fiery orange hair, and his face seemed to be pierced through with black metal rods. His eyes were stained a light purple. Around his forehead was a Amegakure forehead protector, slashed out.

The rain missing-nin chuckled. "So the girl managed to stop the infection. I'm impressed."

"Sshe's too sssmart," Zetsu said.

"Yes, quite. Look at poor Director Doi, he's been irradiated a dozen times today, and doesn't remember any of it."

"You're mind controlling them," Sakura said, forcing the words through her mouth. "All the genin who made it this far."

"Isn't it the perfect opportunity? Took quite a bit of work to set this one up, I must say. Tsunade had already developed a serum for the original neuro-spores, of course. It was not easy to develop a new variant, to introduce the neuro-spores in a way they wouldn't be detected, or to infect the target victims. Under ordinary circumstances, with all the heightened security, probably impossible." The rain-nin seemed most pleased with himself. "But then I thought, what about using the chuunin exam itself? A little danger, a little secrecy, would hardly be out of place. A little tampering with the Third Lock. A little genetic modification…"

"The wasps," said Sakura. "The ones in Fuwa Valley, that stung everyone. You modified them to
deliver the spores directly into the bloodstream."

He laughed. "You're right, Zetsu. She **is** smart."

It was worse than she could imagine. Akatsuki has turned Sosano and Haghira Doi into sleeper agents, with secret commands to do who knew what. Not to mention Temari, and Aumono, and other trusted UC shinobi. It would be trivial for Akatsuki to steal the Annihilation Device now, or even to topple the entire Iwagakure government. A secret conspiracy, aimed at the heart of the ninja world.

And nobody knew about it, except her.

"Will the Tsuchikage tolerate this kind of behavior from his ally?" Sakura asked.

The rain missing-nin with purple eyes shrugged. "The Tsuchikage won't know."

"After I eatttss you," Zetsu added.

>You should have eaten me as soon as you appeared. They were appallingly arrogant. Gloating to explain their dastardly plot was a sign of overconfidence…. both foolish and naive. She desperately hoped that her own expectations for rescue were not equally foolish. *She must come now. If she does not come I am lost.* Sakura only hoped that her protector was actually watching. I've got to stall for time, as much as possible.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "What do you people want?"

The man smiled. "I'm the leader of Akatsuki."

That threw her for a loop. "You're not Orochimaru."

"Come now, girl, do you really believe that? The White Snake was a high-ranking member of Akatsuki at one time, many years ago… but never the one in charge. And he has not even been affiliated with Akatsuki since Uchiha Itachi joined. Or can it possibly be that you buy the Queen Bitch's propaganda? That Akatsuki was responsible for the December 7th attack? Don't be naive. Pure lies for public consumption, allowing Tsunade to rally support in Konoha for her agenda against us." The rain missing-nin walked so close to Sakura that she could almost have reached out and bit her teeth down on the man's toes, if she could only move her head. "As for what I want? Well... I want peace. Peace by destroying the ninja world."

Sakura had nothing to fight back with except the chakra in her head. Some sort of genjutsu? She tried to use Sleep against the man, an utterly absurd gesture against someone who was undoubtedly an S-rank ninja. The man only laughed. "Little girl, you have some fighting spirit. But this is really quite boring." He gestured behind him with a flick of his wrist. "Sougon Sosano. In the name of the New Dawn, I command you. Kill Haruno Sakura at once."

Sosano stood and opened his eyes. He seemed not at all conscious of what he was doing, but his body moved nonetheless, the palm of his hand stretching out toward her, his eyes beginning to burn gold. *Bakudan.* Bad, bad, it was all bad. Sakura could not move. And even if she did, how could she escape? She was surrounded by four of the strongest ninjas in the world, who all wanted to kill her.

Was it too late, am I wrong? Was it all over?

Sosano's eyes blazed—

"Tsunade-sensei!" Sakura screamed.
A flash of light.

Sakura was thrown backwards. The ground exploding into a golden haze in the very spot where her body had been lying. The rain missing-nin with the iron rods in his face, leaping on top of the Reverie Tree. Zetsu, shrieking in cholerical rage. A crackle of blue lightning flashing across the cold air, hitting Sosano right in the chest, and another one that blasted the Third Lock to smithereens. It all happened so fast. Somehow Sakura could feel motion returning to her limbs, the spores in her body deactivating. When Sakura looked up, a woman in white robes was standing in front of her, her face as hard as a weathered root.

"You sure waited until the last second," accused Sakura.

"I needed to develop a counter for the spores first. I could hardly be much help if I was infected myself." The Fifth Hokage turned to stare at two Akatsuki ninjas standing under the Reverie Tree. "A clever trick, compromising the Second Trial. I did not see it coming. Nor the Tsuchikage, it seems. All would be lost if not for you, Sakura. I ran a Nerve Disruption jutsu through your body below the neck, which should have disabled the spores there. It's not a permanent cure, but it will serve."

"What about Sosa?"

"I knocked him out with a lightning bolt. Doi Dragonsight as well. Brain infections will not be so easy to root out, and I could not take the chance they would fight against us in the battle."

The man who called himself the leader of Akatsuki smiled. He seemed not surprised at all that the Hokage had showed up. "Tsunade. Did I smoke your real body out from its hiding place, at last? You would not even come out to fight me in the open at Caiaden, during the Battle of Darkness Barrier, yet here you are, risking all, for a little shinobi girl. How ironic. It's been eight years now since that day, hasn't it?"

"I remember," the Hokage said. "How could I ever forget your dreadfully ugly face, Nagato?"
The Akatsuki missing-nin called Nagato laughed. "Tsunade... I feared you forgot all about me. All this business about Orochimaru being the leader of Akatsuki-him, of all people! I felt most disrespected."

"That was the point."

Zetsu laughed. "You cannnnot hopess to win, Queen Bitch. Two against one."

"I count four of us." Tsunade stretched out a hand to help Sakura to her feet. "Do exactly what I say, girl. One false move and we will both be killed."

Sakura paled, her heart racing, sweat flowing down her face, even in the cold mountain wind. Yet she unsheathed her chakra-cast kunai anyway. *The Fifth means to fight, here and now*. Sakura and her sensei against two S-rank Akatsuki ninjas. There was no choice; they could hardly abandon both Sosano and Doi to the mercies of Akatsuki. *Or Rock Lee.*

Yet the orange-haired rain-nin seemed to prefer to talk rather than fight. "Come, Tsunade. Are you really going to ask your little apprentice girl to fight your battles for you? After what happened the first time we met. Why, she even looks like the first one. Oh, the way you sobbed and cried over her dead corpse. I almost felt bad about stabbing her in the heart."

The Hokage's eyes were as cold as the glacial ice under their feet. "I've not forgotten, Nagato."

"Oh, you do not like that, do you? The past, being dredged up? How all your little apprentices seem to die so young and tragically? What was her name? The pretty black-haired bitch. Started with a… Shiera, was it?"

"No."

"Something like that."

"*Sakura.*" The Hokage glanced at her out of the corner of her eye. "Sakura, you must do what I say. Do you understand? I do not have time to explain everything. We must fight as one, if we are to have any chance to prevail."

"I understand."

"Then now! Protect the others!"

Zetsu leaped at them across the cold icy void, black thorns sprouting from his hands, but the Hokage inflicted the first blow. "Torment!" she called.

Torment, the most powerful genjutsu in existence. The jutsu of insanity that drew its power from the Shinigami itself. The Hokage did not hold back—the genjutsu hit both of the Akatsuki ninjas with its full force. Zetsu froze in midair, his face twisted into a grotesque expression of madness. His mouth gaping wide open, as if he was screaming, but no sound came out.

Nagato only laughed.

"Please, Tsunade. That's the third time you've tried to use Torment against me… it will hardly work again. Not against these eyes. You should have finished me the first time."
"And you should have finished me the second time."

"Touché."

The fallen Zetsu dissolved, fading into a puddle of sap and rotting compost. A clone! Another Zetsu emerged from the ground behind Sakura, and then another. Another. Three partial Zetsu clones, each of them bone-white from head to toe. "Dieees!" they hissed, and ran at her.

Sakura punched the first Zetsu in the face, splattering it into a lump of white goo. Then she slowed down the remaining clones with a Binding genjutsu, then cut off them at the last second, charging her chakra-cast kunai with explosive earth element chakra. She threw her kunai at the Zetsu clones and blew them away with the force of a wrecking ball.

Yet more Zetsu were sprouting from the ground even as she fought. Dozens of them, smoking venom dripping from their long forked tongues.

Sakura made the hand seal for Mirrored Clone. Four mud clones sprang into existence around her. But when she tried to make the chakra connection to their minds, nothing happened. I can't chakra sense at all, Sakura realized. When she looked back toward the Reverie Tree, where the one ninja Nagato had once stood, now there were six ninjas. Six ninjas in the white and red robes of Akatsuki, each of them with the same black metal rods piercing through their faces. Each of them with the same purple eyes.

One of the ninjas was making some kind of anti-chakra field. Absorbing the excess chakra from the air, preventing Sakura from using Mirrored Clone, or any other kind of chakra projection field.

"Don't bother with clones!" she heard her sensei shout. "Open as many Chakra Gates as you can!"

Right! Sakura concentrated, focusing on the Eight Gates within her chakra circulatory system. With each gate she opened, the more chakra she would be able to release through her tenketsu, but at the cost of irreparable damage to her own cells. The most Sakura had ever opened before was four—her limit. There was no choice but to do so again. No holding back, not now.

Four Chakra Gates.

A tidal wave of chakra flooded through Sakura's entire body. Power overwhelming, power infinite—and a sharp gasping pain as well. But there was no time to think about the pain. There was only time for action.

Sakura punched the ground with her fist.

The glacial ice exploded. The Dreamstone Glacier under her feet shattered into a deep crater, a storm of sound and snow and obliterated ice. The white Zetsu clones were swallowed by the sheer force of the attack, shrieking in rage. Sakura almost fell down herself. The Reverie Tree shook violently, thin petrified branches crashing to the ground.

"Oh, impressive." Nagato chuckled. "I can see why you like your apprentice so much, Tsunade. But still only an apprentice." The Akatsuki leader raised his hands. "Let me show you what true destruction is. Shinra Tensei!"

Heavenly Subjugation.

A wave of force exploded from his body.

It was like nothing Sakura had ever seen before. Not an elemental jutsu, nor a chakra jutsu. But
something that altered the fabric of space and time itself, bending the laws of the universe to its own purposes. The sheer power of the attack ripped apart the glacier at Nagato's feet and created a vacuum wind out of the icy air, a howling storm of divine fury. Sakura could only stare as the wave of Shinra Tensei rushed toward her. Far too large to dodge—

"Black Hole!"

The Shinra Tensei stopped.

It stopped right in front of Sakura, as if falling over an invisible edge, and disappeared.

No, not invisible. Black. The edge was black, a small floating circle in space. A circle that represented absolutely nothingness—an event horizon from which no light could escape. And within that miniature circle was the gravitational singularity called a Black Hole.

The edge of the hole was so close that Sakura could reach out and brush it with her fingertips, if she'd wanted. She did not. Next to her, the Fifth Hokage had stretched out both hands, her breath strained with the effort of using such a high-level technique.

The Akatsuki leader only laughed. "Ah, a new jutsu, Tsunade? Using a singularity to absorb the attractive force of my Shinra Tensei. Very clever." He walked forward, untroubled. The other five Akatsuki ninjas around Nagato stepped forward as well. Marching in lockstep.

Who are they? wondered Sakura. And why don't they say anything?

"Did you think you were the only one to get stronger?" replied the Hokage. "You may have learned how to counter Torment… but I can counter Shinra Tensei."

"A feeble counter. And no match for my Rinnegan."

The Rinnegan?

Sakura frowned. The Rinnegan, or Samsara Eye, was the bloodline doujutsu of the Sage of Six Paths, supposedly granting the power to control life and death. Shrouded in myth and legend, many believed that the Rinnegan had never really existed. Could the Akatsuki Leader possess such a bloodline? Nagato's eyes were a fathomless purple, concentric ripples that poured away into the bright dot of golden light at their center.

The Hokage saw the question in Sakura's face. "The Rinnegan? So he claims… I do not know. There is no doubt Yoshimoto Nagato is very dangerous. Do you see the jutsu he's using? It's called the Six Paths of Pain. The other ninjas around him are only corpses, mindless manifestations controlled by his eyes. Each corpse has the ability to use a specific, unique jutsu."

"How do we stop them?"

"I will deal with Nagato personally… while you watch my back. Zetsu is still hiding underground somewhere. You must smoke him out into the open."

Nagato chuckled. "Well, you can try."

One of the Akatsuki ninjas next to Nagato slammed his palms to the ground.

A summoning jutsu!

"Immortal Summoning!"
A giant multi-headed dog appeared in a puff of smoke. The chimeric beast was so huge that each of its dozen heads was bigger than the trunk of the Reverie Tree, so heavy that the Dreamstone Glacier cracked beneath its weight. It roared, and acid drool dripped from its fangs like rain.

At the same moment, another of Nagato's bodies launched a barrage of mechanical rockets.

And two of Nagato's other bodies leapt into the air, black rods flying from their fists.

And Nagato used Shinra Tensei again.

And a swarm of screeching black thorns rose from the ice around them.

Zetsu!

His Black Thorn Maze jutsu closed in on Sakura. Sakura remembered the jutsu from the attack on Honjo Laboratory, and from the Battle of Red Rock Cliff. But this time she was far stronger. *Four Chakra Gates open*. Chakra sloughed from her body in waves, making her eyes and mouth glow with pure energy. The chakra-cast kunai in her hands were burning hot, white torches of light. She whipped her kunai at the maze of thorns and cut them down whenever they got near.

"Fool leaf-nin girl," hissed a voice. "Dare you challenge *meeeee*? I am Zetsu!"

A grotesque thing rose from the ice. A creature made of bark and poison thorns, his black-and-white face enclosed in the jaws of a gigantic Venus flytrap.

A *Zetsu clone*. Sakura was sure of it. The real Zetsu was still hiding underground. *He's afraid of Torment... he doesn't dare show his true body.*

"And I am a kunoichi of Konoha," she said.

She rushed at the Zetsu clone, her muscles supercharged with chakra, and punched the thing in the gut. Zetsu flew backwards across the ice, a gaping hole in his stomach. Yet the grass missing-nin only tittered. "Sssilly girl. I am immortal! I am *Juhijin*, the undying servant of the New Dawn!" A dozen more Zetsu clones sprouted from the forest of black thorns which now covered the base of the Ice Spear. Dark green swords grew from their hands, smoking venom.

Meanwhile Tsunade-sensei was fighting Nagato.

She had summoned Katsuyu—the full Katsuyu—to deal with Nagato's multiple headed dog. The giant white-and-blue slug was battling the dog chimera over the ruins of the Reverie Tree, avalanches of snow and ice crashing around them like waves. Tsunade and Nagato fought in close quarters amidst the carnage. Nagato's Six Paths of Pain were everywhere, it seemed, attacking from all sides in a barrage of rockets and lasers and metal rods and Shinra Tensei. Tsunade countered with mud clones of her own, with Black Holes and lightning jutsu and genjutsu and with her fists.

**Gentaijutsu**, Sakura knew, the Hokage's unique fighting style which combined genjutsu and taijutsu in one. With every physical blow, Tsunade attacked simultaneously with many different genjutsu, spanning them in order to distract and slow down Nagato's reaction time. It was an incredibly difficult technique. Sakura recognized some of the genjutsu, but others were ones she had never learned, and all were thrown at a strength that Sakura could not hope to duplicate. *Tsunade-sensei's opened her Chakra Gates, too.*

The Akatsuki Leader was more than keeping up. Tsunade's focus was directed against Nagato's main body, but he blocked all her attacks, then countered with jutsu of his own. Sakura had never seen such a high-level battle; yet the two were evenly matched. One of Nagato's bodies thrust a black
rod into Tsunade's heart, only for her to turn into a mud clone. When the clone exploded, another of Nagato's bodies absorbed the energy with his special anti-chakra field. Then Tsunade ripped the missile-firing body apart with a lightning Rail Gun, but somehow the body was resurrected by yet another. Deadly jutsu flew everywhere, shaking the very foundation of the Ice Spear itself. A life and death struggle.

It didn't help that Zetsu kept on interfering.

Zetsu seemed to have an unlimited supply of clones. They sprouted from his Black Thorn Maze jutsu, attacking Tsunade and Sakura both, endless swarms of them. With Tsunade distracted by having to fight Nagato, that might make all the difference.

And…

_He's trying to steal away Sosano!_

Sougon Sosano, Rock Lee, and Haghira Doi all lay unconscious on Katsuyu's back. Nestled within the giant slug's protective skin. The Hokage had put them there in order to protect them during the battle. But now Zetsu clones were climbing up Katsuyu's sides. If Akatsuki got its hands on Sosano…

Sakura rushed to intercept the Zetsu clones. Leaping onto Katsuyu's back, she held the Zetsu back with her chakra-cast kunai. A giant rocket flew at her from above. She grabbed Sosano, Lee, and Doi in her arms and leapt away just before the rocket exploded in the place she had been. Smoke poured from a crater on the giant slug's slimy back—though the wound healed quickly, tiny versions of Katsuyu budding off her main body to fill in the hole. "Katsuyu!" she shouted. "Can you get them away from the battle?"

"Not with these Zetsu everywhere!" answered the Queen of the Scar.

_So we've got to take Zetsu out first._

That was what Tsunade-sensei had told her, wasn't it? _Smoke him out into the open…_ then Tsunade would eliminate him with Torment. But how?

Then she looked down at Sosano's motionless body, and she knew.

_To make smoke, first you need to start a fire._

And what better place to start a fire than the Dreamstone Glacier itself?

"Katsuyu, I need you to help me channel some chakra!"

"That, I can do."

Sakura pressed her palms into the slug's back. Chakra poured down her arms and into Katsuyu's body. The giant slug's molecular structure was unique, able to facilitate and even amplify any chakra that passed through it, like a frictionless superconductor. Perfect for her plan.

"What now, Sakura-chan?" asked Katsuyu.

"We melt the ice. All of it."

Sakura concentrated, sending a pulse of chakra though Katsuyu's body to the glacier far below her. Chakra was energy, and energy was heat. Sosano's Blast Wave had taught her that lesson all too
well. Yet she did not want to melt only the ice on the surface of the Dreamstone Glacier. **Zetsu is hiding far underground, in the Frozen Forest.** She had to melt the deepest levels of the glacier… superheat it, all at once. Force Zetsu to come to the surface.

So she spun her chakra into long strings, threaded them into the shape of drills, boring deep into the frozen ice. Then from each chakra drill she created smaller, sideways branches, branching them out like a web. Katsuyu helped her. Without the giant slug's power, it would have been impossible to create such a large chakra web, even with four Chakra Gates open. **Now I only have to set it off.**

"Oh, no, no," laughed a mocking voice. "It won't be that easy, little girl."

Sakura looked up to see the Akatsuki Leader standing before her.

Yoshimoto Nagato grinned. **"Shinra Tensei."**

Sakura tried to dodge backwards, but the attack was far too fast, too powerful. The Shinra Tensei hit Sakura like a hundred sledgehammers and slammed her into Katsuyu—

A flash of light.

The Hokage was there.

Carrying her away, teleporting her away from the Shinra Tensei just before it would have crushed every bone in Sakura's body into powder. Sakura rolled hard into the base of the Reverie Tree, stunned but alive. The Hokage had teleported Sosano, Lee, and Doi there, too.

Katsuyu was not so lucky. She blew up into a thousand pieces, little mini-slugs scattered all over the battlefield like so many white maggots. Some of the slugs tried to slither together, reform into a larger Katsuyu, but they curled up and died even as Sakura watched.

Nagato did not let up his attack for a moment. He surrounded the Reverie Tree with his Six Paths of Pain, blasting them from all sides with lethal jutsu. Zetsu helped out with his Black Thorn Maze. It was all Tsunade could do to keep the Akatsuki ninjas at bay; even her best defensive jutsu, like Black Hole and Diamond Wall, were barely enough. Then Nagato's giant multi-headed dog summon attacked, climbing on top of the remains of the Reverie Tree. Tsunade grabbed the beast's fangs with her bare hands just before it closed its jaws on Sakura's head. Blood ran down her sensei's arms, boiling with acid.

"Now, girl!" her sensei shouted. "Do it, now!"

Sakura released all the chakra that she had been flowing through her body.

It was a massive charge of earth chakra-flow—the bomb she had been preparing throughout the battle. She channeled that energy down into the glacier, surging it through the network of chakra drills she'd woven through the ice. It exploded all at once.

*The biggest damn punch anyone ever threw.*

The base of the Ice Spear turned into an ocean of steaming water.

A plant-like creature leaped up out of the steam, screaming in rage, smoking burns on its white-and-black face. It landed on the Reverie Tree next to Sakura, trying to strike her down with poison thorns. "*You—!*" it shrieked. "*You—bitch—I'll eat your—*"

"*Torment,*" said Tsunade.
Zetsu, Akatsuki second-in-command, froze in mid-motion.

And did not move.

_Tsunade-sensei got him!_ thought Sakura. She had been right… Zetsu could not stay hidden in such scalding temperatures. And once she’d forced Zetsu's real body to come to the surface, the Hokage had finished him in a single shot.

All of Zetsu's clones disappeared along with his broken soul. His web of thorns vanished as well, decomposing rapidly into dirt. The giant multi-headed dog sank beneath the steaming water. Real dogs could swim, but not that one. It gave a piteous whine, struggling to keep its dozen heads above the surface, and then was gone. The Hokage helped Sakura to her feet. The black petrified wood of what had once been the Reverie Tree floated in the water all around them.

Nagato laughed.

"Oops," he said. "You killed Zetsu. Now I've got to make another one."

"So that _thing_ was an experiment?" Tsunade spat blood from her mouth. "A vile abomination."

"I would not throw stones in a glass house. As I understand it, every time you use the Torment genjutsu successfully, the Death God takes a piece of your soul. Tell me, Tsunade. How much of your soul do you actually have left?"

"More than you, Nagato."

The Rain missing-nin laughed again. His six bodies still surrounded the Reverie Tree on every side. They stepped closer, making ripples on the steaming water. Sakura and the Hokage faced him together, back to back. At Sakura's feet, Sosano's unconscious body floated on a piece of wood. She clutched her chakra-cast kunai tightly in her hands. "This is pointless," she whispered. "You won't win. Why you are doing this?"

"For the New Dawn." Nagato's purple Rinnegan eyes gleamed. "For peace in our time. Peace forever."

"By killing everyone with the Annihilation Device?"

"Well, not everyone."

"You're insane."

Nagato shrugged. "You know nothing about me, little ape girl. Or the Rain Country… or even the past of your own sensei. If you did, perhaps you would not fear the destruction of the ninja system. Perhaps… you would even join us."

"Why don't you join the United Countries?"

"_You are_ more amusing than the last apprentice." He grinned and turned to Tsunade. "Well… it seems that our fight is at a stalemate. I fully intended to kill you today, Tsunade… alas, you're quite persistent. We must continue another day. Still… it would be remiss of me if I did not leave you a… parting gift."

"Really, there's no need."

"Oh, but I insist. What kind of fight would it be, if I did not use my strongest jutsu?"
**His strongest jutsu?**

"Planetary Devastation!"

Nagato's five corpse bodies disappeared in a puff of smoke, unsummoned. From his remaining body, he threw a strange black sphere high into the air. With the anti-chakra field gone, Sakura could sense the power emanating from it. The power was indescribably vast, and the effects—

"Hold on!" shouted the Hokage.

The black sphere seemed to be creating a vacuum, sucking everything in the surrounding area toward it. Not only petrified wood and water, but even the outer stone face of the Ice Spear itself, the landscape of the Gorge of Stones. The vacuum effect was incredibly strong. Sakura herself would have been pulled straight through the air, except that the Hokage grabbed her leg and used a Black Hole to shield them from the worst of it. As it was, even with a Black Hole between them and the black sphere, they could barely hold on.

Everything else was being sucked into the sphere. Huge chunks of rock were torn right out of the mountains, and entire petrified trees were ripped out by the roots. All the ice that Sakura had turned to water was compressed by the extreme pressure back to ice again, adding even more mass to Nagato's jutsu.

Within moments, the black sphere could no longer be seen.

No, not a sphere.

A comet. A gigantic ball of rock and ice and petrified wood floating in the sky, hundreds of meters in diameter and weighing something like a million tons.

Nagato floated in the air next to his monstrous creation. "Do you like my present? Here, I'll give you a closer look!"

"He's going to drop it on us!" shouted Tsunade.

"What?"

"Get down! And protect the others!"

The comet down hurtled toward them, falling with the unstoppable force of all its immense mass. A strike of this magnitude would not only destroy the Ice Spear, but possibly the entire Gorge of Stones and everything in it. *Planetary Devastation*. The Hokage created another Black Hole in the path of the falling comet. A very large one, though not nearly as large as the comet.

Sakura gathered the unconscious Sosano, Lee, and Doi to her. Enveloped them in a protective chakra field. When she looked up, Senju Tsunade the Queen of Torment was surrounded by a blinding storm of energy. "Seven Gates!" shouted the Hokage. And then, "Yin Seal: Release!"

The purple diamond in the center of her forehead began to glow. Releasing all the chakra that had been stored there over many years—greatly amplifying the power of all the Hokage's jutsu. Added to the power of seven Chakra Gates... was it enough to stop Nagato's Planetary Devastation?

The falling comet collided with Tsunade's Black Hole. Just the sheer force of the crash was so great that it generated a supersonic wave of light and heat. Most of the energy was absorbed by the invisible edges of the Black Hole, yet some leaked out over it, scalding at Sakura's face. Even when Sakura closed her eyes her vision was filled with a blinding radiance. *Is this the true power of the*
Rinnegan?

The true power the Sage of Six Paths?

Yet Tsunade was holding her ground. Desperately, barely, but she was. The comet came no closer to
them… and slowly, gradually, as the surface of the comet continued to grind against the blank
nothingness of the Black Hole, it began to break apart. Shattering into smaller chunks that could be
absorbed by the Black Hole, or crumbling into dust that blew away across the Gorge of Stones.

And at last the Planetary Devastation was no more.

The Fifth Hokage of Konoha stood in the midst of a smoking landscape of carnage. She was covered
in deep burns, her white robes in blackened tatters. On her forehead, the purple Yin Seal had
disappeared, all its stored chakra exhausted. Yet for all that she was unbowed, unbroken.

Undefeated.

Yoshitomo Nagato floated to the ground a few meters away. Dark ripples washed over the purple
Rinnegan eyes of the Akatsuki Leader. "The New Dawn arrives… soon. We shall meet again,
Tsunade."

He was gone in a puff of smoke.

Sakura climbed to her feet. The Hokage was breathing in ragged gasps, all her chakra drained by the
battle. A distortion passed over her face. *Tsunade-sensei's transformation jutsu is about to collapse.*
The Hokage was over fifty years in age, yet to look at her, she seemed not a day over twenty-five. *A
disguise to hid her true face, maintained by constant chakra.* But the Hokage's chakra was gone.

Sakura wondered what her sensei's real face looked like.

She did not get the opportunity to see.

The Hokage turned away; and when she looked back a moment later, the purple diamond Yin Seal
had returned to her forehead. Sakura thought she knew what had happened—the Hokage had
canceled one of her mud clones, returning its chakra back to the original body. "It's done," said Senju
Tsunade. "You did well today, Sakura."

Sakura looked down at the bodies of Sosano, Doi, and Lee atop the stump of the Reverie Tree. That
stump was all that remained of their immediate surroundings. Nagato's Planetary Devastation jutsu
had sucked away all the ice and water, all the layers of loose surface rock, leaving only emptiness its
wake. Before her the Ice Spear still stood, but everywhere else the ground descended into a deep
crater, a long ugly scar that ran down the side of the ancient mountain. Even the ancient withertrees
of the Frozen Forest had been utterly consumed. Pieces of twisted, melted metal littered the ruin of
what had once been the Reverie Tree. For a moment she didn't know where the metal had come
from. Then she recognized the Third Lock.

No, Sakura had not done well at all. But she'd promised Dr. Micho she would live… and that was
more than could be said of some.

*I survived.*

The Second Trial of the 54th Iwa Chuunin Exam was over.

"Tsunade-sensei," she whispered.
"What?"

"Tsunade-sensei… you lied."

"Yes."

"About the December 7th Attack, about Akatsuki. About everything."

Sakura saw the Hokage's face flicker, like a dying lightbulb, but the transformation held. "Not everything."

"And Gai-sama?"

"Maito Gai is a martyr of Konoha."

_So it's true. It's true just like Anake said._ "You ordered him to sacrifice his soul to the Asylum. You gave him up to Hanzou the Reaper. How could you do that to him?"

The Hokage looked away, to the east; back the way they'd come. "We must return to Iwa at once. Akatsuki has infected dozens of ninjas with neuro-spores, and they must be stopped before it's too late." She gestured to the bodies of Sougon Sosano and Haghira Doi. "And before they wake up. Akatsuki's brazen attack will be like a match thrown on a pile of kindling. The Iwa High Council cannot ignore Akatsuki's treachery… if the alliance between the Confederacy and Akatsuki is broken, then the entire political situation in Iwa is changed. There may yet be an opportunity to avoid open war."

"Tsunade-sensei. You didn't answer my question."

"Why I did it? Do you really want to know, girl?"

"Tell me."

"Because I am the Fifth Hokage of Konoha," she said, and her eyes were as clear and cold as ice.
Rock Lee lay asleep in the south patient ward of Kindness Hospital, a white blanket pulled over his body to hide the fact that he no longer had legs.

When Sakura came to pay her respects, she found that Neji was already there.

His eyes were as blank as ice. He looked at her with those eyes, and did not speak.

"I'm sorry," she said at last.

"I know." Neji turned back to stare at the sleeping face of his teammate. His only surviving teammate, thought Sakura. "I thought he was dead."

"Neji…"

"During the battle in Fuwa Valley, when we were separated. It looked bad… real bad. I guess I gave up on him. He was alone… injured. I didn't think Lee would ever make it to the end of the Trial. Maybe he'd go out in a blaze of glory, like he always wanted. But I never imagined it would turn out like this. Rock Lee… a cripple. Never to walk again. Never to run and to chase fireflies in the Steam Gardens, to leap from tree to tree in Shadowspring Forest and catch the leaves as they fall. The damn grinning idiot. Tell me true, Sakura. Who did this?"

"I did."

"No. You saved his life."

"If I'd been a better medic-nin, maybe I could have saved Lee's legs, too."

Hyuuga Neji did not deny it. "If I had been stronger, maybe I could have protected him. We shall both live with our regrets. But I asked you a question, Sakura. Who did this?" His voice was very cold. "Who hurt my best friend?"

"Onira Kawai of Waterfall."

"Kawai of Waterfall." Neji said the name very slowly, as if savoring the taste. "Then Lee's enemy lives. If I face him during the Third Trial, I'll kill him. And the frog boy Aumono as well, and his grandfather, when I get the chance. I swear it. I'll have vengeance on them all."

It is all he thinks about, Sakura thought. Revenge. Revenge for Tenten, for Gai-sama, for Lee. Neji means to avenge them all, by any means necessary.

When would it stop?

Sakura did not know. Sakura was not sure if she wanted it to stop.

"What did the doctors say?" she asked. "About Lee's condition?"

"Chief Micho says he'll live. There are certain prosthetics that can give cripples a measure of mobility. Puppet implants from Suna, even. Medical technology has come a long way, and Konoha will spare no expense. But Lee can never fight again."

It was as she expected. "He didn't wake?"
"No."

Evidently, Neji intended to wait by Rock Lee's bedside until such time as this occurred. Sakura wondered if she should join him. *Lee loves me, doesn't he? I ought to be here for him.* But that had been before. Before the battle in the Cathedral of Hearts, before Rock Lee had screamed at her to stop, to let him die, before Sakura had raised Sosano's katana over Rock Lee's helpless body, the edge glowing white hot, and before she amputated his legs in a single stroke at the waist.

*He'll never have children,* she thought. The realization made Sakura sadder than she could say. *He'll never be able to love a woman, not as a normal man would.* The poison had spread so far up Lee's legs and into his torso that Sakura had to make the cut right through key organs. Lee's rectum was gone, as well as his genitals and part of his bladder. No doubt some reconstructive surgery could be performed… but in the final analysis, someone would have to nurse Lee every day of his life. Lee would need help clothing himself, performing routine household chores, and even going to the bathroom.

"Neji," she said softly. "Neji… will he…"

"Go, Sakura," he said. "Lee will understand. He finally understands you, now. Go."

Sakura went.

She went to find Chief of Medicine Honjo Micho. The kindly old doctor was practically living in Kindness Hospital these days, attending to the needs of the genin injured in the chuunin exam, and Sakura owed him much for that, for all he'd done for her and her friends. Much and more, she owed. I promised him that I would live.

Micho smiled when he saw her, running a hand through his shock of white hair. "Sakura. Are you all right?"

"I didn't suffer any serious injuries during the Second Trial."

A truly unbelievable fact, considering the number of times she'd almost died. The most serious had been the infection by Zetsu's neuro-spores which had taken control of her body, but the United Countries doctors were quite knowledgeable about neuro-spores by now. It had only been a matter of hours before they had whipped up an antidote and flushed the spores from Sakura's system, as well as all the other genin who had been infected by the final Third Lock—including Temari and Kankuro. The Sand Siblings had not been happy, to say the least. Sakura herself was good as new, or as well as she could be, given the deterioration in her muscles from her use of the Chakra Gates.

The same could not be said of the political situation in Iwa. A great uproar had arisen among all parties over what Akatsuki had done. Haghira Doi had been particularly aggrieved, his pride in designing the perfect chuunin exam no doubt pricked by the events which had overtaken both of the first two Trials, first the earthquake and now an Akatsuki plot. He was said to be furious at the Tsuchikage for daring to involve and hire Akatsuki in his machinations, and Sougon Sawar was none too happy as well. *Yoshitomo Nagato took control of his own precious son, right under his nose.*

Sosano himself had been as nonplussed as Sakura had ever seen, when he'd woken up. No doubt nothing like this had ever happened to him in his life.

"I remember nothing," he had told her.

"The neuro-spores hijacked your brain. You wouldn't have formed any lasting memories."
"It was as if I was asleep. As if I'd died."

"Death is rather more permanent, I would think."

The stone-nin boy smiled at that. "Thank you, Sakura. For saving me."

A warm flush crept up Sakura's face even as she thought of it. Even now, after all she'd learned about Sosano, he could still make her heart flutter. *He makes me feel as if I'm strong.* Yet feelings were dangerous, she knew. Especially for someone like Sougon Sosano. *I love him, but I cannot trust him.*

Sakura had learned that lesson all too well, in the Second Trial. The rain-nin Mukai Aumono had fought by her side, but he'd kept secrets from her, betrayed her. Shimura Anake was a fellow shinobi of Konoha, but Anake had betrayed her as well. *Like Sasuke betrayed me.* She could not trust any of them.

Not even her sensei.

"I'm glad you were not injured," said Honjo Micho softly. A sad expression played across his gruff, craggy face. "But it was not physical suffering I was speaking of, Sakura. As your doctor, and your friend, I must ask you again. Are you all right?"

Sakura looked away. "No."

"Then you are still human," said the doctor. "The pain means you are still alive."

When she didn't say anything, Micho moved over to open the curtains over the window by his desk. Summer light slanted through the tall glass windows of Kindness Hospital and draped the walls of Micho's makeshift office in golden splendor. In the dim shadows, Honjo Micho had seemed half a ghost, his doctor's coat pale as mist. But now in the light Sakura saw that Micho's white coat was soiled with dry brown stains; whether it was coffee or blood, Sakura could not tell.

For a long moment the old doctor did not speak. And then he said, "The Fifth is human, too, though I confess sometimes it is hard to tell. Tsunade is of the old generation… my generation. There are not many of us left, I fear. Most lost to the battlefield, even more to grief and ashes. It is a wonder that any of us survived. Do you know how we did it? By keeping secrets. By hiding the past from ourselves, and burying it away so that we would not have to face it." Honjo Micho the Manslayer closed his eyes; his glasses gleamed in the light like golden mirrors. "Perhaps we thought that we were protecting you. But it is not right to ask children to risk their lives in battle, yet withhold from them the truth for which they fight. Ask any question of me, Sakura. I promise, I shall not deny you."

"Micho-sama," whispered Sakura. "Did you know?"

"About Gai?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"The United Countries. Amegakure has never been an enemy to Konoha, in truth. Tsunade and Hanzou planned the assault on Akatsuki at Darkness Barrier together, even as negotiations for a more permanent alliance were ongoing. But military cooperation is a far cry from ceding sovereignty to the United Countries."

"So Tsunade-sensei lied."
"An omission of the truth. There was no danger of Hanzou aiding the Confederacy. If he had not joined the United Countries, he would have taken no side at all. But Tsunade needed someone to join; a first signatory to the charter, besides the Fire Country itself. Elsewise the whole thing would have been a bloody farce."

*She sacrificed Gai-sama for a piece of paper. "Was there no other way?"

"There is always another way," said Honjo Micho gruffly. "Hanzou wanted vengeance for his son, yes. But a man wants many things. The Reaper of Rain demanded Maito Gai's life, yet I wonder… what if Tsunade had offered him another sop instead? Danzou the Termite was far more guilty than Gai, and more important. Yet Tsunade could not move against Danzou without plunging Konoha into a civil war. That was not a price she was willing to pay. No more than she was willing to leave the Rain Country without Hanzou's signature."

"So… so what are you saying? That Gai-sama's life was the cheapest price to pay?"

"Life is never cheap, Sakura. Yet when you weigh the scales of the world, there must come a point of decision. A time when you must choose. Kill the girl, and let the woman be born. What is one life, against a thousand? What is one life, against the fate of the entire world?"

*A shinobi protects his comrades, or he is no shinobi at all.*

"Everything," whispered Sakura.

Dr. Honjo Micho the Manslayer did not reply. Instead he turned away to look out of the window, letting the light which reflected off the Overlook stream into his face. For a long time he did not move.

When he turned back at last, Sakura saw with shock that he was crying.

The tears poured down his lined, craggy face like they were carving channels into his flesh. They dripped down his cheeks and splattered onto his stained white coat like rain. The old doctor made no attempt to wipe them away. Micho's eyes looked at her then; kindly gray eyes, grandfatherly eyes, but when they stared at her, now, she saw something else. Beneath the tears, something very hard. *The eyes of a man who has killed more people than he can count.*

"Micho-sama?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, Sakura." He shook his head, trying to smile. "I suppose that I'm not all right, either."

She had to ask the question. "Do you… do you think it was justified? What the Hokage did?"

"I don't know. Perhaps Tsunade does not know herself." Micho sat down at his desk and buried his face in his hands. "Gai was my friend. My comrade, more than you can imagine. Would you have the full story now? You need only ask."

"No." Sakura took his hands gently. "Soon, but not now. You ought to rest, Micho-sama. Please."

"You are very kind, Sakura." The old doctor was still crying. "Return to me when you are ready."

"I shall," she said, and left him there.

Sakura had only one other errand to fulfill in Kindness Hospital. Not in the offices, and not in the patient wards.
The hospital morgue.

The undertakers did not bar her way, when she asked to see Shimura Anake's corpse.

They pulled it out from a refrigerator, a body on a metal slab. Sakura was surprised to see it was still intact; The chuunin examiners must have rescued the corpse from Senso-ji Temple just in time. But there it was, in all its glory, the corpse of the boy with blue eyes and a smirking face, the boy who had always made a joke about everyone and everything.

The boy who had tried to kill them all with an eye implanted in his forehead, a doujutsu made of stolen souls.

"What did they do to you?" she wondered aloud.

Anake had been experimented on, that was plain. His naked body was covered in surgical scars and even his internal organs had been grossly disfigured. The people who had done this had seemingly tried to implant eyes all over his chest and torso. There were dozens of failed eyes, tumorous mounds of hairy white eye-flesh, weeping tears of pus. He must've only been a little boy when they had started the experiments.

Even with all her medic-nin training, the sight made Sakura want to retch.

Danzou must have known, she thought. He must have ordered it. ROOT was infamous in Konoha for its dark forays into medical research using live subjects. There was many a horror tale of a disfigured cat with a human hand grafted on it, or an enemy captive who disappeared mysteriously, only to show up in the morgue with pieces of his brain missing. Yet even so… Sakura had not expected anything like this. Just a little boy, and the Termite's own grandson.

What had Danzou intended to do? Develop a secret weapon? Create a new bloodline, as the Onira clan of Waterfall had done? What ghastly purpose could be worth sacrificing the life and body of his own grandson?

*What is one life, against a thousand?* whispered the voice of Honjo Micho in her head. *What is one life, against the fate of the entire world?*

Micho had not been talking about Shimura Anake, though. He had been talking about Maito Gai.

"It's wrong," Sakura said, staring at the mutilated corpse of Anake on the metal slab. "It's wrong." Her voice seemed to gather strength with each repetition. "It's wrong, what ROOT did to you. Some things should never be done."

"Child," croaked the voice of Koharu Utatane the Sleeper.

Sakura turned to see the old hag of a woman limp into the morgue, her wooden cane clicking loudly on the floor tiles. Morino Ibiki and several masked ROOT ninjas followed. Koharu Utatane had always been ugly, yet now to Sakura's eyes she seemed positively monstrous. Sakura wanted very much to go up and throttle the old bitch in the throat, but her ROOT guards would not like that.

Instead she said, "Councilor Utatane. How dare you."

"Oh, see how the child looks at me. Do you see the hate in her eyes, Ibiki? I tell you, she is not to be trifled with." The Sleeper cackled. "Tell me, Haruno Sakura. Why you are angry?"

"This is your work."
"My work? You were the one who killed the boy."

Neji had been the one who had killed Anake, actually, but Sakura had done her fair share. *He tried to kill us, so we killed him first.* Get out of the way, Anake had shouted at her. I only want the rain-nin. But Sakura hadn't listened. And so Sakura had made her choice, and fought, and Anake had made his choice as well, and died for it.

"You brainwashed him," said Sakura. "You mutilated and tortured him until he would do whatever you wanted. He was just a little kid."

"Anake did his duty."

"You ordered him to assassinate our allies!"

"And would again. The sand-nins and the rain-nins are far more dangerous than you believe. Anake did not understand, either, I confess, but he not have to. He was a true shinobi of Konoha. And he did not flinch from what had to be done."

"You just wanted to sabotage the United Countries."

Koharu Utatane leered at her, showing a mouthful of rotting teeth. "You know nothing, child." She doddered forward on her walking stick. "Now, please, leave me, and let me bury my son."

*Your son?*

Sakura turned to look at Anake's naked corpse, covered in surgically implanted eyes, then back at Utatane. Could it be, that they were truly mother and son? But how? Anake was only fifteen, and Utatane so old she was half a corpse herself. How could any mother do something like this?

Morino Ibiki stepped forward, his scarred face grim. "Councilor Utatane asked you to leave, genin."

"*Why?*

Koharu Utatane's gray eyes were very clear. "Sweet child, there's such innocence in you still. Innocence, and a darkness such as I have never seen." She grinned hideously. "Blood child, cruel child. I hope you never find out."
The Shadow War

The luminaries of the United Countries gathered in the Hokage's villa to discuss the fate of the world. From Rain came Densuke Tosuken the Chameleon and the jounin Nichiren Pou. From Wind came Akasun Baki of Two Faces and Hattori Otokaze the Shattered. From Dust came Ashuju Ikoma of the Dust. From Konoha came Hyuuga Hiashi the Whirlwind; Dr. Honjo Micho of the Silent Slash; Koharu Utatane the Sleeper; and Senju Tsunade herself.

Under consideration were recent political developments of great import. The actual substance of their talks, however, proved much less elevated.

"You are a fool, Tsunade!" shouted the opinionated Pou. "The Sun Breaker will never break his alliance with Akatsuki. They are as deeply intertwined as lovers in a tryst. It is a delusional hope."

Hyuuga Hiashi rose in support of the Hokage. "Akatsuki tried to kidnap and brainwash his own son. Is that the action of an ally? Surely even Sougon Sawar must see that this terrorist organization is not to be trusted."

"I never said he trusted them."

Tsunade clicked her nails together methodically. It is her method of grinding teeth, thought Sakura. "I agree Sawar will try to keep Akatsuki on his side... as long as it is expedient for him to do so. But he is not the only major actor in Iwa. The Tsuchikage serves at the High Council's pleasure, not the other way around. Half of the council is stacked with Sawar's cronies. But the other half is allied with Doi Dragonsight. The same Doi Dragonsight that Akatsuki infected with neuro-spores and made an utter fool of. He is a proud man, I assure you, and does not appreciate being made to dance around like a witless puppet."

The rain-nin Tosuken the Chameleon shook his head. "I will say the same thing I said before, Tsunade. You place much faith in Doi Dragonsight. Yet he has just as much reason to hate you as Sougon Sawar. Why do you trust him, when there is every reason for us to believe the opposite?"

"Because you do not know him as I do. Doi, Sawar, Shirasu, Kazan, Okita, Matsushita, Ran, Mari... I know everyone who sits on that High Council intimately. You must trust me. Of all those assembled at this table, I remind you, I alone have lived in Iwagakure."

"Twenty years ago."

"What is your strategy, Tsunade?" Ashuju Ikoma of the Dust was the newest addition to the councils of the United Countries, and by all appearances Ikoma intended to make it a studiously neutral one.

"A compromise."

Koharu Utatane the Sleeper rapped the floor with her cane. "You mean a surrender."

Tsunade looked at the old, withered hag with extreme distaste. "Akatsuki is our common enemy. I trust you agree on that point."

"Oh, yes."

"Then I propose this. We go directly to the Iwa High Council—deal with them instead of the Tsuchikage. The High Council is no happier about Akatsuki's growing influence than we are. We
will ask for a temporary alliance against the threat of Akatsuki. A treaty to pool resources against our common terrorist threat. The Annihilation Device, Akatsuki's terrorist weapon, must be totally dismantled, with constant inspections from a neutral party to ensure compliance. Of course, the High Council will not agree to these demands unless we demonstrate our willingness to make concessions as well."

"Those being?"

"We will not ask the High Council to join the United Countries. Sougon Sawar may also continue to remain Tsuchikage. That is an internal matter which the stone-nins can decide for themselves. And finally, as a gesture of good faith… the United Countries will leave Iwa immediately."

This remark caused a stir.

"Imbecilic," pronounced Utatane. "The whole damn point was to show up in Iwa with enough force to stop the construction of the Annihilation Device. And to destroy it by force, if necessary. If we leave now, we will have no leverage at all."

"What of the chuunin exam?" asked Hyuuga Hiashi.

"The chuunin exam is important only by proxy. And I am tired of children dying and being maimed for no reason."

The Sleeper glanced at Sakura standing in the corner; her gray eyes were hard and dark as chips of flint. "For no reason? Are you a coward, Tsunade? War is the iron law of this world. Or do you not remember your own childhood? The shinobi of Konoha must be prepared for war… however young they are."

"The war, Utatane, is precisely what we are trying to forestall."

"I agree with Tsunade," said Dr. Honjo Micho. "War is not yet inevitable. Yet the longer the UC Embassy remains in Iwa, the more likely it is we shall provoke a civil war. It was a risky gamble in the first place. Rather than accept a diplomatic compromise, the Sun Breaker and his Akatsuki allies will try to force us into open conflict—by deceit, by provocation, and by propaganda. It is already happening. Every stone-nin in Iwa thinks that the UC was responsible for the bombing of Misain Dayu's house. They think that our operatives tortured and murdered those two jinchuriki boys. More fevered imaginations are blaming the earthquake on us as well, and even the debacle with the Third Lock as a plot to kidnap their precious Prince of Dawn. The drums of blood beat through the streets of Iwa… Sawar has whipped his people into a frenzy. Open war cannot be suppressed for long."

"A civil war may be just what the doctor ordered. Unless Tsunade renounces her own statement before the Konoha High Council? Did you not say that toppling Sougon Sawar was one of your top priorities for this mission?"

"I did," admitted Tsunade. "Sawar is a dangerous man, with a blood vendetta against us he will never abandon. But the situation has changed… if he can be contained by the Iwa High Council…"

"More fool you."

Densuke Tosuken nodded. "If Sawar remains Tsuchikage, no agreement we strike with the stone-nins can possibly last. I will support your strategy in principle… but Sawar must fall first."

"The peace faction does not have the votes on the Council," said Tsunade.

"Then we are at an impasse."
Akasun Baki stroked his chin. "Perhaps not. This is a matter of diplomacy, it seems to me."

"What do you propose, Baki?"

"Too many on the Iwa High Council hate you. Every word you speak there will be tainted by the charge of Betrayer, regardless of the merits. I propose to put myself forward in your place. I have a history with Doi Dragonsight as long as yours. We fought together in the Second Ninja War, and then again against the Silla Brotherhood. I know not whether Doi can truly be trusted. But there is little harm in making the attempt. With the right inducements, perhaps his peace faction can be… persuaded. All we need is the right diplomatic touch."

The Hokage's eyes gleamed. "So be it. Akasun Doi, on behalf of the United Countries, I grant you full authority as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Iwa High Council. You may proceed with negotiations immediately."

Baki bowed. "I shall."

He withdrew from the conference room, taking Temari and Kankuro with him. Sakura remained the only genin still in the meeting.

"This gambit has little chance of success," said Utatane.

"Perhaps," said Tsunade. "Yet it is better than the alternative."

"Let us assume for the moment that nothing comes of Baki's noble diplomacy," said Densuke Tosuken. "What then? The Sun Breaker is still in power and with every passing day the Annihilation Device draws closer to completion. It cannot be allowed to fall into the hands of a madman like Sougon Sawar."

"Or anyone's hands," said Honjo Micho softly.

The Sleeper looked at him sharply. "We shall destroy the Annihilation Device as a last resort. But no more. The orders of the High Council are clear. The Annihilation Heart was ours. The Sougon stole it from us, and now we want it back."

"Uatatane, you utter fool," said Tsunade. "If you'd destroyed the Annihilation Heart prototype like you were supposed to at the end of the Third Ninja War, there would be no need to steal it back now. ROOT created this whole crisis in the first place."

"No wonder you're such a terrible gambler. You take all the risks and never collect the winnings. If we had the Annihilation Device, could Iwa ever dare to oppose us? How can you piss away such a strategic advantage?"

Hyuuga Hiashi cleared his throat loudly. "A most fascinating philosophical discussion… but premature, I think. The Annihilation Device is firmly in Iwagakure's possession right now, not ours. What intelligence do we have? How close is the bomb to completion?"

Everyone turned to look at Sakura. During the Second Trial she had heard the secrets of the Annihilation Device out of Sosano's own mouth; she recounted them to the gathered councilors now. The Annihilation Device would likely be operational before the end of the chuunin exam. It was buried under Sougon Castle in the vast complex of stone chambers called the Vault. To reach it, an infiltrator needed to pass through each of the three levels of the Vault. But the Vaults were controlled by special fuinjutsu barriers called the Eyeless Gates.

"The Eyeless Gates can only be opened by the Enshogan eye," said Tsunade.
The dust-nin Ashuju Ikoma laughed. "So we need a Sougon to turn traitor and help us." A faint rattling sound came out of the hole in his missing nose. "Or steal his eyes."

"Sosano told me something else," said Sakura. "The Annihilation Heart can only be destroyed by a spiritual jutsu… a jutsu that can destroy souls. There's only one such jutsu in existence. Death Demon Seal."

Tosuken frowned. "Few shinobi can use such a jutsu. Of those in the United Countries… there are only three. Me. Lord Hanzou. And Tsunade. However, only Lord Hanzou can use Death Demon Seal without sacrificing his own life."

"What of Torment?" Dr. Micho asked the Fifth. "You developed Torment based on your research into Death Demon Seal, did you not? It is a derived jutsu."

"Yes." The Hokage steepled her fingers. "It might work… in a pinch, if it came to it. I would not stake my life on it."

"A strike this very night," said Koharu Utatane the Sleeper suddenly. "The Tsuchikage will never expect it, nor Akatsuki. I have a handpicked team of ROOT operatives on standby right this very moment. Give the command, Tsunade, and I will send my team into the Vault and steal the Annihilation Heart from right under Sawar's nose. The war will be won in a single bold stroke."

"Insane!" cried Micho.

"Are you serious?" demanded the Hokage. She was sitting bolt upright.

"Deadly serious."

A cacophony of voices greeted Utatane's declaration—shouts, fists banging tables, even a hand going to a weapon. *If the Sleeper sends ROOT into Sougon Castle, there will be war.* There would be no way to cover up Konoha's involvement. Sougon Sawar would attack the United Countries Embassy as soon as he heard. The UC would have no choice but to fight back… and there was little doubt that unaffiliated countries like Lightning would get involved as well. *Thousands of the most powerful ninjas in the world, killing each other in the streets of Iwa.* It was everything that Tsunade was trying to avoid.

"Have you lost your wits, woman?" shouted the rain-nin Nichiren Pou. "If you provoke a war like this… we are in Iwa. We are in the mouth of the beast, and you would have it slam its jaws shut on us? The United Countries is outnumbered by the stone-nins three to one."

"We will have surprise on our side."

Tosuken's face was grave as stone, his mouth a frozen line. Yet his eyes glittered with racing thoughts. "Utatane… are you suggesting a preemptive assault? On the entire Confederacy?"

"Of course, what else?"

"Insane!" said Micho again.

"We need not take all of Iwa. Only Sougon Castle, ANBU Headquarters, and a few other Confederacy strongholds. Our enemies will be divided and confused—unable to resist our overwhelming lightning strike. Before the dawn has risen tomorrow Sawar will be dead, the Annihilation Heart will be in our control, and the Confederacy will be no more. It will work, I tell you. A chance like this shall never come again."
"Aren't you forgetting something?" asked the sand-nin Hattori Otokaze. "The inner chambers of Sougon Castle are protected by the Eyeless Gates. We cannot get inside without the Enshogan eye."

Koharu Utatane grinned widely, showing a mouthful of rotting yellow teeth. Then she reached into her robes and pulled out a small glass box.

Within the box was a single object.

The object glowed. Glowed as bright as the sun; an inflamed network of blood vessels coiled around the object's pupils. Sakura knew it all too well.

An Enshogan eye.

A hush fell over the gathered shinobi.

"Where did you get that?" demanded the Hokage.

"Ah, Tsunade, you know better than that. Never ask ROOT to reveal our methods. Only know that this eye was dearly obtained… very dearly." She cackled. "And from a most… unexpected source, I'm sure you would agree."

Dr. Honjo Micho was clearly dumbfounded. "This—this is outrageous," he sputtered, at a loss for words. "Madness. You will destroy the United Countries Embassy. Even with the eye…"

With the eye, the Sleeper's plan could actually work, thought Sakura.

The chain of events unfolded in her mind like a blueprint. A sequence of probabilities and hypotheticals: Uzaemo Square in the empty silence of midnight. Clouds that covered the waning moon, rain that muffled the sounds of footsteps. At that very moment Baki was opening negotiations with Haghira Doi in the Iwa High Council Chambers… would Doi ever suspect treachery? Their guard was down. If ROOT opened the Eyeless Gates with their stolen Enshogan eye… if a strike team led by the Hokage herself captured Sougon Sawar as a hostage… with simultaneous attacks on the strongholds of Water, Waterfall, and Swamp…

Could it work?

Yes.

It would be like cutting off the head of a sleeping snake.

But what if something went wrong? What if the Confederacy's defenses were tougher than expected? What if Akatsuki intervened? And even if they succeeded, thousands would die. The battle in Iwa could easily spiral out of control, kindling a Fourth Ninja War. The risks were incalculable, the rewards alluring but uncertain. Even Utatane the Sleeper did not dare execute such a plan on her own authority. By itself ROOT could perhaps steal the Annihilation Device, but that was not enough. It would also have to survive Sawar's counterattack… without the Hokage's full support, Utatane would accomplish nothing more than her own suicide. The suicide of everyone on the United Countries Embassy.

A chill went through her.

"Tsunade!" hissed Utatane. "Tsunade, give the command. The time is now…. now, or it shall be forever too late. We cannot wait."

The Fifth Hokage sat on the dais at the head of the conference table, her white-robed figure as
motionless as a statue of marble. Senju Tsunade's dark eyes gleamed in the dim lamplight—haunting, inscrutable, unfathomable. For a long moment she did not speak. Tsunade-sensei's considering it, thought Sakura with bated breath, my god, she's actually considering it. The pause stretched on and on.

"No."

Total silence met the single whispered word.

Someone let out their breath audibly.

"How can you throw away this chance!" shrieked Utatane. "Don't you understand we can never surprise the Confederacy again? There is an Akatsuki spy in this very room. He listens to our every word; he knows all I've shared with you. If we delay even a single hour, our enemies will be forewarned."

A hum of outrage rushed around the table. Besides the great luminaries, there were several other ninjas present. Genin leaders like Sakura, Neji, and Aumono. High-ranking UC Embassy officials like Commander Sarutobi Inishu, Commander Nara Shikaku, and Captain Yamato of ANBU Squad 1. ROOT cronies like Morino Ibiki. Powerful and important ninjas all. There is an Akatsuki spy in this very room. It was a shockingly bold accusation.

But the Hokage only said, "I know the risk."

"So what are you waiting for?"

"For diplomacy."

"Even you cannot be that naive. The Iwa High Council will know exactly what transpired here tonight. Any chance of diplomacy you had before is now destroyed."

"Even so… even so, I will not strike first."

Koharu Utatane rapped her wooden cane so hard on the conference table that the table cracked in two. The doddering old woman said nothing else; her narrow wrinkled face quivering in rage. Her steel-gray eyes icy with hatred.

Ashuju Ikoma coughed. "Well… before this gets out of hand… there is a point I must return to. What do you mean, there is an Akatsuki spy among us? I know nothing of this."

"It is a theory peddled in certain quarters," responded the Hokage, staring at Utatane. "Akatsuki seems to have a great degree of luck in its dealings with the United Countries. The theft of the Annihilation Device from Honjo Laboratory. Akatsuki's alerted defenses during the Battle of Darkness Barrier and their instantaneous counterattack on the Asylum. The infection of Sarutobi Asuma with neuro-spores. The sabotage of the Third Lock during the Second Trial. All these events suggest a certain degree of… help. An inside job, if you will."

"And you believe this… theory?"

"No. But I cannot rule it out."

"And… by the evidence you've just presented, our theoretical spy is… someone in this room?"

"That's right."
"Don't worry, Ikoma," joked Dr. Honjo Micho, wiggling his bushy eyebrows. "We know it's not you. You just joined the UC."

"How reassuring."

"There is nothing we can do," said the Hokage, waving her hand. "I assure you, gentlemen, we have investigated this matter thoroughly, with all the intelligence resources at our disposal. Not a shred of positive evidence has emerged. More likely than not, Akatsuki has simply gotten lucky a few times. And even if there was a spy among us, a witch-hunt to find him would do more harm than good. We cannot act in mutual suspicion and betrayal… such a path will only lead to our own destruction."

"You damnable coward," screeched Utatane. "You are a disgrace to the legacy of the Senju clan. You're even weaker than your little faggot brother."

The Sleeper had finally pushed the Hokage to her breaking point. Tsunade leaped to her feet. "Get out!"

Koharu Utatane complied, leaning heavily on her cane as she exited the conference room. Masked ROOT ninjas flanked her on both sides, and Morino Ibiki took up the rearguard.

At the door she paused.

"Tsunade. They call you the Queen of Torment, and how true the name is. You had the chance tonight to annihilate our enemies in a single stroke… to bring Konoha back to the heights of glory. Instead you threw it all away. May you be tormented by that decision for the rest of your life." The old hag grinned as she swept the stolen Enshogan eye back under her robes. "And there is a spy. I have no proof, no, not yet… but I shall soon. Nothing is hidden from the gaze of ROOT."

Then she was gone.

The meeting of United Countries principals dragged on for almost an hour afterward, somehow, though all knew it was already over. Koharu Utatane had said everything that needed to be said. The rest was just going in circles. Endless, repeating, utterly tedious circles. At last the various personages took their leave of the Hokage one by one, heading back to their respective dwellings.

In the Hokage's villa, there were only the two of them that remained.

Tsunade-sensei.

And Sakura.

The Fifth turned to her apprentice. "What do you think, girl?"

It was the first time Sakura had talked to her sensei privately since the battle around the Ice Spear. "I… I don't know," she stammered.

"About what?"

"Any of it."

"Is that so? You seemed to have strong opinions the last time we spoke."

Yes, I called you a liar, and a coward, for sacrificing Gai-sama instead of protecting him like you should have. It was all true, too. Sakura formed her words slowly, carefully. "I don't understand. I don't understand why it has to be like this."
"You mean Utatane the Sleeper."

"You let that disgusting old woman into your meeting. You let her talk and talk, whatever she wanted, insult you to your face… you let her threaten to attack Sougon Castle and kill everyone in it. Koharu Utatane is just as dangerous as Sougon Sawar. Yet you do nothing. You're the Hokage, and all you do is coddle her."

"What would you have me do?"

"Arrest her," said Sakura. She did not hesitate.

"On what charges?"

"Any charges. There's so many I couldn't count them on two hands. The Sleeper conducted illegal medical experimentation on children, and then she tortured and brainwashed them. That's a war crime. She operates ROOT as a force above the law. That's insubordination. She ordered Anake to kill Aumono in order to try to break up our alliance with Rain. That's treason."

"Is it? Only if you side with me. But there is another powerful faction in Konoha. Koharu Utatane and Shimura Danzou are members of the Konoha High Council, with authority equal to mine own. The situation is analogous to the present one in Iwagakure. I cannot arrest Utatane without causing a civil war in Konoha. And I cannot afford internal disunity right now. The world cannot afford it. Too much is at stake. The shadow war between the United Countries and the Confederacy reaches its climax… I fear violent conflict is inevitable. Yet if the battle comes, I must have all of Konoha's strength. Including ROOT. They are an unstable element, I grant you. Yet the time to force the issue is not quite… ripe."

"Ripe?" The word almost choked Sakura. "How can you compare people's lives to fruit? Utatane turned Anake into a twisted monster. Her own son. She's evil, Tsunade-sensei. Damnit, you let her get away with that, but you ordered Gai-sama to sacrifice himself to Hanzou's Asylum? It's not…"

"… fair?"

"You shouldn't have let Hanzou take him."

"But do you understand why I did it?"

"No."

"My hand was forced. Without the Rain Country—"

"No," Sakura said again. She could not stop the bitterness from seeping into her voice. "No, I don't understand because you don't trust me. Tsunade-sensei… I know you care about me. You took me on your apprentice when I had no one else. I owe you not just my life, but my loyalty. So why did you lie? Why do you always, always lie? Seurin Shadowstar was your best friend, and I never heard a word about her. I never heard about your years of exile. The apprentice you had before me."

"All of Sakura's grievances came out in a tumbling rush. "How can I help you if you keep all these secrets from me? How can I be a leader of the United Countries, if you won't tell me the truth?"

The Hokage stared at Sakura. Opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again. For a moment she seemed at a loss for words, at a loss even of wits. Finally, she said, very softly:

"Because I wanted to protect you."

Sakura never got the chance to respond. A phalanx of ANBU guards burst suddenly into the
conference room, followed by a familiar chuunin in a tight ponytail. *Shikamaru.* He was breathless and sweating profusely from a dead run, his dark eyes racing with thoughts. Shikamaru did not even finish his genuflection in front of the Hokage before launching into his message.

"Hokage-sama. I have urgent news."

"What is it?"

"The Tsuchikage's brother. Sougon Shirasu." Shikamaru cleared his throat. "He's been murdered."
Sougon Sosano met her at the gates of Sougon Castle.

He wore a simple gray kimono, as always, the ancient golden crest of the Sougon clan stitched into its back. A long braided ponytail swept back from his widow's peak and hung down across his shoulder, black and thick. Dark eyes curved into enigmatic arches over a fine, regal mouth.

He smiled when he saw her—a flash of white teeth in the bright noonday sun.

"Your father told you never to bring me here again," said Sakura.

"That was before." Sosano took her hand; the touch warm and familiar. "Now my uncle is dead. All is changed."

Yes, thought Sakura, and no. The murder of Sougon Shirasu had sent the political elites of Iwa into a tailspin. Yet on the streets the situation was much the same as before... only worse. Shirasu had been greatly beloved in Iwa, and the villagers grieved and raged at his death. Most blamed the murder on the Hokage, naturally, despite her vehement denials.

A crowd of protestors was gathered in Uzamo Square at that very moment. "Death to the Betrayer!" they shouted, waving cruelly disfigured effigies of the Hokage. "Death to the Betrayer! Death to the Fire Country! Justice! Justice for the Sword of Winter! Death to the Betrayer! Death to all the apes!"

Sakura had come to the Overlook by a back way just to avoid them. If they'd seen her, there would have been a riot. That morning a group of drunken civilians had tried to storm the walls of the Hokage's villa in Tsukai Gardens. Their mob justice had not gotten very far, but it was dangerous enough that the Hokage had ordered all UC personnel to stay indoors for the time being. Civilians were no threat to a trained shinobi, to be sure... but if they provoked an attack by a stone-nin, on duty or off, there was no telling what would happen. Open war between the United Countries and the Confederacy.

"Don't mind them," said Sosano in an amused voice. "Uncouth sheep, and nothing more. They've no manners at all."

"Do you think it's polite for a leaf-nin to attend a Sougon funeral in the first place?"

"Ah. But you are my invited guest."

He led her into the foyer of the castle and then down a series of branching hallways. The white dreamstone walls were almost entirely void of decoration. The starkness reminded Sakura almost of a tomb; yet a tomb suffused with light, the sun shining down through long slanted windows. Gradually, as they descended deeper into the bowels of Sougon Castle, light began to blend with shadow. Capacious spaces vanished into a lengthening gloom—storehouses and servant quarters, armories and shrines, privies and guest apartments. The castle was like an entire city contained within one colossal stone.

Sosano turned around a corner and stopped. At first Sakura thought they had reached a dead end. But then her eyes adjusted, and she saw that before her was a huge black door. It surface was glossy as polished black diamond, and icy cold to the touch, as if sucking heat from the air around it. As cold as the Enshogan.

"An Eyeless Gate," said Sakura.
"Yes." Sosano closed his eyes. "Special barrier gates that control passage from one part of Sougon Castle to the other, sealing the secrets of the castle from outsiders. Only the Enshogan eye itself can open an Eyeless Gate." When he opened them again, his eyes were burning flames.

The gate reacted to the activated Enshogan. Slowly a symbol appeared in the center of its black surface. A golden oval pointed downward, with six winged lines radiating up from its sides. The Sougon family crest. Then the black door split in two and swung open on creaking hinges.

Beyond lay the Vault.

The Vault was the vast complex of buried chambers located beneath Sougon Castle. It was said a man could walk a year in the Vault and never be able to find his way out. It was said the Vault was connected to the Catacombs, that there was secret tunnels leading under the White and Yellow Rivers to the Sagewood and Sakaicho, even that the Sage of Six Paths's immortal body lay in the Vault in a hidden tomb. A thousand rumors made Sakura strangely anxious…. that, and the truth. The Annihilation Device was kept on the lowest level of the Vault.

Sakura stepped through the Eyeless Gate gingerly, unsure what to expect.

What greeted her was the one of the largest caves she'd ever seen. It was not quite as big as the cave that contained the Pillar of Heaven, but elsewise it was larger than every other chamber in the Weeping Caverns. It occurred to Sakura that perhaps they had already entered the Weeping Caverns. We are far below the visible level of the Overlook. Yet the walls of the chamber were not limestone at all. They were solid dreamstone. A cave carved by not by water, but by the power of man.

"Welcome to the Garden of Solitude," said Sosano softly.

The name was apt. The first level of the Vault was eerily silent, all sound swallowed up by cavernous space. The entire level seemed to be nothing else by a single massive chamber. In the center of the cave was a very wide and very shallow lake. The surface of the lake was dark in the gloom, though Sakura spotted schools of little blind whitefish, and brocaded carp, and several clusters of flowering lotuses. It was so cold that Sakura's breath misted in the air.

"A garden?" asked Sakura.

"Oh, yes. Didn't I tell you before? A garden must have walls, or it is no garden at all."

A secret world. Sakura clutched Sosano's hand tightly as she followed him. He stepped lightly onto the surface of the lake, strolling in long slow strides toward the center of the Garden of Solitude. A single shaft of light pierced down from a slanted opening high above, scattering faint sparkles across the gloomy dark lake. Sakura saw now that there was a rectangular slab rising out of the water. It looked very much like the tombstone atop Deathtrap Mountain; the memorial stone for the last battle of the Third Ninja War. The only difference was that the slab was pitch black. Sakura shivered.

"Who built this place?"

"No one knows. It is older than Sougon Castle. Perhaps older than the Sougon clan, some say, though I do think so. It is just like my family to spend generations of pointless toil carving a hole out under a rock. I rather doubt anyone else would have bothered. This was in the days before the Sage of Six Paths, you see, before bloodlines or chakra jutsu. My ancestors chiseled out the entire Vault by hand. It must have taken hundreds of years. The magnificent futility of it all suggests the mind of a Sougon, don't you agree?"

Sosano stared at the slab of strange black stone. Once again the Eyeless Gate reacted to his Enshogan, opening outward to reveal a staircase within. The passageway to the second level of the
Vault. The spiral staircase was long, steep, and worn smooth with footsteps. There was another Eyeless Gate at the bottom, which Sosano opened for a third time.

Light.

Sakura blinked at the sudden brightness. It was the last thing that she had expected, this far beneath the Overlook. Yet it was as if she had walked right out into the Sagewood at noonday. Her sandaled feet sank into soft, rich soil. Her senses were assaulted by the smells of forest and flowers, the sounds of buzzing insects and scampering squirrels and even the lonely, plaintive cry of a cuckoo. There were trees everywhere. Tall swaying stalks of bamboo and lush leafy aspens, sentinel trees with their twisting nets of grey-green needles. Between the trees were tangled grasses bursting with wildflowers in a profusion of color…

Sosano smiled at her surprise. "Different, yes? This is the Garden of Ancestors."

"But how—"

"Look above you."

Sakura craned her head to look at the vaulted ceiling. There were openings cut into the roof at regular intervals, like skylights, and the light which streamed out of them was so bright it hurt her eyes to look at it directly. Yet ordinary light should have been diluted this far under the surface. "Mirrors," she said after a moment. "Mirrors to concentrate and magnify sunlight. Light comes in from the top of the Overlook, and a series of mirrored tunnels carry it all the way under the surface. The Garden of Ancestors gets as almost as much natural light as the Sagewood outside."

"Just so."

"Is this… is this where your family is buried?"

"It is. Come, I'll take you to meet them."

Sosano led her down a stone path between overhanging sentinel trees. Unlike the Garden of Solitude, the Garden of Ancestors was divided into a complex of many smaller, interconnected chambers. Nor were the chambers the same height. Instead they rose and fell with the architectural design of the garden, so that a staircase might lead down into a hidden cave grotto, or a bridge raise a unsuspecting traveler almost to the ceiling. The Earth garden is asymmetrical, she remembered Sosano telling her, and this is because the asymmetrical has the greater power to symbolize multiplicity and vastness. It was hard to tell precisely how large the Garden of Ancestors truly was, but Sakura suspected it was not any less substantial than Sougon Castle itself.

For the first time, she questioned the feasibility of Koharu Utatane's plan to steal the Annihilation Heart out of the Vault. Even with the Enshogan eye to open the Eyeless Gates, the Vault was so colossally complicated that it made the success of any mission chancy at best. How could they ever find it?

Abruptly the path opened up into a wide clearing. Sakura sensed they were somewhere at the edge of the Overlook, though where exactly, she could not be sure. Behind the stone walls, she could just hear the faint roar of the Dreamstone River. We must almost be at the river bottom. It was cold, though not so as cold as in the Garden of Solitude—a brisk but invigorating chill.

In the center of the clearing lay a small temple. Judging by its design the temple was a relic from the days of the Age of Blood, before the coming of the Sage of Six Paths. Animalistic Shiva sculptures sprouted from its tiled sloping roofs, and the Five Gods of Zen stood guard at the temple entrance.
Yet the two priests who came out to greet them wore the habits of Kiyome monks; an exemplar of the spiritual syncretism that characterized much of Earth Country religion.

"I see you, Sougon Sosano," said the monks, bowing low. "Come. The funeral is about to begin."

The inside of the Shiva temple was filled with burning incense, fearsome stone idols dressed in battle armor, and rhythmic, beating gongs. "This temple is the ancestral shrine of my clan," explained Sosano to Sakura. "Here lies buried all the Sougon dead for countless centuries. Some of the greatest even have statues of their own, you see? We worship them as kami, the guardian spirits that will protect our clan and make us strong."

The gongs grew louder toward the back of the temple. When the monks led her out the back door, Sakura knew why. There was a cemetery behind the temple. Row upon row of white gravestones, some so ancient their names were marred with moss, others far newer. Dozens of people were gathered in the cemetery. Among them were the most illustrious personages in Iwa: Sougon Sawar the Sun Breaker, the Fourth Tsuchikage. His brother, Sougon Charasu of the Inferno. Haghira Doi the Dragonsight, Director of the 54th Iwa Chuunin Exam. Chuzuru Kazan, head of the powerful Chuzuru clan. Iranki Okita the Fearless, Tokako Matsushita the Stonecrusher, and Noatari Ran, influential members of the Iwa High Council all. Sougon Mari, the ANBU Commander.

So too, were the others. Keel the Annihilator, one of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist. Misain Dayu the Cinder. Nobunaga Kikuko the Spinster. Makoto Muro, the Warlord of the Blood Country. The swamp-nin Shigeru Yorai. The river-nin Rouga Eneki the Nightingale. Kasuga Darui of the Black Cloud. Ikenobo Zeami the Princess of Dragonflies, leader of Kusagakure. Ambassador Loom, the taciturn samurai from the Iron Country. Ambassador Immanuel Burgouine, renowned diplomat of the United Republic of Genoa. Sakura even spotted Baki, the only member of the United Countries at the funeral beside her. Baki was Doi’s invited guest.

They had all come for a single purpose.

The funeral of Sougon Shirasu.

_The Sword of Winter_, they called him. Both for his jutsu Absolute Zero, and for the legendary sword Masamune bequeathed to him by his sister, Seurin Shadowstar. For that act of blasphemy—wielding the Masamune which by rights belonged to the head of the Sougon clan—his older brother had never forgiven him.

Now he was dead.

Angry muttering spread as Sakura entered with Sosano, hostile looks and even whispered curses. Sakura was the daughter of Arashi the Demonslayer; Tsunade the Betrayer's personal apprentice. Her very presence in this place was a kind of blasphemy as well.

Sougon Sawar ground his teeth. "Sosano. You're late."

"My regrets, Father. I was escorting a guest."

The Fourth Tsuchikage stared at Sakura with blunt revulsion. His eyes were two orbs of black ink, as dark as they were merciless. "Yes, Tsunade's little harlot. I know her well... better than you do, in some ways. Treachery is ever a woman's weapon. I told my brother so when the High Council voted on whether to allow the United Countries Embassy to enter Iwagakure. Do not let the Betrayer within our gates, I said, or she shall destroy us from within, with poison and lies, with false seductions and with daggers in the dark. Shirasu did not listen to me, of course. Now he has paid for his defiance with his life. I pray you do not meet the same fate."
"The Hokage unequivocally denies any part in my uncle's murder." Sosano smiled impishly. "Why, I am sure Sakura had nothing to do with it."

"I hope so, for your sake." The Tsuchikage turned his gaze to Sakura. "Do not profane this funeral any more than you already have, girl. That is the only warning I shall ever give."

Sakura did not doubt it. The Tsuchikage is a man of his word, all agree. He would not break it even to save his own life. If Sakura violated the sanctity of the funeral, Sougon Sawar would not hesitate to cut her down where she stood. The Tsuchikage's hand already rested on his sword hilt.

Something about the glittering white sword drew her attention. It's the Masamune, Sakura realized. Of course—Sougon Shirasu was dead. That meant the Masamune by rights would pass to the head of the Sougon clan. Sawar had claimed the legendary katana for himself even before Shirasu's body was cold in the earth. The Tsuchikage was not a man much given to tender sentiment. It's what makes him so dangerous, Sakura thought. It was what lay behind his severe, chiseled features, the leathery skin that clung to his cheeks and showed the outline of his skull, the hard mouth that had never learned how to laugh. Behind the face of Sougon Sawar was a man of iron. He will break before he bends.

And so and the funeral began.

Sougon Shirasu lay in a closed coffin. A single casket, gleaming like snow in the summer light. Over it the high priest from Katsu-ji temple performed the ancient funeral rites of their land. The Prayer of Life, it was called. The Prayer of Death. The prayer that had already been old when the Sage of Six Paths walked the earth:

\[
\text{Fleeting alas are moments,} \\
\text{subject to rise and fall.} \\
\text{Having begun, they cease;} \\
\text{their subsiding is bliss.} \\
\text{So life goes on and on.}
\]

Most of the mourners bore the ritual in dignified silence. But not all. The old matriarch Sougon Karumi, Shirasu's mother, sunk to her knees in a wild grief. A hysterical madwoman in the best of times, Karumi shrieked now in uncontrollable rage, tearing at her long tangles of white hair, beating at her shrunken face with fingernails long as claws. Sosano had to restrain his grandmother before she physically hurt herself.

The other elders were not much better. Sougon Shuichi did not even understand that his nephew was dead. Karumi's younger brother, Shuichi had once been a famous ninja, celebrated for his daring exploits in all three Ninja Wars. Now he was old, wrinkled, and suffering from dementia. Shuichi seemed to think that they were at a party of some sort. While Karumi wailed in grief, Shuichi giggled and burst into peals of uproarious laughter.

The worst were the children.

Sougon Shirasu had two children, fathered on various women. An adult daughter, Razu, Sosano's older cousin and a full-fledged chuunin. And a ten year old son, Heike. They held hands together all throughout the service. Heike was trying very hard not to cry. I know how you feel, Sakura wanted to tell the boy. I lost a father too. But she did not speak.

The rest of the mourners soldiered on. The service was an excessively long one, even by the pompous standards of the Earth Country, and by the time it was over all words had been exhausted.
There was naught else to do but bury the dead.

Shirasu's grave had been dug in the center of Sougon clan cemetery, in the raised plot reserved for the great luminaries of the family. His white tombstone was flanked on either side by immediate family members—by those great shinobi who had fallen before him. Sakura knew the names all too well:

SOUGON ONOKI
443-510

SOUGON SEURIN
472-509

SOUGON SHIRASU
485-526

Sakura watched as the casket was lowered into its grave, and then as the gathered mourners each took a turn covering the grave with a handful of fresh earth. Sougon Sawar was the first to bury his brother, Akasun Baki the last. To Sakura's surprise, Sosano pulled her forward to take part. Sakura dug deep into the mound of prepared soil with her hands and threw.

*Death is in the very earth,* she thought.

Afterward.

The gathered crowd broke into small groups scattered around the temple grounds. Semele, Sosano's little sister, found them standing beneath a large aspen tree. The trees lined the cemetery walls, spreading long leafy fingers over the gravestones of the Sougon clan. Sosano embraced his sister in a fierce, gentle hug.

"Is Uncle Shirasu really gone?" Semele asked.

"I'm afraid so, sister."

The last time Sakura had seen Semele, the little pig-tailed girl had been a bundle of laughing, infectious energy. Yet now Semele was subdued by sorrow; her bright green eyes wet with tears. "Daddy says someone killed him."

"Yes. Nobody knows who."

By Semele's side, her pet deer Teru sniffled archly. "I never much liked Shirasu. He never had time to play with me. And he made such awful jokes. Would say that if I didn't keep my eye on Sosa properly, he'd make sure to dine on venison that night, or something. Oh, he was just appalling." The white-tailed deer's heart was evidently not much in the insult. Her large black eyes stared at the dead man's gravestone, ears drooping. "I liked it when he'd feed me an apple, though. Shirasu had a remarkably good sense of smell, for a feeble human."

Sosano stroked Teru's soft brown fur. "I know, Teru."

The young doe swung her white tail and then nuzzled at his neck with her soft wet nose. "Damnit, Sosa. I wish I could... but I'm just a pet. I can't fight." She curled up at Sosano's feet. "Will you find the person who did this, Sosa?"

"I will."
"Oh, Sosa, I know you will!" exclaimed Semele excitedly. "You'll kill the bad person. And then we'll all be happy together again, won't we? We'll be safe."

Sosano did not answer at once. Only glanced at his sister, then back to Sakura; their eyes met. Semele's outburst had disturbed Sakura more than she could say. *Kill the bad person.* It was a queer, almost obscene mixture of innocence and blood vengeance. Sakura wondered if her own sister, Kyoki, so similar to Semele in personality and outlook, could ever utter something like that. *What kind of world are these children growing up into?*

"Don't you remember what I told you, little sister?" asked Sosano at last. "I'll protect you… with these eyes."

"Promise?"

"Always."

"Do not make promises you cannot keep, my nephew."

They turned at the sound of the liquid, powerful voice. It was Sosano's uncle, Charasu of the Inferno. Sakura recognized the sound, though it was not quite the same as she remembered. *The voice of a killer beast.*

This was the man who had stolen the Annihilation Heart from Honjo Laboratory. The man who had tried to overthrow Gaara in Red Rock Cliff.

The man who had killed Pug.

"Uncle Charasu." Sosano smiled. "A rare sighting these days, I'm afraid."

"I could hardly miss my own brother's funeral." Charasu's eyes were as black and piercing as those of a hawk. "Shirasu and I were never the best of friends. Yet he was of my own blood. I have never taken pleasure in any man's death, nor did I ever wish for Shirasu's demise. Often I thought he would outlive us all… that Shirasu would still be capering along in the flush of old age, drinking and whoring, while the rest of his family rested in the cold earth. Fate decreed otherwise. Death comes to us all, nephew, soon or late."

"Let us hope later rather than sooner." Sosano gestured at Sakura with a sly grin. "This is my girlfriend, uncle. The beautiful Haruno Sakura."

"I see you." Charasu would have said more, but he coughed suddenly. "Pardon me… I fear I have a cold."

Sakura's face paled.

*That is no cold.* She had seen enough coughs to know that much. Charasu's hacking, wheezing cough reminded her of nothing of so much as the symptoms of the wasting sickness. *Charasu is deadly ill.*

Sakura's own father had died from tuberculosis: the bacteria burrowing itself in her father's lungs, ravaging them until he coughed up blood with every breath. Even the latest, most expensive medicines could do no more than slow the decline. Could Sougon Charasu have tuberculosis as well?

Sakura had heard something about Charasu's illness once, she recalled. When was that? She could not quite seem to remember. Regardless, the illness explained much. Sakura had only seen Charasu
on two occasions since arriving in Iwa: first, during dinner at the Overlook. And then again now. He had not appeared on any of her other visits to Sougon Castle. It was an odd omission. Charasu was, by all accounts, his brother's right hand man, his most trusted advisor and attack dog. But if he was sick, perhaps even bedridden…

The illness explained the change in Charasu's voice, as well. It was noticeably weaker and thinner than before. So was Charasu's body. The man was a hulking beast, so massive he made Sosano look like a child's stick figure. Yet it was obvious that the muscles beneath his gray robe had shrunk significantly in mass. Sakura ran her eyes over Charasu's frame closely and saw all the signs of a serious, perhaps even terminal illness.

She did not understand how someone so sick could have traveled to Konoha to break into Honjo Laboratory. *Something is wrong here.* In truth, Sakura had scarcely thought about Sougon Charasu since the UC Embassy had arrived in Iwa. Ever since she'd met Sosano, in fact. *I made a mistake… I'm missing something important.* The pieces of the puzzle did not fit together.

But why?

Her thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of the sand-nin, Akasun Baki. He pulled Sakura aside for a political conversation while Sosano helped his uncle sit down beneath the aspen tree. With Baki was the famous stone-nin Iranki Okita the Fearless, one of Doi's allies on the Iwa High Council, as well as Haghira Doi himself.

"I see you, Haruno Sakura," said Doi. "It is good that you have come."

Iranki Okita nodded. "Yes. Tsunade could not come herself, of course… but it is wise for her apprentice to pay respects to a fallen member of the Sougon clan. The Garden of Ancestors is a sacred place in Iwa. It is the root of our village, an ancient fount of justice and law. According to some tales, if an unworthy party—a guilty murderer, shall we say—tried to enter such a place as this, she would drop dead on the spot."

"Well, I'm not dead."

Doi smiled thinly. "No. As I have told Baki, I do not believe Tsunade ordered the assassination of Sougon Shirasu. However… there remains the fact that he was assassinated. The man was found in a whorehouse with half his bones crushed."

A gruesome death. Sakura did not know the details, but she had heard rumors enough. The Sword of Winter had not died painlessly.

"It was Akatsuki," said Sakura.

"Was it? Perhaps. They have the motive, there is no doubt. And the means, too, I think. There are not many shinobi in the world who could murder Sougon Shirasu in cold blood. Only another S-rank ninja of comparable power could do the deed… that, or a team of such ninjas. Could Akatsuki could it? Perhaps. Yet here is the troublesome thing. Of all the S-rank shinobi in the world… a very large percentage of them are currently residing in Iwa."

"Troublesome," agreed Sakura.

"So then who is responsible? Akatsuki is a strong possibility, yes. But also elements in the United Countries. The Grass Country. The River Country. The Lightning Country. Even a Confederacy traitor. Even someone on the Iwa High Council itself… even the Tsuchikage. Means they all had, yes, and the opportunity that Shirasu so carelessly provided with his careless whoring on the Street of
"Beggars. But motive? That is another matter entirely."

It was the key question, Sakura agreed. There was no shortage of suspects. But which of them had a reason to kill Shirasu? And why?

"Sougon Shirasu was the decisive swing vote on the Iwa High Council," said Baki. "The Tsuchikage and his war faction controls four votes on the Council. Doi’s peace faction controls four other votes. Shirasu was the balance: aligned with neither side, but open to persuasion based on the situation of the case. Now he is dead. The Council will be deadlocked until a replacement is chosen."

"Who?"

"No one," replied Haghira Doi. The director of the chūnin exam was a skeletal man, as black and spindly as the spiders he summoned into battle. Sakura wondered how a woman like Seurin Shadowstar had fallen in love with him. "A partisan candidate cannot get enough votes, and a compromise candidate does not exist. That means the business of the High Council is stalled for the foreseeable future. This includes the investigation into the Dayu house explosion. It also includes any official negotiations with the United Countries."

"So your talks with Baki-sama—"

"—amount to nothing."

Tsunade-sensei would not like that. She staked all on the success of a negotiated settlement with Iwa. But the assassination of Sougon Shirasu had made that officially impossible. "What now?" Sakura asked.

"Now?" Doi shrugged. "Now we wait."

It was a depressing answer, but Sakura knew she would get no other. They had to let the investigation into Shirasu’s death run its course—wait to see if the true culprit could be found. That would determine everything. And the assassin would not just wait to be found. Whoever he was, he’d already stirred up a hornet’s nest, and might not be able to resist striking once again. A second assassination would explode apart an already chaotic situation, with unforeseeable consequences.

Doi left the cemetery with Baki, Okita, and Noatari Ran. The Tsuchikage departed shortly afterward in the company of his mad mother and his demented uncle, escorting them back to their apartments above. Other funeral guests withdrew from the Shiva temple in fits and starts. It was almost late afternoon by the time Sosano rose to leave. In the Sougon clan cemetery there remained only himself, Sakura, Semele, Teru, and several priests. The gongs had stopped; bees buzzed from flower to flower, pollinating the primeval plants of the Garden of Ancestors.

Sosano led them out of the Shiva temple by another way. Not the straight path from the back to the front entrance, but sideways, deeper into the recesses of the temple. Sakura did not understand his intent until they came to the mural.

The mural was huge. It took up an entire wall of the temple, twenty meters from end to end. The wood of the wall was entirely lacquered in paint, a hundred different colors from all the spectrums of the rainbow. The mural was old and faded in many places, stained by incense smoke, yet lovingly maintained. It depicted a scene from some kind of traditional Shiva fable. Three sisters stood weaving over a loom: a young maiden to the left, a pregnant mother to the right, and a crone in the middle. They seemed to represent the three stages of human life, or perhaps the three phases of time. Past, present, and the future swirled together over a maelstrom of possibility, the sisters weaving and measuring and cutting, golden threads that glittered and twisted and transformed into the objects of
earthly existence.

And in the center of the mural was a black heart.

A very black heart. Too glossy to be painted, too smooth to be naturally carved. The heart was so large that a grown man could walk into it and stand in its center without touching the edge.

"What's that?" asked Sakura, though she already knew.

"An Eyeless Gate. The last of them all." Sosano touched a hand to the smooth inky surface of the heart. It was so cold that he shivered. "The gate to the third and final level of the Vault. Some say it is the most holy place in all Iwa. Some say it is the most beautiful. A place where all the kami spirits of all the ages gather in seclusion, slumbering until their final awakening at the end of days, to cast judgement upon their living children. A place of profound spiritual and prophetic power. The Garden of Fate."

The Annihilation Device.

It was under her very feet.

"Sosa," Sakura whispered. "Why did you bring me here?"

"Because I want to help you. Because I told you, Sakura, but you didn't believe me. You can never be my enemy." When Sosano wrapped his arms around her and drew her close, his voice was soft and close, his words a naughty whisper. "Now come, and let us return to the surface. I have a proposal for your Hokage, and there is no time to lose. I think I know who killed my Uncle Shirasu. If we catch them, we may forestall the shadow war you fear so much."

"Who?"

"ANBU ROOT."
Sougon Shirasu had died on the Street of Beggars, a rich man to the end, though the money had done him no good. Half the man's bones had been crushed into powder.

"My uncle always claimed he wanted to die in his own bed, with a belly full of wine and a beautiful whore's mouth around his cock," observed Sosano. "Though not quite… like this."

The body had been removed for the funeral, of course. The beautiful whore was gone as well, arrested by Iwa ANBU and held for questioning under suspicion of accessory to murder. The bed was still there. Evidently it was Shirasu's own: he had purchased a suite all for himself on the highest level of the brothel, with his favorite concubines.

_The Floating World_, the establishment was called. Sakura had been there once before, briefly, though she had only passed through the gambling rooms on the ground floor. The casino and the brothel were both notorious for all kinds of debauched behavior. She was not surprised it had been one of Sougon Shirasu's favorite haunts. _In that, as in so much else, the Sword of Winter was the opposite of his older brother._

There was a large window by the bed, open to the street. Sakura leaned to look out. She could see the small stone courtyard below: the courtyard where Sosano had showed her the sun of the summer solstice setting across the streets of Iwa. The courtyard where he'd kissed her.

A block further on, Sakura saw the remains of Misain Dayu's house. The mansion had been blown up by a booby trap, destroying itself and much of the neighboring buildings. That was a few weeks ago; since then construction crews had patched up much of the street, though the Dayu house itself was still a charred hole. A _hidden laboratory, used to finish the Annihilation Device_. Further on, toward the south, the twisting cobblestone path widened into a broad avenue. That was the Street of Beggars proper: the opulent, palatial whorehouses at the heart of Iwa's Shitamachi entertainment district.

"You uncle was certainly drunk," said Shikamaru. "The autopsy shows he almost died from alcohol poisoning."

The leaf-nin chuunin looked a little tired. In the absence of Inoichi, Konoha's Chief of Intelligence, Shikamaru had been named the Hokage's point person for the investigation into Sougon Shirasu's assassination. Perhaps the pressure was getting to him… and perhaps he was having too many sleepless nights. If Sakura breathed in deep, she could smell Temari's scent on him. The two of them had been spending a lot of time together lately. In fact, Temari often didn't return to the Zoo at night. With Sakura gone too, Kankuro complained that their shared room had almost become a single one. _It's just me and Tonton the pig now_, he would say. The jokes almost wrote themselves.

Sosano laughed. "Well, that would have saved us all a good deal of trouble."

"The assassin was someone who knew Shirasu well," guessed Sakura. "Knew his habits, his movements. The perfect time and place to strike him down."

"I agree," said Shikamaru. "Unfortunately, there are many possible suspects who fit those criteria. Shirasu was friendly with everyone… all the high-ranking ninjas in Iwa would have known about his favorite haunt in the Floating World. The other stone-nins, of course. Misain Dayu the Cinder. Nobunaga Kikuko the Spinster, and Keel the Annihilator. Kasuga Darui. Zeami the Princess of Dragonflies. Tosuken the Chameleon. Even Hiashi-sama, or Dr. Micho-sama, or Hokage-sama."
"What about the murder method?"

"That's where it gets trickier. Shirasu was found in bed the morning after the assassination. I'm sure you've seen the photographs… his skull and ribcage was flattened into a pancake. But oddly, the bed itself survived—bloodstain aside. Best we can figure, Shirasu's upper body was crushed by a tremendous application of pressure. Like he was thrown under a steamroller."


"Maybe."

"Or maybe the assassin wants to throw us off the scent," said Sosano. "Haghira Doi has no motive for killing Shirasu."

"Who said it was Doi?" asked Sakura. "Geigin could have done it."


"The Sword of Winter was passed out in a drunken stupor. My little sister could have done it."

"And you think it was at my father's behest, eh? You theorize that my father ordered Geigin to murder my uncle."

"They had no love lost for each other."

"No, of course not. But you are wrong about my father's motives. Sougon Sawar is a man of law and order. As the head of the Sougon clan, he has a sacred duty to protect his family, his subordinates. The murder of Shirasu is a challenge to the source of his own authority. I tell you, he will do everything in his power to get to the bottom of this crime. Including cooperating with Tsunade the Betrayer herself."

"Speak of the devil," said a voice.

It was the Fifth Hokage.

She glided into the room in her white robes, taking in the scene. Her gaze settled finally on Sakura's boyfriend. "I see you, Sougon Sosano. Now tell me—what you do want?"

"Tsunade-sensei—" Sakura started.

"I asked him, girl, not you."

Sosano bowed, his eyes filled with mirth. "I see you, Hokage-sama. I requested this meeting because I want to help. I believe I know who killed my uncle."

"Who?"

"ANBU ROOT."

"Have you evidence for this charge?"

"I do, Hokage-sama. Koharu Utatane came to see my father the day after Sougon Shirasu's murder. She made… a proposal. For a secret alliance between ROOT and Iwa."

Shikamaru coughed in shock. Goosebumps pimpled across Sakura's arms. *An alliance between ROOT and the Confederacy?* The sheer scale and depravity of the treason was breathtaking. The
Hokage herself did not speak for a moment, apparently processing this. "Proceed."

"The terms of the alliance were quite simple. ROOT would feed secret information about you to the Tsuchikage, helping him assassinate you. In return for his help killing you, ROOT would be allowed to return to Konoha in peace. Really quite an odd pair of bedfellows, Utatane and my father. You see, they both hate each other, but they hate you even more, Hokage-sama. My father accepted the terms… and signed it in blood."

"I don't follow your logic. What makes you think that ROOT murdered Shirasu, if they wished to strike such a secret alliance?"

"Why, because my father thinks that you killed Shirasu, of course. ROOT is fanning the flames of his suspicion. It is a masterstroke of deceit and deception. ROOT knows that my father is a man of his word. He will not break an agreement once sealed. But for ROOT, it is not so. By killing Shirasu, they have weakened the Sougon clan, and also framed Tsunade. No doubt Utatane the Sleeper intends to break faith later, at an opportune moment. I suspect that ROOT will keep on killing people just to cause more chaos."

Sakura thought through the implications. Dare she believe that ROOT had actually approached Sougon Sawar about an alliance against their own Hokage? After what had happened with Anake, she would put nothing past Utatane the Sleeper. The night after Shirasu's murder was also the night after Utatane had tried to convince Tsunade to attack preemptively and wipe out the Confederacy. The Hokage had rejected her… would Utatane then approach Sawar? Had she already planned out the whole thing, killing Shirasu even as their meeting was taking place? Could this dark pact actually be true?

It was a breathtaking treason.

The Fifth looked at Shikamaru and Sakura. "Analysis."

"It's… possible. If what Sosano says about this secret pact is true." Shikamaru rubbed his chin. "There are others suspects, however."

Sosano smiled. "Let me guess. ROOT claims that the actual culprit is an Akatsuki spy somewhere in the United Countries?"

Shikamaru glanced at the Fifth. "That's right."

"There is no Akatsuki spy. Everything you suspect that this spy may or may not have done… was always ROOT. ROOT has been trying to undermine and destroy the United Countries from the beginning, by any means necessary. ROOT will stop at nothing to destroy the Hokage and regain the levers of power in Konoha. Including allying with Akatsuki and with the Confederacy."

A deadly silence.

You could have heard a pin drop. The Hokage stared at Sosano. "Boy… tell me. Does your father know that you're here? That you are telling us this?"

"No."

"Then why are you helping us?"

"Oh, for Sakura, of course. She has quite convinced me of the justice of your cause." Sakura could not tell if he was being sarcastic or not. He smiled. "I see that you are not convinced, however. Here is my proposal. I will help you entrap ROOT and prove their guilt. Sakura and Shikamaru can go
with me. I will double cross and prove the conspiracy against you."

The Hokage's face was cold as ice. "Very well. It is done."

"Thank you, Hokage-sama." Sosano smiled, bowed again. "We'll start immediately."

"Wait." The Hokage held up a hand. "I want to talk to Sakura. Alone."

Sosano and Shikamaru left. It was just the two of them.

"I am not pleased," said Senju Tsunade. "You should not have brought that boy here without my permission."

"He's trying to help us—"

"I did not think you were so naive. Truly, you are blinded by lust. He's here to kill me, Sakura, don't you see that?"

She wanted to shriek in frustration. "What are you talking about? Didn't you hear what Sosano just shared with us, at great risk to himself? Why does everyone keep on—"

"Because it's true. Do you know why I stay away from Sougon Sosano? I want to keep a safe distance from him. His father tasked him with the mission of finding my real body and then blowing me up. He is the only one in that god-cursed clan with the wits to actually do it. The more we interact, the more he understands the way I think, the higher the risk to myself."

"Even if… even if his father told him to do it, so what? Sosa hates his father. He doesn't listen to his orders."

"You don't always listen to me. I ordered you to kill the Sougon boy, and you decided to bed him instead. Does that mean I should suspect you of treason? Does that mean you will betray me to the Tsuchikage? Come, girl, when it comes down to the final calculation, do you really think Sosano would betray his entire family, his entire village, just to get into your pants? The boy is loyal to his father."

"It's not that simple."

"But it is. Believe me, I speak from experience."

_When you turned your back on Iwa, at the outbreak of the Third Ninja War._

"Just because you feel like you betrayed Seurin—"

"Not feel. I did betray her. I have regretted it every day of my life since… and yet I still suspect I would the same thing again, if I had to do it over. That is the strength and the curse of a shinobi." Senju Tsunade turned away to look out the window. "But enough of that. For the moment, I see no great danger in your collaboration with Sosano. The Tsuchikage wants to get to the bottom of this murder, I think, just as we do… so let the boy tag along with you, if he desires."

Sakura nodded. "We'll find the culprit, Tsunade-sensei. I know we will."

The Fifth snorted. Sakura waited for a moment, sensing it was not yet finished. Senju Tsunade held up her hand. "There's one more thing, Sakura." Her voice cracked like ice in a glass. "You must tell me the truth, now. Do you still need me to keep a watch over you?"

"What?"
"That chakra bug in your head. I placed it there at the beginning of the United Countries Embassy so I could protect you. So that whenever you were in fatal danger, I could be there to rescue you. I vowed to myself that I would not let you die, not like…” Her voice trailed off. "I'm glad I did it, or you would not have survived your encounter with Akatsuki on the Ice Spear. But the situation has changed. You're stronger than you were before… and I can no longer afford the chakra drain. Sakura. Do you want me to remove the bug?"

"You never asked me in the first place."

"I'm asking you now."

Sakura did not whether she wanted to be angry or glad. "What do you mean, you can't afford the chakra drain?"

"It takes a great deal of effort to maintain the connection between us. It's similar to the principle behind Mirrored Clone, or Baki's Chakra Sensing Transfer jutsu… except more intense, because it is also a space-time ninjutsu. Watching over you is a constant drain on my chakra reserves. And I need all my chakra at the moment."

"For what?"

"Fool girl. The world is a bigger place than the Earth Country. Akatsuki has its tentacles everywhere, in the North, even in the South across the sea. What do you think Kakashi is doing? What do you think Jiraiya is doing? Even the White Snake is not content to brood in his lair. Revolution shakes the Steam Country. The Crescent Country is balanced on a knife's edge. And the Annihilation Device draws to its final completion below the Overlook. I must be ready for them all."

Sakura paused to absorb this information. *Naruto and Sasuke*. Their lives were in danger, just like hers. *Where were they? What were they doing?* She did not try to press the Hokage for answers that would never come. "And now you think I can take care of myself," she said.

"No. But you were right. What you said to me on the day of Sougon Shirasu's murder. I can no longer protect you."

"Take it out," Sakura said.

She did not hesitate.

"Very well." The Hokage pressed her palm to the top of Sakura's head; then removed it an instant later. Sakura felt only the slightest itching sensation. "It is done. You are on your own now, girl." She hesitated. "We did not finish our last talk. I know you have questions for me."

Sakura went for the very first. "Why didn't you come? When I called for you, in the Cathedral of Hearts? I knew you could hear us." Sakura's voice was bitter. "You let me cut off Rock Lee's legs."

"It was too late. Lee had already been poisoned. I could do no more for him than you did."

"But—"

"Do not think I don't feel for the boy. It is a tragedy."

That was the understatement of the century. Sakura could hardly speak. *What is the use of these all questions, when I already know the answers?* "And what about Maito Gai? You gave him up to Hanzou's Asylum. Is he dead, or not? Can we bring him back?"
"He's not dead." The Hokage paused. She seemed to dislike the last word. "There are ways to reverse Death Soul Salvation in a living body, to restore one's soul... to heal one's sanity. I've done it before. That's how I developed the Torment genjutsu. Gai can be freed."

"Will you? Was that the deal?"

The Hokage paused. "No."

"So you could, but you're not! You're just going to leave him there forever!"

"Forever is a long time. Things change. I cannot tell you how, or when. But I promise you, I have not forgotten Gai's sacrifice. This was a mission he chosen voluntarily. He knew the risks, he knew what would happen, and he knew how important this alliance was to the future of Konoha. When the time is ripe, I will bring back."

_We're all liars, and every one of us is better than you._ "He didn't volunteer. You gave the mission to him."

"He accepted."

"It's wrong."

"Of course it's wrong, I know that!" The Hokage seemed genuinely enraged. "When you wear these robes, sometimes there are only terrible options, and even worse ones. And sometimes you will have to order men, good, loyal men, to their deaths. And you'll know it as you're doing it. That is the burden of leadership. Or do you deny that you knew what would happen in the Cathedral of Hearts? Sakura, don't blame me for Rock Lee's crippled legs. It was you. You were the one who ordered him to fight Onira Kawai. So you tell me, how could you order Rock Lee to his maimed fate?"

Sakura said nothing.

The Hokage's eyes gleamed. "You did what you had to do. As did I."

"And Akatsuki?"

"Nagato told you the truth."

Sakura remembered. The Akatsuki Leader's eyes had been a fathomless purple, his voice harsh and metallic. _Can it possibly be that you buy the Queen Bitch's propaganda, that Akatsuki was responsible for the December 7th attack? Don't be naive. Pure lies for public consumption, allowing Tsunade to rally support in Konoha for her agenda against us..._ 

"So you based the entire United Countries Embassy on a lie. We should've gone after Orochimaru, not Akatsuki. Instead you brought half the shinobi in Konoha to Iwa. You risked the village to attack people who had nothing to do with us. Your whole war on terror is bullshit."

"Orochimaru killed thousands of our people on December 7th. I know that well. I was the one who stopped him. He shall burn in the sixth hell for all his crimes... and face justice in this world as well, if I have my way. But the White Snake is crippled, his organization destroyed, his powers grossly weakened. He's still making trouble, to be sure... but he is not our greatest threat. It is Akatsuki. Akatsuki is the one that plots to destroy the entire world. You saw that for yourself on the Ice Spear. But how to make the villagers understand? How to gather the support I needed to form the United Countries, instead of go on some pointless goose chase?"

"You could have told the truth."
"This world is ruled by instinct and passion, by hatred and blood. The truth is rarely enough."

"That's how you all think, don't you? You and all the other leaders. You're no different from Sougon Sawar. All you do is lie, lie to each other, lie to us, lie even to yourselves. Micho-sama was right. It's not right to ask us to risk our lives in battle, but withhold from us the truth for which we fight. That's why this world is so fucked up."

"Dr. Micho is wise." Senju Tsunade's eyes gleamed. "But he is not the Hokage."

"So you did what you had to do. Koharu Utatane the Sleeper said the same thing to me in Kindness Hospital, to justify what she'd done to Anake."

"There are lines I shall never cross."

"Are there? You crossed one I never thought you would, Tsunade-sensei. You lied to get us into a war."

"Never."

The word was so vehement that Sakura almost took a step back. She was startled to see the Hokage shaking like a epileptic. All her surface calm had vanished in an instant, like ripping a cover over a moldy dish. It was as if Sakura had insulted her sensei's ancestry, or religion, or some other sacred cow. She had never seen Senju Tsunade so furious in her life. For a moment the woman could not even speak. My god, Tsunade-sensei has tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," Sakura stammered, never intending such a reaction.

The Hokage had to gather herself before she could even speak. At last she croaked, "Get out, girl. Now."

She left.
The rest of Sakura's day did not go any better than it had started.

A few minutes after her unpleasant conversation with her sensei, Sakura found herself standing with Sosano and Shikamaru on the rooftops of the Street of Beggars. At Sosano's suggestion, she had used a transformation technique to disguise herself as a masked Iwa ANBU; Shikamaru had done the same. Sosano wanted them to go to undercover to investigate the murder of Sougon Shirasu.

The first stop: ANBU ROOT.

"I tell you, Tsunade killed your uncle," Morino Ibiki insisted. "What do you want?"

"She told me different."

"Of course she did. No doubt she claimed it was ROOT." The tall, scarred man glowered at them, a hand resting inside his signature black trenchcoat. "I will say again what Utatane-sama said to your father. ROOT would never stoop to such amateurish murder as this. There is a fine art to assassination. An undetectable poison, a lover's knife, a man driven to madness... these are the hallmarks of a beautiful assassination. Not a man crushed into a bloody pancake. You might as well have hacked him to pieces with a butcher knife in Uzaemo Square. No, Sougon Shirasu's death was not our work. Tsunade wanted to make him a symbol. She wanted you to know that your family was not safe."

"According to Tsunade, ROOT told her the killer was an Akatsuki operative. A spy in the United Countries."

Ibiki blinked. He didn't think Tsunade would reveal such information to Sosano, Sakura realized. "A mere cover story. Why are you even talking to that woman?"

"Why, that's my cover story."

They were in a nameless warehouse on the outskirts of Onden District, sparsely populated. A place with more rice paddies than people—and thus the ideal location to set up a secret hideout. Apparently, this was one of several underground bases that ROOT had established throughout Iwagakure. It was where ROOT and the stone-nins met to coordinate their efforts against the Hokage. Ibiki was responsible for feeding information to Iwa that would help them find Tsunade's real body.

"Were you followed?" Ibiki asked Sosano.

"Of course not."

"You should not be so arrogant, boy. The Queen Bitch has many ways of spying on her enemies."

"I thought that was your speciality?"

"Interrogation is my specialty. A different thing... most different."

"Undoubtedly." Sosano flashed a wry smile. "Leaving the matter of my uncle's death aside for now, my father struck this alliance with ROOT for another—more pressing reason. Do you have any news for me, Chief Ibiki?"
Morino Ibiki grinned, the deep scars on his dark face stretching out like thin wriggling snakes. "Yes. We have extensively analyzed the possible whereabouts of Tsunade's true body. She is certainly in Iwa. But not in the United Countries Embassy—at least not any longer."

"You think she's hiding somewhere in the Confederacy?"

"Perhaps even somewhere in Sougon Castle."

"An intriguing theory."

"Tsunade's Advanced Transformation Technique is very versatile. She does not even have to be disguised as a human being. An animal, a piece of furniture, a stone in a wall… still, she probably transformed herself into a human, yes. Tsunade is intimately familiar with Sougon Castle from her time living there during the Ceasefire. It would be quite easy for her to plant herself in the castle somehow. Among the servants, perhaps. Or among the Sougon clan itself."

Sosano laughed. "So she killed someone in my family and took his place, did she?"

"That's our best guess."

"It's not that I don't believe you…it's just, my father would rather like to see some proof."

"We have recently acquired certain pieces of information which indicate this theory is correct."

"Well, that's not vague at all."

Morino Ibiki glared, his face a mask of scars. But even after Sosano's pressed him for more details, Ibiki refused to divulge anything about his mysterious sources of information. Evidently the cooperation between ROOT and Iwagakure had its limits. Sakura thought that she knew why. ROOT has a stolen Enshogan eye. But whose eye was it? And how had they stolen it? If they'd somehow abducted a member of the Sougon clan, then covered it up… but what was Tsunade's role in all of this? It did not seem likely that the two rivals had collaborated on such a clandestine operation.

A sudden thought occurred to Sakura. Could ROOT have obtained their Enshogan eye from Tsunade? That explained why they believed Tsunade had infiltrated the Sougon clan. But ROOT did not want to reveal this fact to Sosano, lest it expose their own possession of the Enshogan. Should I tell Sosano the truth? For some reason—a reason Sakura did not even want to think about—she held her tongue. Ibiki held his tongue as well, and Shikamaru. Then between Sosano and Ibiki there remained only the question of logistics; that is, just exactly how to go about smoking Tsunade out and blowing her up. Sosano took his eventual leave with a bow and a smirk.

"Wish me luck, I suppose."

Outside, a safe distance away, Sakura and Shikamaru, still disguised as stone-nin ANBU, gave vent to their pent-up feelings. "Those damn traitors!" Sakura exclaimed.

"You see?" said Sosano. "I told you."

"It's more serious than I thought," Shikamaru acknowledged. "I will report ROOT's treachery to Hokage-sama at once."

"By all means. Though I suspect it makes little difference." Sosano smiled wryly. "Tsunade already knows that ROOT is not on her side. If she has not moved against them yet, she will not do so now… no matter how duplicitous they may become. It is exactly analogous to the relationship..."
between my father and Haghira Doi."

Sakura frowned. "Doi? He's never betrayed Iwa."

"Ah, but that is from your perspective… my father would certainly label Doi Dragonsight a traitor. After all, he's trying to undermine my father by negotiating with the United Countries, behind his back."

"Doi is a member of the Iwa High Council. He has every right to reach out to other villages."

"As does Koharu Utatane the Sleeper."

Sakura had no ready answer for that.

"All this is somewhat besides the point," interjected Shikamaru. "We are here because you claimed that ROOT murdered your uncle. If this accusation can be proved, Tsunade and Sawar alike will have cause to arrest the perpetrators, don't you agree?"

"Yes, that's so," said Sosano.

"So where is the proof? I heard nothing back there to make me think it was ROOT."

"My dear leaf-nin, it would be a short investigation if you did."

The three of them argued in circles for a while, getting nowhere. Sakura was ready to be fully convinced that ROOT was responsible. Shikamaru was more skeptical, and more suspicious of Sosano's own, ulterior motives. For his part, Sosano maintained that every hour of delay was potentially disastrous. "The killer will not stop with the Sword of Winter," he told them. "Not as long as he thinks he can get away with it. He will kill again, and soon… "

And so on. Eventually, Shikamaru took his leave in order to report back to the Hokage. Sakura found herself alone with Sosano as they waded through the dank alleyways off the Street of Beggars, scooping out possible investigative clues around the neighborhood. It was a futile effort. Any assassin strong enough to kill the Sword of Winter would have had no problem sneaking into the Floating World undetected, especially at night. Sosano even temporarily summoned his pet deer Teru to try to sniff out the assassin's trail. Teru didn't manage to smell anything except Sakura's hair, pronouncing it unacceptably stinky. "Like monkey droppings," the white-tailed doe declared in an arch tone.

Teru's insults were not the worst. Sakura had returned to her real appearance after following Sosano back to Shitamachi District. Yet the sight of two of them walking openly through the streets brought unwelcome attention from the Iwa villagers. Everywhere she went, a hundred eyes glared at her—even the damn whores. They hate me. Never popular, Sakura had recently become infamous for her sinister attempts, so it was said, to seduce Sosano to betray his family. The Betrayer's Little Whore, she was called. It was even whispered that she had helped personally murder Sougon Shirasu. The earth-kins would believe anything, it seemed.

The Shadow War had caught her and Sosano in its deadly grip.

Sakura well understood why the Hokage had ordered all UC personnel to stay indoors unless on official duties. The tensions created by the UC Embassy and now magnified by Shirasu's assassination were at the breaking point. Even now, it was only Sosano's personal presence next to Sakura that kept the villagers from starting a riot. The Prince of Dawn was still respected and feared enough to command instinctive deference. Yet neither he nor Sakura could pretend not to see all the hostile stares. She almost transformed back into an Iwa ANBU, just to be rid of them.
Only she could not talk openly in disguise. And I have to ask the question.

"Sosa," she whispered. "Tell me the truth."

"Of course."

"Do you really believe that our cause is just? Like you told Tsunade-sensei?"

"Do you doubt me?" He laughed. "Oh, you're so adorable when you look at me like that. All right—yes. The cause of the United Countries is just. My father's mistrust of Tsunade's intentions is utterly misguided, his alliance with Akatsuki self-destructive. Iwa ought to join the United Countries and dismantle the Annihilation Device. I am with you in that. And with Doi Dragonsight."

"Against your own father?"

This time Sosano did not answer directly. "It's an open secret that Doi wishes to topple my father from power… to usurp him as the new Tsuchikage. It would not be the first time. One might even call it—karmic justice."

"You mean what happened to the Third Tsuchikage."

"That's right. Sougon Onoki of the Third Light, the Third Tsuchikage, was my grandfather—my father's own father. For many years he ruled Iwa, all through the Ceasefire and through the entire Third Ninja War. But in the end he committed the unforgivable sin."

"Onoki lost the war."

"He lost the war… and then he signed away the peace. Gave away all we'd fought for by accepting the Ashwarren Accords. The Ashwarren Accords were meant to put an end to the cycle of endless war. A noble goal, in theory. But in practice they accomplished that goal by impoverishing the countries on the losing side of the war—weakening them to such an extent it has taken a generation to recover. Even now, seventeen years later, the Earth Country still pays crippling war reparations to Fire. It was an unbelievably humiliating treaty. And my father could not accept it."

"So he made Onoki abdicate."

"That's a nice way of putting it. It was a coup, in truth. A violent coup… and one that ended in Onoki's death by forced seppuku. My father as good as did the deed himself. Several other relatives died, and Grandmother Karumi went mad. Which is not say that Onoki had clean hands himself. My grandfather made a series of critical military blunders that likely cost Iwa the war. There was a strong case to made that he was unfit to remain Tsuchikage. But the way it was done… well, it was a nasty business. And a precedent." Sosano paused, dark eyes shining bright. "You see, Sakura… what has happened before, can happen again."

For the very first time, Sakura understood.

"Sawar is afraid of you. He thinks you might try to depose him, the same way he overthrew his own father. That's why he doesn't fully trust you."

"Yes."

"And is he right?"

Sosano laughed lightly. "A man can readily bemoan the state of the world, but that does not mean he will do anything about it." They sat on the rooftop of the Floating World whorehouse, just the two of
them, watching the passerby in the Street of Beggars below. A soft wind blew through his long, braided hair, ruffling his clean gray robes. Sosano's mouth twisted in fine amusement. "Will I betray my own father? I love you, Sakura… but that is a hard thing you ask."

*He does not answer. I asked him for the truth, and he dares not speak it.* "Everyone has to make a choice."

"I did not claim otherwise. Tell me, Sakura. Why does this question concern you so today?" He gestured to the earth-kin walking in the streets below them. "Is it these people—their hatred? Their anger?"

"I don't understand," Sakura admitted. "Why won't they believe us? All we want is peace."

"Because of history."

She frowned. "Because of the Third Ninja War? The Ashwarren Accords? I know the Accords are controversial… I don't defend the war reparations, or the ceding of Earth territory in order to create the buffer countries. But Tsunade-sensei is trying to change all that, don't you see? She unilaterally stopped the reparations already. It was supposed to be a gesture of goodwill."

"It is dangerous to look at a calm sea, and fail to see the iceberg underneath."

"Many lost their lives in the Third Ninja War on both sides. But that was seventeen years ago. Why should we condemn a new generation to suffer and die because of past mistakes? If we do not move beyond these historical recriminations, the cycle of violence will never end. Look at the United Countries. The December 7th attack happened less than a year ago. All agree that Sunagakure invaded Konoha without provocation, at the behest of Orochimaru, resulting in thousands of deaths. That did not stop our two villages from striking a desperately needed alliance in order to fight against a common enemy. Why can Sougon Sawar not do they same? Doesn't he understand how dangerous Akatsuki is? These damn terrorists just tried to mind control you, Sosa. If we worked together to fight them—"

"—that is where you are wrong, Sakura." Sosano's eyes flashed. "My father has already struck a desperate alliance against a common enemy. He allied with Akatsuki against Konoha."

"But that's insane!"

"Is it? Is Akatsuki really as menacing as your Hokage claims in public? Was Akatsuki the true mastermind behind the December 7th Attack? Or is that just… another of her many lies?"

Sakura did not answer. "You asked me to tell you the truth. Most men would rather deny a hard truth than face it."

Sakura stared at the boy sitting next to her. This boy that had tried to kill himself at the age of ten, this boy that recited poetry in the dead of the night and made love to her with sad, haunting eyes. This boy who was, after all—just like everyone said, just like he'd told her—his father's son. *Look at me, Sakura, and see. Look at me, with both eyes open.*

"And women?" she whispered.

"Ah." He smiled, dark eyes slanting into slender arches. "Women are another matter entirely."

She looked away. "Go on, Sosa. Tell me the rest."
"Very well, here it is. Akatsuki is a destabilizing terrorist organization, to be sure. But Akatsuki is in no way the most dangerous actor on the world stage. Nor is it Iwagakure. You leaf-nins have created a narrative in your own heads—a story in which you are the undisputed good guys; the noble heroes saving the world from the big bad Sougon Sawar, his evil terrorist allies, and their nasty bomb. Yet objectively the truth is quite nearly the opposite. The greatest threat to world peace today is Konohagakure. And that has not changed for the last three decades."

"I thought you agreed our cause was just."

"I agreed that your cause is just. Even Tsunade's personal cause, I'll grant you. But that is not the same as the larger agenda of Konoha. Tsunade has been Hokage for less than a year. She was not even there for most of the Postwar Period. During the Third Ninja War, she largely fought on the front lines of the battlefield, with limited influence at home. And during the Ceasefire she was living in Iwa. But who was in charge of Konoha all that time? Who held the true power? Once I asked you what you knew about the origins of the Third Ninja War. This is no idle historical question. It goes to the very heart of the current crisis which has brought the United Countries Embassy to Iwa."

"The Ceasefire was broken by both sides over time, culminating in tensions over the failed Treaty of Miyawe. Nobody is blameless."

"No doubt you think that an enlightened view. In the Konoha Ninja Academy you learned that the stone-nins were mobilizing their military forces once again, ready to invade the Fire Country. Later on, reading those books you're so fond of, you discovered that there were other factors. The aggressive push by Rain, Grass, and Water to recover territory lost in the Second Ninja War. The Leper Sickness which devastated the Wind Country, Earth's traditional ally. The political ambitions of Sarutobi Hiruzen, the Third Hokage. Diplomatic mistakes and miscalculations which destroyed the Treaty of Miyawe. Controversial—that was the word most often used to describe the causes of the Third Ninja War, was it not?"

"That's right."

But you're wrong, Sakura. None of your books talked about the true cause of the war. The true culprit which could not be publicly revealed."

"What?"

"ANBU ROOT."

The very name sent a chill up Sakura's spine. "ROOT has always been a hardline faction in Konoha's village politics. Every village has one. I'm sure they were pressing for war, but you can't blame them for causing the entire conflict."

"Not a faction. ROOT controlled Konoha for over thirty years, from the ascension of the Third Hokage until December of last year."

"The Third wasn't a part of ROOT."

"Oh, but he was. He was the true founder of ROOT. Not officially, perhaps… but he was the one who empowered Danzou the Termite. He was the one who empowered Koharu Uatatane, his own teammate. He was the one who recruited his favorite student, Nomo Orochimaru, into ROOT. The Third gave them the resources and the mandate to do whatever they wanted. And he listened to their counsel… especially in the early part of his reign. ROOT shinobi were his closest advisors and allies. Orochimaru and Danzou never accepted the Ceasefire, which had left Iwa in a stronger position relative to Konoha. So they intentionally engineered the series of events that led to the Third Ninja
War. Their ultimate goal was to wipe Iwagakure from existence. This is ROOT's guiding ideology, you see. The total destruction of all potential threats to Konoha… by any means necessary."

"Have you proof of these charges?"

"Ask your sensei, Tsunade the Betrayer." Sosano’s voice was deadly quiet. "Or better yet… read the letter she wrote at the time. The one she wrote on the eve of the Battle of Kurenkara to her sensei, the Third Hokage… it confirms all that I've said to you. Tsunade not only labeled Konoha the aggressor solely responsible for the war, she promised to fight on the side of Iwa against Konoha. If only she had kept her promise. Instead she went back home… and for all practical purposes threw her support to ANBU ROOT."

_The Betrayer._

Sakura shook her head slowly. "Sosa… if what you say is true…"

He knew what she was thinking. "Who rules Konoha, really? Senju Tsunade is the Fifth Hokage. But she does not control ROOT… a faction that is utterly loyal to Shimura Danzou. Koharu Utatane, a member of the Konoha High Council, openly resists Tsunade's rule and yet Tsunade can do nothing about it. What does that mean? It means Konoha is divided. If Tsunade falls, Danzou will surely become the Sixth Hokage. The United Countries will collapse, and there will be a Fourth Ninja War. This is not a stable foundation on which to build a lasting peace."

"So that's why your father doesn't trust us."

"Yes. It goes back to the Third Ninja War, as I told you. Tsunade's decision to return to Konoha then ensured that ROOT would survive—and prosper. Twenty years later ROOT remains the black cancer at the rotten heart of Konoha. Sougon Onoki was a man of peace. He tried desperately to avoid another war—doing anything to keep the Ceasefire from falling apart, trying to appease Hiruzen's aggression even to the point of absurdity. In other words, he was weak. Konoha ate him up like a lion eating its prey. You can see why my father does not wish to emulate my grandfather's failure. How can he trust Tsunade, when Tsunade violated his trust before? How can he sign another treaty with Konoha, when ROOT still lurks in the darkness?"

"The Queen of Torment made a grave mistake. She should not have come to Iwa and tried to force the issue of the United Countries before she was ready. She should have stayed in Konoha and set her own house in order first. Now she is beset on two fronts, from the Confederacy outside and from ROOT within. It is too late to retreat. Tsunade gambled everything on the success of the UC Embassy, and her losses have already piled up to the limit. Only one throw of the dice remains. And each side of the die is covered in blood. You are right, Sakura. Everyone has to make a choice."

There was a long silence.

"How do you know ROOT killed Sougon Shirasu?" she asked at last.

"They have been killing my family for generations."

_Sosa hates ROOT_, Sakura realized. _He blames ROOT for everything. For the Third Ninja War, for the death of his mother, for all the bad things that have ever happened to him. That's why he wants to help us destroy them._ Sakura knew it in her bones. _Behind all the lies, all the obfuscations, this is the truth._

"But you don't know. You have no concrete evidence."

"No. I don't."
Their conversation ended on that inconclusive note.

It was past noon, the summer sun just reaching its zenith. Bright warmth streamed down from a deep blue sky, baking the opulent rooftops of the Streets of Beggars in a shimmering haze, but Sakura felt cold as ice. She proposed to continue their investigation into Shirasu's death. It was a way for her to refocus her mind on a concrete objective after Sosano's troubling revelations. Sosano laughed, however, and said that he was thirsty after talking so much.

So it was that they ended up at Inaho Teahouse.

The famous teahouse was a little ramshackle shop of wood and bamboo, barely a smudge compared to the great brothels at either side of it. Though not much less expensive—a single kettle of *ukiyo* tea might cost half of Sakura's weekly genin salary. Sosano was paying, of course. Sakura fondly remembered sitting with him at a table by the window, bringing the cup of fermented dark tea to her nose, breathing in the rich, sweet camphor scent.

"Look," observed Sosano, amused. "It is our mutual acquaintance."

There was someone already sitting at their table.

Someone dressed in the ugliest and most absurd gown that Sakura had ever seen.

It was Nobunaga Kikuko. *Kikuko the Spinster.* One of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist, and the disgusting, charming, lovable grandmother who had tried to set Sakura and Sosano up in the first place. Sakura supposed she ought to thank the old hag, though that would only go to her head.

Kikuko spotted them just as quickly. "Ah! Sakura! And the lover boy! What a pleasant surprise! Come, come, sit down and talk to your Aunt Kikuko. I've missed you both so. We must make delightful, profound conversation."

Sakura was not sure when her relations to Kikuko had been upgraded to that of aunt and niece. Sosano only laughed, plopping himself down at the table, and ordered two cups of steaming *ukiyo* tea. Sakura could not very well refuse.

"How are you, Kikuko-sama?" Sakura asked politely.

"Abandoned! Deserted, neglected, thrown in the trash, I tell you!" She waved her hand dismissively. "My dear students… they abandoned me to chase some cute girls over in Tsukai Gardens. Well, I was all up for the adventure at first. I have more experience chasing girls than all three of them put together. Only… they told me they didn't want me! Onome, Kuina, they are such cruel young things! This new generation of lesbians, they have no sense of gratitude, I tell you, none at all! Even my own dear granddaughter, Yukari. *I was too old,* they said. Can you imagine the affront to your Aunt Kikuko? What am I to do, except sit here and drink tea, all by myself? Do I look old, I ask you?"

Sosano grinned. "Kikuko-sama, you look as old as the Sage of Six Paths."

The old hag roared, slapping the table. "Hah! Hah, yes, you are a nasty one. Well done, my dear slanty-eyed boy. I see why Sakura likes to get inside your clothes so much. By the way… apologies about your uncle. Shirasu was such a dear friend of mine. I never met a more irreverent fellow. Did I tell you at the funeral? Once I stuck Shirasu through with Red Needle… a long story, I won't bore you with the details… anyhow, even stabbing him through the gut did not shut him up! I told him, you have the biggest mouth in the North. And the largest manhood, he replied. A man's sword requires a large mouth, else it soon becomes a small one."

"My uncle was one of a kind," agreed Sosano. "I am sorry your stay in Iwa has not been as pleasant
as it could be."

"Not at all." The aged hag drew a deep drag on her cigar, letting the cinnamon smoke drift out through the open window. When she smiled, her broken yellow teeth glinted like chips of gold. "Actually, I must say, Iwagakure has proved to be far more interesting than I anticipated. Last time I was here, there was hardly more to do than fart in the wind. Tsunade-kun has turned over your precious rock and all the roaches are crawling out. Who knows what will happen next, eh?"

"I'm afraid roaches get unpleasant when they are disturbed."

Kikuko turned suddenly to Sakura. "And you, girl. Tell me. How is poor Rock Lee doing?"

Sakura did not expect the question. "Lee? He's..."

"You wonder why I ask. I'll tell you. I owe Rock Lee a debt, as do my students. Rock Lee saved Yukari's life during the battle in Senso-ji Temple, don't you know? Yukari has not forgotten that—nor have I. We visited him as a team just yesterday. He was absolutely in the doldrums, the poor thing. What happened to him... well, it changes a man. Of course Auntie Kikuko was there to cheer him up."

Sakura shuddered to think how Kikuko could be trying to cheer Lee up. "That is very good of you," she said sincerely. "Thank you, Kikuko-sama. I'm sure that means a lot to him."

"Have you heard the story of the lion and the deer?"

Sakura was having trouble following the Spinster's unpredictable tangents. When both she and Sosano shook their heads, Kikuko laughed. "I'll tell you, then. One day a lion was running through the wood and he saw a deer. 'I'll eat you up, deer!' he says. 'Have pity on me, lion,' the deer begged, 'I want to live, my little ones are waiting for me at home.' The lion wouldn't listen to him. Then the deer said, 'Well, at least let me live three days longer, and then you may eat me up. It'll be easier for me to die that way.' The lion gave him the three days—he didn't eat him up, just kept an eye on him. One day passed, then another, and at last the third day came. 'Get ready now,' says the lion, 'I'm going to eat you.' And the deer began to cry bitterly. 'Why did you ever give me those three days, lion! You should have eaten me up as soon as you saw me. Those three days were worse than death to me!' That deer spoke the truth, dear. Don't you think so?"

"Maybe," Sakura said. The story was a troubling one. "If it was over quicker, maybe that would have been more humane." She had seen it all, as a medic-nin. The sick, the terminally ill, dying in hospitals—suffering, crying, begging for release. And sometimes they were given it. What is so humane about death?

Nobunaga Kikuko turned to Sosano. Sosa smiled, sipping slowly from his teacup. "I do not doubt the truth of what you say," he said. "Those three days were worse than death. And yet... it was during those three days when the deer was truly alive, as he never was before."

"You mean suffering gives life meaning."

"Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that suffering is life."

"I never knew you stone-nins to be so sensitive. You know, my granddaughter calls you the Prince of Bad Poetry." Kikuko cackled. "I was just prattling on about talking animals, really. An absurd little fable... it means nothing. Why think about death on such a lovely summer day as this?" She winked. "Death is so terribly final, but life is full of possibilities."

Suddenly a messenger came running into the teahouse. One of Neji's servants, dressed in Hyuuga
clan garb. He delivered a scrawled note into Sakura's hands. When Sakura read it, her whole face turned pale.

"What's the matter?" asked Sosano.

"It's… Lee." Sakura's voice broke. "He… he just tried to kill himself."
Sakura and Sosano found them standing outside Rock Lee's hospital room, talking quietly. Neji, of course. And Dr. Honjo Micho, Konoha's Chief of Medicine.

"So you came," said Neji.

"Of course I came," said Sakura.

Neji's cold white eyes seemed to doubt her, but he did not speak the accusation. "Lee tried to kill himself, as I'm sure you know. It happened last night. He was planning it for days. It's not so easy for a legless cripple to commit suicide, it seems. You have find the right weapon... choose the right time and spot. Rock Lee decided to cut open his throat with a scissor he'd found in a closet somewhere. Fortunately, Lee has too much stamina to die so easily. The sweet dumb fool."

"He's in a stable condition now," said Dr. Micho softly. "The nurses found him when they were switching shifts. There wasn't too much harm done—a wound on the neck that I patched up, a few clothes and bedsheets that needed changing..." He paused. "However... now that Lee has shown that he is a danger to himself, we've had to take certain... precautions. A suicide watch has been instituted. And restraints."

"They tied him up, thought Sakura. They chained him to his own bed like a criminal, just to protect him from himself. A suicidal ninja was a dangerous ninja.

"Did Lee say why he did it?" asked Sakura.

Neji shook his head. "Does he need to? It's pretty bloody obvious."

"I mean—did he..."

Sakura trailed off, thinking twice about her words. But Neji understood. "You mean, did he talk about you? He did, Sakura. I'll tell you what he told me, just this very morning. Rock Lee lived for three things in all the world. He lived to be a ninja... to prove his way of the ninja to the world. He lived to uphold the ideals of Gai-sensei. And he lived for you, Sakura. Now all of it is gone." Neji took a deep breath. Sakura saw with a start that he was shaking—literally, trembling from head to toe. "Lee told me all of that. He told me that, and then he asked me to kill him... do you understand, Sakura? My best friend just asked me to kill him. Because of you? No, I don't blame you. It's not your fault that Rock Lee loves you still. But he does love you, Sakura. Don't you ever forget."

There was a silence.

Then Sosano spoke. "Is Rock Lee awake?"

"Yes." Neji stared at Sosano with frigid contempt. "But don't go in. You are the very last person that he wants to see."

"Oh, don't worry. I won't."

"Then why are you here, stone-nin?"

"To apologize." Sosano smiled contritely. "I was wrong, to fight Rock Lee in Single Branch Village. I was wrong to taunt Lee as I did... nor were my words true. Rock Lee was a great shinobi... brave and strong to the end. I was proud to fight by Lee's side, that dark day in the Cathedral of Hearts, and
I am sorry for his fate."

Neji stared. "Fate. You are a believer in fate, as I understand it? The inescapable destiny of all human relations, determined from the day of our birth?"

"I am."

"As was I." Neji shook his head slowly. "But no longer. There is no fate but what we make for ourselves."

"An intriguing claim. Ah… but I am not sure that our philosophies are so incompatible after all. It is a matter of interpretation, perhaps."

"Perhaps."

Neji bowed his head slightly, formally. Then he swept away coldly down the bright white tiled halls of Kindness Hospital. Sosano watched him go for a moment, smiling mysteriously. Sakura did not dwell on it. No, it was the white hospital door in front of her which concerned her now. She even shivered as she opened the latch; Sosano waiting outside as she slipped in silently to make sure that he was not seen.

She was not sure what she would find…. what Lee would be like. One thing was as she expected, one not. As expected, Lee was bound to his bed. There was fuinjutsu restraints that bound his arms to the bed. He wore only a thin hospital gown, with a plaster cast of bandages around his torso… and now another white bandage around his neck, where he's tried to slit his throat with a scissor. Sakura expected all of that, had prepared for all of that—the physical horror of it all.

She didn't expect Lee to be so cold.

Rock Lee looked away as soon she came in. "Go away, Sakura."

"Lee—"

"No. I don't want to talk to you."

She kneeled by his bedside. "Lee—I know—I know this hard for you. And I… I want you to know that I'm here—"

"Go away," he repeated. Then a thought occurred to him. The boy turned to look Sakura in the face. A ghastly grin was plastered on his plain, round face, his round eyes glassy with excitement. "Go away… unless you promise to kill me."

For a long moment she did not know what to say.

"Lee—it gets better—"

"—so you won't do it. I knew you wouldn't. I told you to, in the Cathedral of Hearts. I told you I would rather die. But you cut off my legs off instead. You wanted to save my life." He laughed bitterly. "Thanks for nothing, Sakura."

He's worse than he's ever been before, thought Sakura. Not that Rock Lee had felt very good the first few days, after he'd woken up in the hospital after the Second Trial. But he'd been… more normal. If that was the right word for it. Sakura could still make him smile. Sakura could make him babble on about nonsense, could make him excited or even happy. He hadn't seemed suicidal. Perhaps it had been the antidepressants. Or perhaps Lee had just been hiding his true feelings. Over
the past week all his delusions and hopes for recovery had been stripped away, and now there was nothing left.

What was it Kikuko the Spinster had said, in that fable of hers? *Why did you ever give me those three days, lion! You should have eaten me up as soon as you saw me. Those three days were worse than death to me!*

"I'm sorry, Lee."

The words were like an old dirty rag, tattered and worn ragged with use. She'd said them so many times they had lost all meaning.

"Go away, Sakura."

She went.

Sosano was still waiting for her outside Lee's door, but not the other person who she had come to talk to. *He will be in his office, then.* Bidding Sosano goodbye with a kiss, she told him of what she needed to do, and asked him to meet her later by Sougon Castle, to continue their investigation. Sosano asked if he ought to wait for her again.

"No, Sosa. I think it will be a while."

The office of Dr. Honjo Micho was as disheveled and charmingly untidy as its owner. The old doctor himself was sprawled in the chair behind his desk, all covered in papers, coffee stains, and a very impressive collection of random objects—knickknacks and mementos from Micho's travels all over the world. Sakura wanted to ask him about that, someday. She wanted to know all about Micho's old yarns, and stories, and riotous tale tales accumulated over a lifetime of experiences. She wanted to sit with Micho in his office and laugh together over some absurd, silly rigmarole about the Silla Brotherhood.

But not today.

"Micho-sama. You told me, once, that I did not know the truth for which I fight. You told me you would tell me the full story, when I was ready."

The gentle, kindly doctor looked at with calm gray eyes; his glasses gleamed in the morning light like golden mirrors. "And are you ready?"

"I am."

"You want to know about Tsunade."

"And Akatsuki. And Gai-sama, and ROOT, and Anake, and…" Sakura trailed off. "They're different things, I know, but—"

"—no. That is where you are wrong. It is all connected. All of it—the past running through all our lives like an unbreakable thread of fate, twisting this way and that… the dark secrets from which we cannot escape. The boy Shimura Anake… ROOT… Maito Gai and Mukai Mamoru… the Asylum… Tsunade and Lord Hanzou… Akatsuki… and even Katou Shizune."

"Who?"

"The Hokage's previous apprentice."
Sakura felt a chill. *The one who died.* "I never knew her name."

"As you know, Tsunade left Konoha after the Third Ninja War. She took with her Katou Shizune, the niece of her dead fiancé Dan. They traveled the world, having various adventures. About ten years ago, a mysterious group called Akatsuki appeared in the Rain Country. Lord Hanzou called them terrorists, Akatsuki called themselves liberators and revolutionaries trying to overthrow the corrupt ninja order. Tsunade naturally heard about it and began to investigate it. At that time, Tsunade was on quite good terms with Hanzou. You might even say that Hanzou was indebted to her."

"Why?"

Dr. Honjo Micho stared at her, eyeglasses flashing, the lines in his craggy face like a shadowed net. "What do you know about the Asylum?"

"It's what gives Hanzou his power. He sacrifices souls in the Asylum to give himself immortality. A deal with the Shinigami, the God of Death itself. It's the Death Demon Soul jutsu. The most powerful jutsu in the world, all agree."

"And where do you think this jutsu came from?"

Sakura considered. "You mean… Tsunade-sensei—"

"Yes, it was created by Tsunade. Or at least, she was the original inventor…the later derivations you refer to as the most powerful jutsu in the world were Hanzou's own twisted creations. Be that as it may. Tsunade and Hanzou go way back, you see, all the way to the Second Ninja War. But Hanzou did not have the Asylum then. He was no Hanzou the Reaper, not then. Nor was Senju Tsunade called the Queen of Torment. None of the spiritual jutsu existed at that time. But then… something terrible happened to Hanzou. He went insane."

"That explains a lot."

"You joke, but it is no laughing matter. Hanzou was broken by the endless destruction that the Second Ninja War had wrought in his country. After the Battle of Silence—the most horrifying and gruesome battle of that entire war—Hanzou went into a spell of insane, almost catatonic grief. Tsunade, his friend, brought him back by developing a special jutsu called Sanity. You see, this jutsu could actually… repair souls. By using Sanity, Tsunade struck a deal with the God of Death himself to heal Hanzou from his madness. Remember that, Sakura. That was the first spiritual jutsu. Not Death Demon Seal. Not Torment. It was a medical jutsu to save people's lives, to help them recover from mental trauma."

"And Hanzou used it to steal their souls."

"That is the way of the shinobi, is it not? There is nothing, no human insight or discovery or philosophy, that we cannot twist to the purposes of more glorious and efficient killing." Dr. Micho's voice was bitter. "So you see… Hanzou owed Tsunade a debt for saving his soul. It is for this reason that he trusted her to help him put down Akatsuki."

"Okay."

"In those days, Akatsuki was quite different than it is now. Not just smaller, more regional, but also ideologically different. Today Akatsuki has its sole goal the destruction of the entire social order of our world, by any means necessary. But ten years ago its aims were much more limited. Akatsuki was primarily a nationalist movement to overthrow Hanzou and unite the country against Hanzou's
tyranny. Still… in the name of this idealistic revolution Akatsuki was doing horrible things… massacres, kidnappings, terrorism… perhaps even worse than Hanzou, worse than the Asylum. Akatsuki was also dangerous in another way. They wanted to overturn the Postwar Order, whereas Hanzou was content to maintain it. Tsunade realized that Akatsuki presented a long-term threat to world peace; that Akatsuki could potentially instigate a fourth Ninja War.

"Akatsuki at the time was founded and led by the rain missing-nin Ozawa Yahiko. The Akatsuki Founder. He was a very strong ninja… as he had to be, in order to oppose Hanzou successfully. Tsunade and Shizune slowly infiltrated the organization, helping Hanzou. It was working, but they needed more help. They appealed to Konoha to send in some teams for support.

"Konoha sent several teams of elite ninjas. Among us, there were three special individuals that Danzou the Termite had planted. There were three of us. Myself, Maito Gai… and Morino Ibiki. We all had one thing in common, at that time. We were, in secret, members of ROOT. You look surprised by that, I don't doubt."

Sakura was shocked. "I knew about Ibiki. Not you… or Gai. I mean, he seems the opposite of your typical ROOT ninja."

"No," said Micho sadly. "Gai was always instinctively loyal. And he followed orders. That made him a perfect recruit for ROOT. As for myself… I was a different person back then, I think. I believed in the cause for which Konoha was founded, for which we had fought three Ninja Wars."

"But Danzou had his own agenda, no doubt."

"Unknown to any of us at the time, Danzou had decided that Hanzou was a bigger threat to Konoha than the Akatsuki rebels. Konoha was at this time still in the midst of the Undeclared War with Lightning, and Danzou, Orochimaru, and the Third Hokage were concerned about Hanzou's growing power on our eastern border. Danzou had a plan to destroy both Akatsuki and Hanzou… to break both threats at once. It was a series of double-crosses. On the surface, the three of us ROOT members had been sent to help root out Akatsuki. In actuality, we came with secret missions."

"What missions?"

"Gai and Ibiki were sent to work with Hanzou. Ibiki was meant to act as Hanzou's intelligence advisor and strategy coordinator… in fact, his mission was to steal the secrets behind Death Demon Seal. Danzou was, and is, completely obsessed with the power of that jutsu, the power of the God of Death. It has always been denied him. Ibiki was supposed to try to steal the secret of the jutsu and then possibly assassinate Hanzou with it afterward. Meanwhile, at the right signal, Gai was supposed to assassinate Mukai Mamoru, Hanzou's son and only heir, while making it look like Akatsuki had done it. Gai was friends with Mamoru, having fought together in the Third Ninja War. He and his ROOT team would then either destroy Amegakure or throw it into chaos."

"And you?"

"I was given perhaps an even darker mission."

"What?"

"I was embedded with Akatsuki, along with Tsunade and Shizune, supposedly to work with them. But my real mission was actually to kill Tsunade, and her apprentice. I've researched the nature of this order. Apparently the idea originated with the White Snake, but the Third Hokage rejected it. He could not countenance the killing of his own student. But Danzou took up the torch anyway. Danzou had put men loyal to him in ROOT, you see, people who do absolutely anything that he ordered."
Men like me and Gai, who knew nothing. And men like Ibiki, who were the worst of all that mankind had to offer. Fools, and monsters. That was what ROOT was made up of."

"So what happened?"

"All of this was supposed to happen in a final confrontation between Amegakure and Akatsuki, between Hanzou and Yahiko… a great battle. That's what Tsunade originally requested us for. Unexpectedly, however, there was a change. Still undercover, Tsunade, with the help of Shizune, discovered that Ozawa Yahiko, the Akatsuki Founder, was actually a man that could be reasoned with. A bitter man, a war criminal, to be sure… but a misunderstood man as well. A man who wanted, in the end, the same thing that Hanzou wanted: peace and stability for the Rain Country. Tsunade and Yahiko became… close. Drawing on her relationships with Yahiko and Hanzou, Tsunade successfully organized a peace summit between the two sides.

"It was nothing like what we were originally led to expect. It was not a battle at all, like we'd been waiting for, but a diplomatic conference. Tsunade was on the brink of the greatest success of her career: the end of the civil war, the resolution of a grave terrorist threat, a new beginning for the Rain Country… and even a strong ally of Konoha, to boot! But it was not to be. From the shadows came the slithering agendas of Orochimaru the White Snake, and Danzou the Termite, and ultimately the Third Hokage himself… the orders must stand, they said. The original missions given to Gai, Ibiki, and myself by ROOT.

"Gai and I took the unprecedented step of protesting the order. We protested… but in the end we obeyed. We betrayed Hanzou, and Yahiko, and Tsunade. The peace conference took place atop the Tempest Eye, a sacred lake in the Weeping Lands—a neutral site away from both Bliss and Caiaden. All the major parties were there… while Gai, Mamoru and Tosuken stayed behind in Ame. Just as the negotiations were reaching a conclusion, the ROOT trap was sprung.

"We executed the sinister plot as follows. Gai murdered his friend Mamoru in the Asylum, but framed Akatsuki for the murder, even as he and a group of other ROOT shinobi tried to destroy Amegakure. As soon as Hanzou heard about the death of his son he went berserk. Fighting broke out between the two factions in the Tempest Eye. Many ninjas died on both sides. I personally betrayed and killed Ozawa Yahiko, while framing the murder on Tsunade. Akatsuki's second-in-command, Yoshitomo Nagato—the present Akatsuki Leader—took the bait, believing that Konoha had betrayed Akatsuki under false pretenses. He tried to kill Tsunade and was on the verge of succeeding… only Shizune got in the way. Nagato thrust a black chakra rod through her heart and killed the girl instantly. Ibiki, meanwhile, had been gathering data on the Death Demon Seal technique, but had not deciphered the whole thing. He tried to use Death Demon Seal on Hanzou but did not quite succeed. Hanzou fled wounded back to Ame. Gai's plot to destroy Amegakure had been violently halted, exposed by Tosuken the Chameleon.

"The irony was that the plan worked, but none of the outcomes were favorable to either ROOT or Konoha. Hanzou survived, but Ame was greatly weakened, as was Akatsuki. ROOT fled back to Konoha. Tsunade disappeared to drown her sorrows, her dreams shattered. Akatsuki survived after Yoshitomo Nagato took up the burden of command. Of course Nagato had been radicalized. He would stop at nothing to destroy Hanzou now, or Konoha… or the entire ninja world. And he would, ever, trust Tsunade again. It all went wrong, so terribly wrong. The chance we had… the chance for permanent peace in the Rain Country. Ruined forever, and in its place the most terrifying terrorist organization the world has ever known. It was ROOT's fault, Orochimaru and Danzou's fault. It was my fault."

Sakura absorbed this story in silence for a while. So that's why Gai killed Mamoru. That was why Hanzou had broken off his relations with Konoha, when they had been allies previously. That was
why Tosuken had wanted to kill Gai when he returned. And why Hanzou had demanded Gai as a sacrifice before he would join the United Countries. So much tangled history. ROOT, damn you all, don't you know what you've done?

"And what about Shimura Anake?" she asked. "His… his Soul Eye doujutsu. It was based on Ibiki's research into Death Demon Seal, wasn't it? ROOT used the secrets they obtained from the Asylum to create the Soul Eye."

"That's right. You must understand something, Sakura. There is a name for ROOT within ROOT. They do not use that name. Instead, they call themselves… The Steadfast Ones."

The Steadfast Ones.

A chill went through her.

"It is a hard concept for many leaf-nins to understand. Such an alien concept to what our village traditionally stands for. Steadfast like the dark, hidden root. The strength to never waver, no matter what it takes. To keep on going, no matter what happens above the surface—"

"No, I understand." Sakura knew all too well. "Endure. In enduring, grow strong."

"Exactly." Micho frowned, bushy eyebrows furrowing. "Sakura… you've changed, since you started on the UC Embassy. Since you came to Iwa."

"I know." Sakura paused. "I'm sorry. I know it's not what you wanted for me."

_You wanted me to be a doctor, to heal the wounded, and I'm a child killer instead, in bed with people like Danzou and Hanzou. And… and Tsunade-sensei._

The grizzled, kindly doctor paused for a moment. His eyes were shining with tears of sympathy. "As… as I was saying, ROOT will do anything—anything—if the Termite and the Sleeper believe it is in the interests of Konoha. At the very top of this list, this list of evil tolerated for a greater good, is Morino Ibiki."

"Ibiki?"

"Most of the ninjas in ROOT were like Gai, or me, you see? Brainwashed, hands covered in blood, but not inherently cruel in their day to day interactions with people. Ibiki was… different. He's a monster, Sakura. He's a torturer. And a psychopathic sadist. From a little boy he was given to exquisitely torturing insects, small animals—experimenting on them. He should have been locked up in a mental asylum and given the help he needed. Instead Orochimaru and Danzou and the Third Hokage only encouraged his tendencies. They didn't lock him up, do you understand? They made him head of the Konoha Interrogation Division, they made him one of the leaders of ROOT. There is no one better at extracting information. But the cost of doing it… the cost of his experiments…"

"Ibiki was the one who experimented on Anake," said Sakura.

"Yes. Anake was actually a test tube baby, created from DNA from both Uchiha cells and Koharu Utatane. There's no biological relationship to Danzou, his supposed grandfather. His genetic makeup was designed to be receptive to a doujutsu like the Soul Eye that ROOT scientists were designing—the first prototype in a new generation of super soldiers, of super weapons. The process was a lengthy one. From when Anake was a small boy, Ibiki implanted different doujutsu into Anake, experimenting to create a successful Soul Eye. The Soul Eye itself is a combination of a Sharingan eye and a Byakugan eye, modified to access the power of Death Demon Seal. Years of experimentation… Anake suffered greatly, I'm sure, but that was not the worst…"
Sakura had seen Anake's body. "How could it be worse?"

The old doctor trailed off, gathered himself before he could speak again. "It was more than just medical experimentation. Ibiki… he is a monster of certain peculiar tastes. Without those tastes being satisfied, he cannot do the work of interrogation that he is so good at. Danzou was obliged to satisfy him. You see… Ibiki has a sick desire for little boys. Beautiful, young little boys. There is nothing he enjoys more in the world than to rape them sadistically."

"And Anake…"

"Not just Anake. Many… many young Konoha ninjas were abused by Ibiki. Many ROOT trainees. Even the boys of the Sarutobi clan itself were not immune from his predations. Sarutobi Iniden, for example. And Sarutobi Saisen—"

"Pug?" Sakura interrupted.

"Yes. You knew him as the ANBU Pug. He was Ibiki's pet for years, from when he was a little boy…"

"But… but Pug was the Third Hokage's son…"

"Sarutobi Hiruzen did not like it. He accepted it, he swept it under the rug, he pretended… he was steadfast. Of course, Asuma could not countenance the abuse of his little brother. But nor could he challenge the authority of his father, the Hokage. That's why he ran away to Ashwarren."

Sakura exploded.

All she's heard, this twisted tale of Micho's, all she'd seen and experienced over the past few months. It exploded out of her all at once.

"How can you—how can Tsunade-sensei—let these people live? They're monsters…we—we should be fighting them, not the stone-nins! Sosano told me the truth about the Third Ninja War. The stone-nins only want the Annihilation Device to protect themselves from Leaf aggression, for self-defense. The real enemy… the real enemy is ROOT! We're fighting the wrong war, why can't any of you old fools see that?"

Dr. Honjo Micho looked away. "Oh, Sakura," he said, so softly.

Sakura was breathing hard. Her heart felt like it was pounding out of her chest. She couldn't remember the last time she felt so angry. Maybe after they'd found the cloud-nin girl Juukan Dee being raped in the Catacombs of Iwa. Maybe after December 7th. Maybe never.

The old doctor shook his head slowly. "Sakura… what you say is not wrong. But you must understand the larger context of the ninja world. Most of Konoha… most of Konoha is not like this. You know that for yourself. You were brought up in a loving family. You had friends and teachers who only wanted the best for you. That is the true Konoha: the great tree spreading in the sunlight, the budding branches and countless leaves, like one great family, each one precious, each one constantly renewing itself. But the dark side of the village… yes, there is a dark side. There is always a dark side. That is as true for Iwagakure as it is for Konohagakure. Do you think that Iwa does not have its own Danzou? His name is Sougon Sawar. Do you think that Iwa does not have its own suffering children? It is called the Untouchable Village. The ninja world is the same wherever you go, Sakura. That is what Tsunade is trying to change."

"I wish I could believe that," said Sakura.
Dr. Micho stared at her in silence. *It's done,* she thought, *the full story has come out.* Sakura bowed stiffly to the old doctor, thanking him for sharing the truth with her. Light slanted down through the tall glass windows of the office, streaming into the room. It was hot and stuffy, but somehow the heat did not touch her. Sakura felt cold as ice. She turned to go, but Micho cleared his throat to say one last thing.

"Sakura… a warning. You want to destroy ROOT, I know. You want to kill Morino Ibiki, and Utatane the Sleeper. But you must be careful. If you make ROOT your enemy… they are the most dangerous people you will ever face. Never let down your guard."

"I won't, Micho-sama."

Her voice shook.
The world did not change.

It should have, Sakura thought. After the revelations about ROOT, she thought that a giant bolt of lightning should have descended from the sky and struck Koharu Utatane and Morino Ibiki dead. That was justice. But Utatane and Ibiki did not die. There was no divine lightning, no justice.

Instead there was only the grind.

The grind of the investigation into Shirasu's murder. The grind of training for the Third Trial. The grind of mutual hostility and suspicion that infected every single person in Iwagakure. The Shadow War, Tsunade had called it. Sometimes Sakura wished the war would break out into the open. At least then she could fight. Fight her true enemies… instead of waiting around like a lamb to the slaughter.

A week after the murder of Sougon Shirasu, Genma and Aoba disappeared.

Nobody knew where. One night the two leaf-nins had gone to sleep in Tsukai Gardens and the next they had vanished, abducted right out of their own bed. When Sakura inspected the room, the bedsheets had been still been soaked with the sweat of their lovemaking the night before. Shiranui Genma and Yamashiro Aoba… two special jounin, strong shinobi both. Where could they have gone? Who could have taken them?

"It's ROOT," Sakura told Shikamaru.

"Or Akatsuki. Or the Confederacy."

"No," she insisted. "It's ROOT. Utatane the Sleeper wants to destroy the UC Embassy. She wants to overthrow the Hokage, and she'll do whatever it takes. Sosano told us!"

"So you believe him?"

"What have the stone-nins done to us? What reason could they have to abduct Genma and Aoba? We're so blinded by external threats we've failed to notice the danger from within, Shika, don't you see that? ANBU ROOT caused the Third Ninja War. They created Akatsuki in its present form. They're trying to start another world war between the UC and the Confederacy. These monsters are behind it all! Damnit, Shika, we've got to stop them before it's too late."

Shikamaru only stared at her. "Sakura. Whose side are you on?"

_The side that's the opposite of ROOT._ She flushed. "Are you questioning my loyalty?"

"Koharu Utatane is a member of the Konoha High Council. She's one of our most respected and important elders, practically one of the founders. Yet you speak worse of her than you do Sougon Sawar… or his son. The UC Embassy didn't come to Iwa to fight ROOT. You should know that better than anyone."

"I know. But…"

"… but maybe we're being undermined from within. What would you have me do, Sakura?"

"Find the truth."
Shikamaru's sharp black eyes pierced through the airy, empty light of Genma and Aoba's bedchamber. "I will. I promise you that."

Sakura wished that she could believe him. The truth was a casualty of the Shadow War; a victim of the endless lies of the ninja world. Who dared Sakura trust—truly trust? There was no one... no one that she was absolutely sure would never try to kill her. Not Sosano. Not the Sand Siblings. Not Shikamaru, or the Hokage, or even Rock Lee. Sometimes Sakura felt like the only person she could trust was Tonton the pig. Only her fat pink bulk was completely beyond suspicion. *Pigs and birds and children are innocent, but men never are.*

While the investigation was ongoing, Sakura trained for the upcoming Third Trial. Sometimes she trained with Temari, with Kankuro as a sparring partner, working on ninjutsu, especially elemental jutsu, and ways to control the battlefield. Sometimes she trained with Sosano—working on speed and strength and taijutsu, Sosano's dreamsteel katana against her chakra-cast kunai. The two groups did not mix. Sosano and Temari were like water and oil: driven apart by a strong mutual hostility.

The Hokage also found time to train Sakura.

They worked on chakra control, mostly. Sakura's entire fighting style was based on her chakra control. All her medical jutsu were based on it. All her genjutsu relied heavily on it. So did Mirrored Clone, and Chakra Enhanced Strength, and even her ability to use her chakra-cast kunai. *And Chakra Gates, of course.* The better her chakra control, the better all her other jutsu became, and the more dangerous a fighter she became.

Sakura first made leaps with her Chakra Sensing. Her skill was still rudimentary in the end, but much improved. She could sense more chakra fields, in greater detail, and at greater distances. When she concentrated, people around her became almost ghosts at the edge of her vision. She could sense the chakra emanating from other shinobi's bodies in tiny, glittering waves—see it, hear it, feel it. The Hokage claimed that even the very air and ground and water was filled with the traces of chakra, since all living organisms generated chakra to some degree, though Sakura could only take her sensei's word for it.

Then Tsunade had Sakura practice strengthening the integrity of her Chakra Fields. Sakura now had no trouble generating various chakra projection jutsu, like Walking With Water. But the strength of her jutsu was not there. The Hokage demonstrated by creating a solid shimmering wall out of thin air. When Sakura punched it, even with chakra-enhanced strength, the wall held. "This Chakra Wall is made of nothing but my own chakra. It is so dense and durable that it can block even the most potent attacks." Sakura could create nothing approaching the power of a Chakra Wall. But she did learn how to make so-called Advanced Chakra Fields: an upgrade of an ordinary chakra field, created by adding chakra flow and chakra string. Her Advanced Chakra Fields were strong enough to block attacks like thrown shuriken, even to support Sakura's own weight.

Then it was time for genjutsu. Sakura's genjutsu were indeed quite a bit stronger after all the chakra control training she'd undergone. Tsunade wanted her to learn how to use Combined Genjutsu—a combination of two or more genjutsu at once. Not one after the other, like Sakura could already do, but striking at the exact same time, each genjutsu blended together into one, far more complex and intricate than its constituent parts. Its was the attack that Sakura had witnessed her sensei had used against the Akatsuki Leader beneath the Ice Spear—the precursor technique to gentaijutsu. The more genjutsu used in the combination attack, the more difficult the attack was to counter.

Unfortunately, Sakura wasn't very good at Combined Genjutsu. Not completely ineffective... but not very good. "Never mind, it's not important," proclaimed the Hokage, waving her hand. "The main thing is I want to teach you a new genjutsu. This is a powerful A-rank genjutsu. It's called Fear. I
expect you have been exposed to this genjutsu yourself, a number of times."

"I have?"

"You may know it under the name of… Killing Intent."

Sakura did know that genjutsu. She knew it well… Orochimaru the White Snake had used it against her in the Forest of Death, during the Konoha Chuunin Exam. With a single glance Orochimaru had paralyzed her with fear. She had felt his pure killing intention, his evil, and the knowledge of her own death. A vision of herself being repeatedly stabbed to a bloody death had manifested in her mind. Sakura had never been more afraid in her life.

"The genjutsu has to be targeting the brain's limbic system, I think," she says. "Like Amnesia, but instead of targeting short-term memory, in the hippocampus, Fear targets the brain's emotional centers. That's the amygdala… the deepest and, some say, most primitive part of the brain. The part dominated by instinct and feeling, instead of rational thought. The seat of the emotion of fear itself."

"That's correct."

"Fear must be a chakra-flow genjutsu, too. Like Amnesia again. The field manipulation has to be strong enough to penetrate into the victim's amygdala. A spear of chakra all the way into the core of the limbic system. And maybe even add in some chakra sensing…"

"Correct again. However, there is something you are missing, girl."

"What?"

"Fear is a genjutsu unlike another other. It requires a knowledge of the structure of the human brain in general, yes… but it requires more than it. You must also understand the psychology of the specific victim you are targeting. You must understand what they are afraid of. This unique characteristic is what gives Fear its great power, above and beyond its difficulty as a genjutsu."

Sakura frowned. "What difference does that make? Just activate and supercharge the Fear circuit in the amygdala…"

"No. It must be a real Fear, not a contrived one. Fear is the most powerful emotion that exists. The first emotion, and the last. The destroyer of the human mind, and also its liberator. The window into a man's soul. A man's deepest Fear can never be controlled… it will paralyze him beyond any rational reasoning. The other fears, however, are only superficial and easily banished. For this genjutsu to be truly effective, you must tap into the target's primal emotions, or it will not work. You must know what they fear above all else."

"Death," said Sakura.

"Is that what you fear, girl? All men fear death, in some way, I do not deny it. But is that your deepest, darkest fear? Is it dying?"

No. What I fear most is being weak.

For some reason, she thought of Sosano.

The Hokage nodded. "A powerful shinobi rarely fears his own death above all else. It is… something else. The death of a loved one, perhaps. The failure of a mission. Loneliness, or old age, or weakness, or madness. Whatever the fear is, you must find it out. Then, using genjutsu, you must tap into that fear and create a vision of it in your victim's mind. It will paralyze your victim with
uncontrollable terror. None can stand against it."

"And what do you fear, Tsunade-sensei?"

"You know what I fear."

She did.

*You fear for the lives of those you love. You fear for the destruction of all that you've fought for. You fear the future, because of all the mistakes of your past.* It was a few days before she dared ask Tsunade about Dr. Micho's revelations. Perhaps she didn't know how to begin. Perhaps she was afraid to begin… afraid to hear what Tsunade to say. Afraid that she would lose all her remaining respect for her sensei.

Yet when Sakura spoke, it came out all at once.

"How long did you know about ROOT?"

"I always knew about ROOT," replied the Hokage.

"So before the Third Ninja War. Sosa said… he said you knew that ROOT had engineered the whole war. The border conflicts between Earth, Rain and Fire. The failure of the Treaty of Miyawe. The preemptive invasion of Kurenkara… all of it."

"Yes. Sougon Onoki the Third Tsuchikage was a man of peace. He tried everything to stop the war from breaking out again, to turn the Ceasefire into a lasting peace. He even gave up the territorial gains Earth had acquired in the Second Ninja War. But to people like Danzou and Orochimaru it was not enough. Only the total destruction of Iwa would have sufficed."

"Why didn't you try to stop them?"

"I failed. It is the greatest regret of my life."

"But you said…"

"The letter I wrote to Hiruzen-sensei, I presume?" The Hokage's dark eyes flashed. "Yes, I did write such a letter. Yes, I did threaten to fight on the side of Iwa against him. Some might say I was writing in the heat of confused shock, with Seurin Shadowstar whispering in my ear… an excuse I myself used to climb back into the good graces of the Third Hokage. But that is not the truth. In truth… it was the hardest letter I ever wrote. And at the time I wrote it I meant every word. I did mean to turn traitor to Konoha. The only harder choice I ever made was the very next one. When I betrayed my promise to Seurin and went fleeing back to Konoha in the middle of the night, the tail tucked between my legs."

"Why?"

"Because it didn't matter who started the war. It didn't matter who was right and who was wrong. Once it had started, there was only one way to end it. Konoha and her allies were more powerful… more prepared, more likely to win. I decided that it would be best if Konoha won as quickly as possible. Then I would be able to influence the aftermath by counteracting Orochimaru's and Danzou's evil influence and creating a lasting framework for peace. You ask me why I went back to Konoha? Because I knew that I needed to be on the side of the victors, to help write the Ashwarren Accords and stop a world war from ever occurring again." Senju Tsunade paused, as if he weighing how much to reveal. "And because I am not Seurin Shadowstar. I did not have her strength."
They were in the garden of the Hokage's villa, sitting against the trunk of the grand old cherry tree in the center of the courtyard. The tree spread its canopy above them, the sun peeking through its tangled, leafy branches like golden syrup. The Hokage had closed her eyes, her face etched with dark shadows. For some reason Sakura was reminded of sitting with Sosano against a gnarled pine tree beneath a star-streaked sky. That was the night she had made love to Sosano for the first time. Look at me, Sakura, and see. Look at me, with both eyes open.

"Was Seurin… was she really as great everyone says?"

Her sensei's voice was as faint as a ghost. "She was the finest person I ever knew."

"You killed her."

"So I did. And so we are all paying the price."

Sakura knew it was true. "Is that why you left the village? After the war? To… to repent, for what you did?"

Senju Tsunade opened her eyes again. "Is that you think, girl? The truth is just the opposite. It was not my choice. At that time, the Ashwarren Accords had just been concluded, and the Fire Country had an extremely favorable deal, cementing it as the superpower of the world. Konoha did not seem immediately threatened, and the warmongers were in retreat. Meanwhile the Third Hokage was old, and intended to retire—not entirely due to his own wishes, either. There were two choices, right from the start: Orochimaru, or Namikaze Minato. Orochimaru at that time was called the so-called Hidden Hokage, for his total influence as adviser to Hiruzen-sensei. He was also one of the Sannin, considered the strongest of all of us. But Minato was the hero of the war, and extremely popular, without any of Orochimaru's considerable… baggage. Hiruzen-sensei and Danzou supported Orochimaru, as did Jiraiya, against his own student, but I, your father, and Uchiha Fugaku allied with Minato against them. It was a grand, exciting time. We talked of changes, great changes. We would root out corruption from Konoha, we would stop war from ever happening again. And we won. But there was a catch."

Sakura understood then. "They pushed you out. As a condition of the Fourth becoming Hokage."

"The old powers were still too influential. Having all four of us—me, Arashi, Fugaku, and Minato—in power would be too much for them to accept. They could not very well exile the head of the Uchiha Clan, and your father was not as a great a threat as I was. And Orochimaru had it in for me from the start. So I left the village, and Danzou remained on the High Council. Of course they spread malicious lies about my departure. I was insane, I was hysterical, I somehow could no longer stand the sight of blood, and so on. Utterly absurd. But to be frank, I did not care very much. I was happy to be done with the ninja world after all the destruction of the Third Ninja War. And I had Shizune…"

She trailed off.

"Your apprentice before me," said Sakura softly. "Dr. Micho told me. About… about everything that happened." She paused. "I'm sorry."

Her sensei closed her eyes, opened them again. They were full of tears. "We were fools," she continued at last. "All our dreams turned to ashes. If Minato had not died… but he did. He saved the village from the Kyuubi, but handed it back into the hands of the Third Hokage. At least it was not Orochimaru, small consolation that. The Fourth had intended to push them both out—Orochimaru and Danzou—clean out the system, even try them in the courts for their crimes. In two years time he managed to cause enough damage to Orochimaru, enough of a hit to his reputation, that he would
never be considered for Hokage again, just as Danzou was never considered. But with the Fourth's death everything went back to how it was before. The Third, Orochimaru, Danzou, back in power. Soon enough Arashi was dead, and Uchiha Fugaku as well, massacred along with the rest of his clan by his own son. Thousands more died on December 7th. And who knows how many more in the future. All that is happening in Iwa today is a result of the mistakes of Ashwarren. We aimed at the head of the snake and we missed."

Sakura was silent for a while. Then she said, "It's true, isn't it?"

"What?"

"That they're better than us. The stone-nins, I mean. That we're the bad guys."

"It's not that simple. Good and evil live within each person… and the battlefield of their eternal conflict is the human heart. Even the hands of Seurin Shadowstar were stained with gray. Would she have made the same decision I did, to break my promise and return to Konoha to wage an evil war? No, I do not think so. Yet Seurin would have been tempted… sorely tempted. It was no easy choice."

_A coward can be as brave as any man, when there is nothing to fear. And we all do our duty, when there is no cost to it. _"And did you make the right choice?"

"I am, and I shall always be, a kunoichi of Konoha."

"You didn't answer my question."

"Oh, but I did. Let me ask _you_ a question, girl. Let's suppose… hypothetically… that I was not coming to Iwa in order to preserve the peace. Let's say I was actually coming here, with an army, under the pretense of the United Countries, in order to steal the Annihilation Device and then use its power to take over the world. And you found that out that was my purpose, unquestionably. What would you do?"

Sakura did not answer.

"That's what I thought. It's not easy, is it? Would you betray me? Your sensei? Your village, your home? For an ideal of peace? Would you go over to the stone-nins? But what good would it do? Would you be able to stop the war? No, you have no power. The battle, the bloodshed, would still happen anyway, just the same. So then what? Perhaps you'll run away. Off to some village in the mountains, perhaps. Or across the sea, to Genoa or Ru Daunu or Illithia. Maybe even with that Sougon boy. What a fine life you'll lead. But then the cost of running away is that you'll never see your family or your friends or your home again. You'll be a missing-nin, on the run and hunted for for the rest of your life, short or long as it may be. And with the sadistic hunter-nins out there, the likelihood is quite short. Do you see what I mean, girl? The whole ninja system is sick. There are no good decisions—only terrible ones and even worse."

"You changed the war. If you'd fought for Iwa…"

"Would it have made a difference?" The Hokage paused. "I don't know. The terrible costs… Maybe if I had sided with Iwa, Iwa would have won the war. The war was so close, and I was one of the most powerful ninjas in the world. It's possible. But then again I might have been killed on the first day of the war. Your own father could have done it. And even if we had won, what then? Konoha was corrupt from the roots to the tips of the leaves, and absolutely single-minded in its devotion to blood. The Third and Danzou might not have stopped fighting until the whole village was razed to the ground. Would you have me responsible for that? Your father and your mother would have been
killed before you were even born. Dan would been killed.

"Of course, if I had sided with Iwa… I never would have met Dan in the first place. I never would have loved him, and I never would've lost him, and I never would've killed Seurin Shadowstar, and I never would have been the Fifth Hokage. And I would have never known you. So consider that, girl. Twenty two years of my life, forever changed. What would I have done, what should I have done? You ask me to rewrite my whole life. I do not know. All I know is what I should do, must do, now. Enough, Sakura! Do not ask me for more. I cannot bear it."

The last words were choked out of the Hokage's throat. Tsunade-sensei's crying. Breaking down from the weight of so many memories. So many regrets and mistakes. So many secrets. Sakura was not sure what to do, what to say. Perhaps she should leave… leave her sensei to her own inner demons. She very nearly stood up.

Instead she cupped her hands gently around the Hokage's own.

"Tsunade-sensei. You don't have to bear this burden alone."

"Don't I?"

"No. You don't have to keep everything hidden inside. Don't you see, Tsunade-sensei? If you bury the pain, it'll only eat away at you faster. Let me bear this burden with you. Let me help, please."

"Sakura…"

"Trust me, Tsunade-sensei. Share your secrets with me… tell me what they were really like. The people you've loved and lost. Help them live again in our hearts. I want to know, Tsunade-sensei. I want to share this pain with you. Tell me about Dan… tell me about Shizune. Please."

"Shizune." The word was a prayer. A word freighted with joy and love and memory and torment all at once. Senju Tsunade's voice broke as she took a deep, shuddering breath. "Shizune… she… she was the most extraordinary young woman. She was kind, and strong, and brilliant, and beautiful. She… she was very much like you…"
They sat around a wooden table atop the vaulted peak of the Overlook, cross-legged and grim-faced, staring at each other.

Sakura had not been in this room since the dinner on the eve of the First Trial. There had been over a hundred guests that night—the great hollowed out cavern filled with laughing voices. Today there were only three.

Sougon Sawar the Fourth Tsuchikage, called the Sun Breaker.

Haghira Doi the Dragonsight.

And Senju Tsunade the Queen of Torment.

The three most powerful people in Iwagakure. And the three most hostile. Sawar was the leader of the Confederacy, of course, as Tsunade was of the United Countries: enemies at each other’s throats. The relationship between Doi and Sawar was even more complicated. The two stone-nins had been rivals ever since childhood, adversaries both as shinobi as well as suitors for the favor of Seurin Shadowstar. Sawar had won his sister's hand in marriage, as decreed by ancient Sougon custom, but Doi had won her heart. After Seurin's death and Sawar's ascension to the position of Tsuchikage, Doi had emerged as his greatest political opponent on the Iwa High Council.

They had come together now for only one reason.

The Shadow War.

"The situation is getting out of hand," said Doi. "Riots are breaking out in the streets; just yesterday a crowd of drunken workers in Sakaicho burned a container ship to a husk for carrying diapers and perfume from the Fire Country. This is your work, Sawar. You have whipped the mob up into a frenzy. Put down your dogs before they drag the rest of us into a conflagration that cannot be stopped."

The Tsuchikage ground his teeth loudly. "My work? I told you this would happen as soon as you let Tsunade inside the gates of Iwa. Konoha ravaged our land and destroyed our prosperity for a generation. The people remember… no matter what lies the Betrayer chooses to tell now. How can you ask them to stand aside, while the very existence of Iwagakure is threatened by an enemy from within? If you wished for quiet, you should have refused the UC entry in the first place, as I begged you to do."

"Are you truly such a fool, Sawar? You created the present crisis by assembling the Confederacy to oppose the United Countries. You have brought seventeen years of peace to the very edge."

"Peace?" Sougon Sawar's eyes flashed. "No. It is a prison."

"Perhaps," said Doi. "Yet better a false peace than a true battle. Better the prisons of peace than the wages of war."

"Never."

The single word cut through the cool, spray-scented air of the vaulted chamber like a knife through butter. Sakura felt her face pale; as did Shikamaru's standing beside her. The Tsuchikage's voice echoed ominously off the stone walls. Behind him, Sakura could see the fluted doorway that led to
the Overlook’s balcony—to the place where she had kissed Sosano for the first time. Other sounds came through the windows: the rush of the Dreamstone River against the Overlook, the soft ringing gongs in Katsu-ji Temple, even the hum of shouting protestors down in Uzaemo Square. Even here, on the highest level of Sougon Castle, they could not escape the tensions building outside.

Tsunade finally spoke. "If it is war you want, Sawar, then you shall have it." Her fingers were steepled before her pale, marbled face, very still. "Yet I do not think that is your purpose for calling this meeting. Our… differences aside, we each have our reasons to stop the Shadow War from spiraling out of control."

That was true, Sakura knew. They're not ready yet. Sougon Sawar wanted to assassinate Tsunade before he attacked the United Countries. Haghira Doi needed more political support before he dared to move against Sawar for control of Iwa. And Tsunade wished to buy more time to fend off ROOT's insurrection on her flank. Looming above all their calculations was the Third Trial of the chuunin exam. How each side performed in the chuunin exam might decide who the remaining Unaffiliated villages would support in the final conflict. They are not here to negotiate a peace—not one of them—but only a delay in the war. It's just a matter of time.

Yet the time made all the difference.

"The Shadow War began in earnest with Shirasu's assassination," Tsunade continued. "It can only be stopped by finding his killer."

Doi nodded grimly. "And what if the murderer is in this very room?"

It seemed more likely than not, Sakura had to admit.

Doi, Tsunade, and Sawar were, of course, all considered prime suspects in the crime. All S-rank shinobi—all with the means and perhaps the motives to kill Shirasu. Besides them, the chamber also contained quite a number of other suspicious characters. Iwa High Council members like Chuzuru Kazan and Noatari Ran. Sougon Charasu, Sawar’s brother and powerful right hand man, who had led the mission to steal the Annihilation Heart. Konoha ROOT operatives like Morino Ibiki. And Sosano.

The boy stood behind his father—next to his teammate, Haghira Geigin. He flashed an amused smile. "Why, Director Doi, surely you cannot be accusing my father of murdering my own uncle."

"I did not say that."

"So you are confessing?"

Doi ignored this. "The day before he died, Shirasu came to me in confidence. He told me that Akatsuki had finally gone too far by sabotaging the Second Trial. He wished, as I did, to terminate our relationship with such a treacherous terrorist organization. We planned to bring the issue to a binding vote before the Council. Then Shirasu was assassinated… and the council deadlocked. How convenient for certain parties."

"This is an outrage," Sougon Sawar ground his teeth so loudly it drowned out the sound of the Dreamstone River below. "If anyone is the suspect, Doi, it is you."

"Shirasu was my ally. I had no reason to kill him."
"Shirasu was my brother. For such as a creature as you, that is reason enough."

"Still think I'm after your job, Sawar? Odd you should bring up family ties. The last time someone overthrew the Tsuchikage, I recall, it was you betraying your own father. How did it feel to stab a close relative in the back? One can only hope you have not made a habit of it."

The recriminations only got worse after that. Charge, counter-charge, thinly veiled accusations that become naked barbs with each repetition. Their summit meeting almost broke up after Sawar tried to use Geigin, Doi's own son, to demonstrate the effect of the Haghira's clan Gravity Wave on a human body.

Sakura could not tell how serious the charges really were. As far as she could tell, Sawar still thought Tsunade was responsible for his brother's death. Evidently, however, he was not above exploiting Shirasu's murder to score political points against his rival Doi. Neither Doi nor Tsunade were shy about throwing innuendo in the opposite direction. As for the ostensible agenda of the summit—to get to the bottom of the Shirasu's assassination and arrest the advance of the Shadow War—remarkably little progress was made. Even an anodyne joint statement of cooperation was barely approved.

The situation was complicated by one of Shikamaru's theories.

"There may be more than one rogue actor," he told them. According to Shikamaru, still in charge of Konoha's investigation, two major incidents had occurred in the last week: first, Sougon Shirasu's death. Second, the disappearance of Aoba and Genma. Yet there was no reason to assume these two incidents were related. "I suspect they are not, in fact. Kidnapping is very different from assassination."

Sakura knew what Shikamaru meant. ANBU ROOT. Suppose that Shirasu was killed by an outside force—such as Akatsuki, for the purposes of destabilizing Iwa. How would ROOT respond to that threat? Koharu Utatane seemed already convinced that an Akatsuki traitor was operating in the midst of the United Countries. She had vowed to go to any lengths to discover the traitor's identity.

Could ROOT have kidnapped Aoba and Genma because they thought they were Akatsuki spies?

"Perhaps," agreed Sosano, when Sakura found him after the hours-long summit, playing in the bright hallways of Sougon Castle with his sister Semele. "Though I wager it is a matter of the snake eating its own tail. The Akatsuki spy does not exist, remember. Instead it is ROOT itself that has been sabotaging the UC all along. What can be gained by kidnapping its own members? Security and loyalty. Morino Ibiki wishes to purge ROOT of suspect elements, before they can betray the organization."

Sakura's head hurt. "It's all speculation."

He laughed. "And so it is. Come, why don't you play with my sister?"

Semele was riding on the back of her pet deer Teru, pulling playfully on the deer's ears, and quite oblivious to the political drama swirling upstairs. "Look!" shouted Sougon Semele, bouncing up and down in excitement. "Look, Sosa, look at those clouds outside. Sosa, they're so pretty!"

Sosano flashed her a smile. "Not as lovely as you, little sister." Semele's green eyes were wide and full of life, flushed with excitement—a bundle of skinny limbs and pigtails and moxie. "But be careful now—don't stand up on Teru, you'll fall—"

"Serves her right," declared the white-tailed doe Teru, tossing her head archly. "It would do the girl
good to learn some humility." Semele giggled, balancing her feet on Teru's back, and tickled the
doe's soft brown fur with her toes. She did not fall.

"Sosa," Semele demanded, "please, when are you gonna take me to play in Tsukai Gardens? I want
to draw the flowers on Walking Stick Hill. You promised."

"I will… but not today. It's not safe to leave the castle right now."

"You leave all the time."

"I'm bigger than you are. Besides, you heard Father."

"Who cares what he thinks? Daddy told you to break up with Sakura, and you didn't listen to him at
all!" Sosano could not dispute it. The little girl wheeled to face Sakura with a giggle. "My daddy
doesn't like you, you know."

"He doesn't like a lot of people."

"Yeah. He's such a big bore, isn't he? Oh, I love him… but really, I think he ought to ride Teru once
in a while. Only Sosa and me, he says. We're the only one he trusts. Oh, and my mother, but she's
dead."

It was easy to forget that Semele's mother was not Seurin Shadowstar, but the courtesan Enyo
Kayura. Semele looked quite a lot like her big brother, in truth… until Sakura stared at her
eyes. *Green eyes, not black.* Semele had never activated the Enshogan.

"My little sister rather takes after her mother." Sosano laughed. "The Lady Enyo Kayura was famous
for her frivolousness. A jaunt, a fight, a secret, even a death—it did not matter. A thing would go in
one ear and out the other, with nary an effect on the morrow. Kayura never dwelled on the past, nor
did she ever think much about the future. That's what my father loved most about her… and what he
sees still in Semele. Do you understand, Sakura? My sister inherited none of our father's more…
melancholy qualities."

*Nor yours, Sosa.*

"And how are your studies at the Iwa Ninja Academy, Semele?" asked Sakura.

Semele scrunched up her face. "Terrible! Being a ninja is way too much work! I told my daddy that
to his face, and he totally agreed with me. I'd rather be a painter. Besides, I have my big brother to
protect me! He promised."

*They've sheltered her,* Sakura realized. Even her father… or perhaps especially him. It was a startling
contrast to the way the Tsuchikage treated everyone else in his family. *She does not know what the
world is really like.*

"Sosa won't always be around," said Sakura softly. "There may even come a time when you need to
protect him."

The advice fell on deaf ears. "Aw," Semele complained, "why so serious?"

"Well… sometimes… that's what grown up people have to do."

"You mean I've got to grow up? And be like this?" Semele imitated her father Sougon Sawar
grinding his teeth, the sight of it in the little girl so absurdly funny that Sakura had to laugh. "Just
shoot me, please!"
"Now, now, Semele, let's get carried away," remarked Sosano. "Sakura has not yet started to grind her teeth—thank goodness. She just wants the best for you. Think of Sakura as your… big sister."

"Really? I never had a big sister before."

"I've got a little sister," Sakura told her. "Kyoki. A little younger than you. You remind me of her."

"Does she like mint chocolate chip ice cream with sprinkles?"

"Her favorite."

Semele considered this for a moment. "Then I guess we can be sisters!"

She leaped off Teru, running over to Sakura to hug her and showering her with little light kisses. There was a joyful and talkative family reunion for several minutes as Sakura was admitted properly into the Sougon clan as an honorary member. Then, just as quick, Semele scampered off again, dashing down the hallway with Teru, both her older siblings forgotten.

Sakura watched her go off with a smile. "There goes the only member of your family I like."

Sosano turned to Sakura. He was not laughing. "We all indulge little Semele too much, I fear. Even my father. She reminds Sawar of her mother, Enyo Kayura… the only woman that he ever truly loved."

"Not Seurin Shadowstar?"

"My mother was too strong for him. Sawar saw her as a rival. A sister. A wife. But love? No. Seurin was all that could be desired in a woman, but he could never dominate her. As he did Enyo Kayura."

The courtesan Enyo Kayura was dead. Killed by Lee Sheeptamer of the infamous pirate gang called the Silla Brotherhood, which was in turn destroyed by Sougon Sawar in the legendary Battle of Three Wolves. "Why?"

"To the man who has lost everything, there are only two ways in which he may go. Either toward God, or toward a woman. Sawar lost the war, he lost his wife, and he lost his father. Kayura came into his barren life as a beam of radiance—a mature Semele, writ larger and more beautiful. I did not know Kayura well, but from a glance you could see that she was all that Sawar always wanted. Wanted and never had. Uncomplicated, unsophisticated, uninterested in the shadows of the past. If Lee Sheeptamer had not murdered her, the world might be different… be that as it may. Enyo Kayura is dead, and Seurin as well, yet Sougon Sawar still lives."

_Fate goes as fate must._

Sakura was quiet for a moment.

She filled the uncomfortable silence by leaning to look out the window. On this side of Sougon Castle, the windows opened out to peer down over the south side of Uzaemo Square, toward Kindness Hospital. For some reason she looked first for Rock Lee, perhaps hoping for a glance of his friendly, laughing face, though Lee's room was located on the opposite face of the building. Rock Lee did not appear. Instead, absurdly, the view was dominated by a giant canvas poster, covering the north face of the almost the entire hospital. It must have come up during the night. Several names had already been defaced, the white canvas graffitied by protesters—yet for all that, the giant type was still clearly visible across the entire Overlook.

The poster was an advertisement.
THE THIRD TRIAL

of

The 54th Iwa Chuunin Exam

An epic clash of the strongest genin in the world!

The fate of the United Countries versus the Confederacy!

The greatest chuunin exam in history!

Who shall lead his village to ultimate victory?

Matches begin August 20th in Aoyama Chuunin Exam Stadium!

Tickets on sale now!

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ROUND ONE ================== ROUND
TWO ========================= QUARTERFINAL ===========
SEMIFINAL ==============FINAL

Haruno Sakura (4) ... ... ... ... Onira Kawai (1) ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... 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The Third Trial is less than two weeks away, thought Sakura. She did not need a giant advertisement to remind her. The endgame of the chuunin exam approaches, and with it the fate of the United Countries. They might survive the Shadow War only to stumble into a real one.

Altogether, only 18 genin had made it to the Third Trial and chosen to continue. Considering the number of genin who had originally entered—1,149 genin distributed in 383 teams—it was a staggeringly low percentage; less than one percent. Those remaining were by far the strongest, drawing almost exclusively from the few A-rank and high B-rank entrants. The United Countries and the Confederacy were represented in approximately equal numbers. There were 6 UC genin, including Sakura. On the other side there were 7 CF genin, and one of them—Touin Yukari—might as well be unaffiliated. Genin from Lightning, Blood, Steam, and Glacier rounded out the rest of the competitors.

The Third Trial of the 54th Iwa Chuunin Exam, like most other chuunin exams, was designed as a one-on-one, knockout tournament. Aoyama Chuunin Exam Stadium, near the Zoo, had been built for the express purpose of holding these chuunin exam matches. Nothing fancy. Just two ninjas standing in a round stone arena and trying to beat each other to death. The loser would be immediately eliminated, while the winner would advance. Eventually, the last two winners would meet in the finals and the champion of the Iwa Chuunin Exam would be crowned.

One did not necessarily have to win the Third Trial in order to become a chuunin—that would be decided by a panel of judges. But a respectable showing was essential. And there were many political ramifications outside the rules of the exam itself. If Sakura was knocked out in the first or second rounds, for example, that would reflect very badly on the strength of the United Countries. Unaffiliated villages would therefore be less likely to join them in their fight against the Confederacy. So it was important for her, and the other UC genin, to get as far in the tournament as possible.

The seeding did not seem to favor either side, though Director Doi had obviously tried to make each match as exciting as possible. Neji vs. Aumono in round two, for instance. Or Raiki vs. Makera in the quarterfinals. Me versus Kawai. The brackets were primarily seeded by the time of completion of the Second Trial. Sakura and Sosano—the two very last ones to finish the Second Trial—had been placed in a special play-in round against the two other last place finishers, Shinren and Ryua. If they advanced far enough, they would meet in the semifinals.

"Worried?" asked Sosano, smiling. "What if Higeru Shinren knocks you out in the first round? Then you'll never have the chance to face me."

"If you even get past Neji." Sakura shot back.

"Ah—a match I look forward to."

Predictably, Sosano then began to boast of his unsurpassed fighting prowess. Sakura rolled her eyes. Fortunately, Sosa was interrupted when footsteps came running down the hallway in some haste. Sakura turned; it was Shikamaru.

"Sakura! There's news."
"About the investigation?"

"About Aoba and Genma." His voice was strained, like a wire stretched to its breaking point. This is nothing good. Shikamaru nodded to Sosano over her shoulder. "Sosano gave us the information we needed. He was right all along—it was ROOT. We hit the secret sites that Sosano provided us, searching for clues to Aoba and Genma's whereabouts. We—we found them."

"And?"

"They're dead. Cut into pieces—charred and burned in some kind of pyre. That's not all. From what we can gather, the bodies were extensively mutilated before death."

"Tortured by ROOT," said Sougon Sosano.

"That's right."

Sakura tried to remember the last time she'd seen Aoba and Genma. Genma and the senbon he chewed in his mouth… Aoba and his dark sunglasses that he never took off. The two leaf chuunin examiners had always greeted her with a smile and a cheer. She'd not known them well, but they were good men both. They loved each other, and ROOT snatched them from their own bed in the dead of the night. Aoba and Genma had never seen the sun again. What had they done to deserve such a fate?

"Why?" she whispered.

"Morino Ibiki claims they were Akatsuki traitors."

The name of Morino Ibiki elicited an almost instinctual response in Sakura's body—a hiss of utter revulsion. "That is a lie."

"They confessed." Shikamaru swallowed. "Of course, confessions under duress of torture are notoriously unreliable. I viewed the videotapes myself. Aoba and Genma were barely conscious, much less rational. Ibiki claims to have found further incriminating evidence in their room. Secret communiques, incendiary equipment, things of that sort. It seems to check out… at first glance."

"But evidence can be planted," finished Sosano, "and you doubt the motives of ROOT."

"Yes."

BOOM!

The explosion was so loud that it shook the walls of Sougon Castle; rattling Sakura to her bones. But it had not come from the castle, she could sense at once. Somewhere farther away—somewhere else in the village.

Sakura rushed to another set of windows. Before her eyes, far to the east, a billowing cloud of smoke rose up in the Shitamachi district. Trees and hilly green spaces were choked in darkness by the roiling ash.

Sosano came up behind her, frowning. "That's Tsukai Gardens."

The headquarters of the United Countries.

Sakura's instincts were on the mark. By the time she and Shikamaru had managed to force their way back to the scene of the explosion, all of Tsukai Gardens was swarming with people, with military
police and ANBU and protestors and curious onlookers. The Hokage's villa had been the target of the bombing. The complex of luxurious apartments was large and extensive, housing a large part of the United Countries's total personnel. A cloud of gray, ashy haze hung over the villa, suffused with the scent of burning wood.

It was not as bad as Sakura feared, however. A large-enough bomb could have destroyed the entire villa. Instead most of the complex remained undamaged, at least directly. The Hokage's own personal apartments had survived without a scratch. Across from the windows of the Hokage's apartments, the famous kaleidoscopic flowers of Walking Stick Hill remained untouched—blooming richly in the late summer light. Tsunade was not the target.

Instead it was the opposite side of the villa that had been destroyed.

Here the ground was blackened and still smoldering with smoke, the area strewn with the wreckage of buildings that no longer existed. The epicenter of the explosion was the villa's main conference center, Sakura saw. The place where the principals of the United Countries had most recently discussed a preemptive attack on Iwa.

"Sakura! Shikamaru!" It was Kankuro, standing on the outskirts of the ruined landscape. Soot covered his sand-nin uniform, blackened his painted face. His voice had a wild pitch to it. "Sakura —"

Sakura gripped the boy's shoulders. "Kankuro. What happened?"

"Temari and me... we were walking toward the villa when it blew up. We were gonna train with Baki-sensei, you see. He'd scheduled a session with us after he got done meeting with the stone-nins. He was negotiating with them over the United Countries, you know, all that—that Ambassador crap."

"Where's Baki-sama now?"

Kankuro only shook his head.

And did not answer.

Sakura's heart was pounding, her mouth dry as dust. She pushed through the crowd to the center of the explosion. The conference center building had collapsed into rubble. Several shinobi corpses were lying half-buried in piles of debris, almost all UC, their bodies maimed and disfigured; casualties of a brutal and carefully orchestrated terrorist attack. She did not see Baki. Instead she saw a girl with straw-blond hair, kneeling in the smoking wreckage.

"Temari!"

Evidently Temari had found something. The sand-nin knelt down and grasped with her fingers at something hidden below the blackened rubble. Shook the object free and lifted it gently—a heavy, metal clanging echoing against the concrete stones underneath. Somehow, Sakura knew what it would be even before it had pulled clear.

The false skin had been burned away from the arm, showing the metal plates underneath—showing the joints and wires, the intricately crafted mechanical fingers.

A puppet arm.

The arm of Akasun Baki, one of Suna's greatest shinobi.
He was dead.
To Shield and Serve

Sabaku Temari, all in white, stood vigil beside her sensei's bier, fingers curled about the hilt of her great War Fan.

At dusk, the interior of the mausoleum of Katsu-ji Temple turned dim and eerie. The last light of day slanted down through the high windows, washing the towering likenesses of the Five Gods of Zen in a red gloom. Around their altars, scented candles flickered whilst deep shadows gathered in the gloom and crept silently across the tiled floors. The echoes of the evensongs died away as the last worshipers were departing. Sakura approached in silence.

"Temari. It's late." Her voice was swallowed in the cavernous gloom. "Let's go back to the Zoo."

Her friend turned with eyes dark with grief—eyes like chips of flint. Her hands tightened their grip on her War Fan. As if she let go, even for a moment, she would be forever lost. "I will stand the night."

"Let Kankuro stand. Or Shikamaru."

The two boys were there as well, recently arrived with Sakura at Katsu-ji Temple. The day had been filled with a flurry of meetings, a maelstrom of frenzied activity in response to the assassination of Akasun Baki. Only Temari had shunned it all for silence. Only she had stood alone in the great halls of Katsu-ji Temple, from dawn to dusk, keeping watch over the charred remains of her dead sensei.

Shikamaru nodded. The boy put his hands gently around Temari's shoulders. "There's no need for you to do this by yourself."

"Shika." Temari's voice softened at her lover's touch. "You're kind, Shika. But you do not know the customs of the Earth Country. You did not know Baki-sensei, or you would not say that."

Sakura glanced over at Kankuro. The sand-nin boy seemed shrunk, diminished… almost ghostly. Perhaps it was the white mourning robes he wore. Perhaps it was his face. Clean of paint, clean of all artifice, Kankuro looked as vulnerable and innocent as an angel. Young, Sakura thought, he's so young, though he was a year older than her. Sakura wondered how she had ever been afraid of him.

Temari stared at them all in turn. "I was a girl of twelve when I stood my first vigil. It is a ritual that all Suna academy students must undergo in order to receive their forehead protectors and become genin—a ritual of prayer, fasting, and penance. The temple where I spent the night was in the middle of the howling desert. In a white robe I knelt upon the rough stone floor before the altar of Atropus, God of Time. By dawn my knees were raw and bloody. 'All shinobi must bleed, Temari,' Baki-sensei said, when he saw. 'Blood is the seal of our devotion. To shield and serve our people, our blood is the sacrifice that we offer to fate.' With the ancestral sword of my father Baki-sensei tapped me on the shoulder; the blade was so sharp that even that light touch cut through my robe, so I bled anew. I never felt it. A girl knelt that night… a kunoichi of Sunagakure rose. It was the proudest moment of my life." Her voice broke. "Baki-sensei stood watch over me for a day and a night. I shall do no less for him."

Silence.

"Then we will stand together," said Sakura.

And so they did.
For a time they were alone with Baki's corpse. The air was smoky with incense, with candles and crystals and the sickly sweet smell of death. At midnight the gongs began to beat. The deep brass beats tolled across Katsu-ji Temple, across the Overlook, filling the wind with a roaring dirge of thunder. The hinges of the great mausoleum gates swung open as several hundred Kiyome priests and monks filed in for their devotions. None of the devout paid Sakura or her friends any mind. They made a circuit of the temple, worshiping at each of the five Zen altars of Khiton, Tethis, Dymeter, Cirsa, and Atropus, and then before the statue of the Sage of Six Paths, raised on a marble pedestal above them all. To each god they made sacrifice, to each they sang a hymn. Sweet and solemn rose their voices. Sakura closed his eyes to listen, but opened them again when she began to sway. I am more weary than I knew. She'd slept hardly at all since the day of the explosion in Tsukai Gardens.

When the dawn rose, casting rays of soft golden light over Baki's flag-draped coffin, it was like waking from a dream.

Temari stirred slowly, stretching her limbs. Half her body was numb from standing in place so long. Sakura was not all that much better. Kankuro rubbed his eyes, stifling a yawn. Shikamaru went to his girlfriend and gave her a kiss. The kiss was long and gentle and bittersweet. Shikamaru had to go, he explained. The Hokage was expecting him to continue the investigation into the murders of Sougon Shirasu and Akasun Baki at once. They had a few promising clues, but nothing concrete yet. It was almost certainly the same person that was responsible for both murders, he thought. A breakthrough might happen any minute.

Sakura took her leave as well. "I have to find Sosano," she said. "He's waiting for me at Sougon Castle. He says he might have a lead—"

Temari's voice cut her off suddenly, her voice lashing out like a whip. "You have such terrible taste, Sakura."

"What?"

"In boyfriends, Sakura. You always pick the very worst one."

It was the last thing that Sakura expected her to say, at this moment, in this place. She was not sure whether to be angry or bewildered. "What the hell does that have to do with anything? Sosa—he didn't…"

"Did he? I do not know. But you cannot be sure either."

"It was ROOT."

"You're in denial, Sakura. You're in total denial."

Sakura took a step back. "You're in grief, Temari. You don't know what you're saying."

"This is not about Baki-sensei, Sakura. I am not telling you who to love. Do you remember our conversation in Inaho Teahouse? Love is a fickle thing, and no one knows which way it will blow. We do not choose who shall take our heart. I am only asking you to love with both eyes open. See the truth about Sougon Sosano, this boy who wants to destroy you!"

"He's helping us."

"How can you be so blind? You are a genius, a brilliant ninja. But you cannot see the truth writ on every line of this boy's face. You killed Sougon Sosano's cousin with your bare hands in Red Rock Cliff. Your sensei, Tsunade the Betrayer, killed his mother on Deathtrap Mountain. He thinks a leaf-nin assassinated his uncle. He wants vengeance on your entire village, Sakura! He is a Sougon
through and through, don't you understand?"

"You're wrong. He's not like the rest of his family."

"Oh, Sakura. What is it about these bad boys that attracts you so? First it was Uchiha Sasuke, who abandoned you for Konoha's greatest enemy. Now it is Sougon Sosano, who has been your enemy from the start! The cycle is as predictable as the rising and the setting of the sun. What is it you like so much, Sakura? Is it strength? Overwrought sentimentality? Or is it simply just the danger? You could have chosen somebody nice. Like Rock Lee."

"Rock Lee?" Sakura could hardly choke back her words of outrage. "Rock Lee doesn't even have legs."

"Ah, and there it is, I suppose. Just as simple as that. You think you're too good for Lee. You're too good for everyone, except the handsome, mysterious prodigy with the famous bloodline." The other girl shook her head. "You're wrong, Sakura. These boys you love so much are worse than trash."

"Damnit, Temari, why—"

"Because you are my friend, Haruno Sakura. Because I care about you, and I don't want to hold a funeral vigil for you, too." Temari's voice was deadly soft, her hard eyes rimmed red with tears. "I have lost enough of the people that I care about."

Sakura turned away in anger. How could Temari say such things in the holy mausoleum of Katsu-ji Temple, next to the very corpse of her sensei? But when she looked upon the faces of Kankuro and Shikamaru for support, she only beheld a kind of embarrassed silence… a complicit silence. They agree with her, they all agree with her. My friends trust Sosano like they trust a rattlesnake. What did that say about her? Was Sakura truly blinded by lust, like everyone kept on telling her? She did not want to dwell on it.

"I'm sorry."

"As am I."

There was nothing to say after that.

Sakura did not end up looking for Sosano, after all. Instead she found herself back at Tsukai Gardens, in the shadow of the explosion that had destroyed the north side of the Hokage's villa and taken Akasun Baki's life.

The complex was a bustle of activity. Not only were new defensive measures being erected to protect them from further attack, a burst of diplomacy was reshaping the alliances that undergird both the United Countries and the Confederacy. The Fifth Hokage had just finished with Unchiku Narumi, the highest representative of the Wave Country in Iwa. "Wave has agreed to join the United Countries," the Hokage told Sakura. "A strange time to finally hitch their carriage to our train, so to speak… but all for the better. Narumi knew Baki well, and is shocked by his unprovoked assassination. You did well to befriend Narumi's students in the First Trial, too. The wave-nins have put the cause of justice ahead of potential profit."

It was not all good news, of course. The Confederacy was also increasing in numbers. The Blood Country, evidently sensing an imminent Confederacy victory, was planning to formally join Sougon Sawar's alliance. The leader of Blood, the Warlord Makoto Muro, was an unabashed mercenary for hire. Sawar had enticed him into the fold with promises of gold, territory, and the glow of victory. It was rumored that the Grass Country was not far behind.
"Everyone loves a winner," said Tsunade, disgusted. "The stench of death hangs over the United Countries… quite literally. That damn woman, Utatane the Sleeper, she is not wrong about that. Akasun Baki was the driving force behind our alliance with the sand-nins. With him dead, and I impotent to protect him, our careful calculations are falling apart at the seams. You find me at a most inopportune time, Sakura. What do you want?"

"Has there been any news of Baki's murderer?"

"There has." Tsunade sighed, looking weary and tired. *She has not slept either.* "An investigation led by Dr. Micho and Shikamaru has carefully reconstructed the scene of the crime. Pieces of the bomb were collected and analyzed… it seems a special jutsu was used to construct the active mechanism. A jutsu that is controlled by a single clan in the entire world. Certain anomalous samples from Sougon Shirasu's body were also matched to this part of the bomb. All the evidence indicate that the bomber as the same person who killed Sougon Shirasu—using similar methods of murder and concealment. One person responsible for starting this whole Shadow War."

"Who?"

"Haghira Doi."

"Director Doi?" Sakura could not keep the surprise out of her voice. Doi Dragonsight was Tsunade's closest ally in Iwa… or so he had seemed. Could he really be responsible for the bombing?

"Do you believe it, Tsunade-sensei?"

She did not answer directly. "It really does not matter what I think. The Tsuchikage does believe it. It seems even he cannot imagine that I would bomb my own house and kill my own right-hand man. No, I have no motive for this attack. Doi, on the other hand… well, perhaps it might be thought that an attack on the UC would be blamed on Sawar, giving Doi political cover for a coup attempt. The Sun Breaker is hardly the most rational man, as you know well. His grievances with Doi run deep; he would not flinch from a chance to destroy his most dangerous rival. Sawar is preparing to arrest the Dragonsight as we speak."

"Arrest him! But then… then the Tsuchikage will completely control the High Council."

"Yes."

Sakura had quite a lot to say about that, none of it flattering to Sougon Sawar. In her mind it seemed blindingly obvious that Doi was being framed. She opened her mouth to speak, but just then the door to the Hokage's office slipped open.

"I thought I would let myself in." The suave, accented voice belonged to none other than the Ambassador Extraordinare from Genoa across the sea—the diplomat by the exotic and most distinguished name of Sir Immanuel Burgouine. "I hope you don't mind, Tsunade."

"Mr. Burgouine," said the Hokage flatly. "It is always a pleasure to enjoy your company."

Her tone was not quite sincere, of course, but the Ambassador deigned not to notice it. Besides, the Hokage's actions spoke louder than her words. Certainly no other diplomat would have dared to barge in the Hokage's personal office without leave or notice. There was a good reason for that. Among the hidden villages Tsunade was the big dog: the leader of the largest and most powerful military force in the North. But in comparison with the three Southern empires across the Sea of the Sage the power relationship was reversed. The United Republic of Genoa, Immanuel Burgouine's employer, was twice the size of the Five Country and probably four times as powerful. Burgouine wore the wealth and prestige of Genoa literally on his sleeve: a fine, pin-striped suit in the Southern
fashion, made of silk fabric so rich it would have beggared a lesser village's coffers just to acquire it.

*Do not underestimate this man,* Tsunade had told her once. *He is the representative of the most powerful empire on the planet. He can be our greatest friend… or our deadliest enemy.*

Burgouine smiled oily. "I am glad you think so. Why, I just met with the Tsuchikage this morning, and you are really so much more pleasant to talk to." He pulled up a chair and lit a large scented cigar. "Tsunade, my friend. I am here to help."

"Out of the goodness of your heart, I'm sure."

"Oh, Tsunade, you have made so many enemies. Akatsuki. The Confederacy. ANBU ROOT. They are closing in on like the baying hounds on a wounded fox… the smell of blood in the air. In these trying times, don't you desperately need a true friend? This is the hour of your greatest need."

"And in return for your… help?"

"I will not mince words. The United Republic of Genoa is, and will remain, officially neutral in your conflict with the Confederacy. However… we Genoans are *very* interested in the United Countries. We admire your extensive borrowing of the political principles of Genoa into the UC charter. The President of Genoa, as you know well, is very nearly your besotted fan. Genoa wishes to extend its support to you in your difficulties. Yet there remains cause for concern. If the North was united into one great alliance… well, how that does benefit Genoa?"

"Stability in the North. Mutual cooperation against international threats such as Akatsuki, which grow even in the South."

"A rival power," said the Ambassador bluntly. "Stability in the North is overrated… why, Genoa came out quite well from the Third Ninja War by selling supplies to all sides, as I recall. But a united North is a different story. One that could destabilize the delicate tripartite balance of power in the South. The three empires of Genoa, Ilithia, and Ru Daunu are at peace. We'd like to keep it that way… for now."

"You want assurances."

"Of a sort." Burgouine smiled. "As you know, trade between the North and the South… between Genoa and the nations of the United Countries, have been growing for many years. Free trade is the lifeblood of any great economy. I believe there could be a great partnership between our two powers. Much like the one that lies at the heart of the United Countries charter. A common market for resources, without tariffs or internal customs barriers. I believe free trade would not only improve our economies, it would also strengthen the ties between our two peoples— preventing future conflict. You see? Stability and growth."

"I see your logic."

"I knew we would see eye to eye on the matter. However… ah… the Wind Country has been sadly troublesome. It has been our largest trading partner in the North since ancient times, you understand. Indeed, the legendary Whale Road across the Sea of the Sage leads directly from Hoath to Sawara. Five hundred years ago, the Sage of Six Paths crossed this same road to bring his crusade to the North. But in recent years, particularly under the Fourth Kazekage—and unfortunately continued by his son—the Wind Country has adopted a posture of hostility toward trade with the United Republic of Genoa. They've erected numerous tariffs against our goods… indeed, they've put a stranglehold on Genoan exports. The President is not pleased."
Tsunade frowned. "For a reason. The Wind Country is far poorer than Genoa. By dumping a massive quantity of finished goods into Wind you've created a massive trade deficit with the wind-kin... thousands of pounds of gold shipped back across the Sea of the Sage every year, draining Wind of its financial resources as well as weakening its own internal industries."

"Come, Tsunade. Do you really believe that hot air? The Wind Country is literally a desert. Genoa is the world's greatest economic engine... without our food, our wood and steel, our machinery and electronics, our textiles and weaponry and medicine, even our perfume and tobacco... the sand-kin would nothing more than be a bunch of naked savages riding camels in the dunes. Yes, Genoa gets gold in return. It is a mutually beneficial relationship."

"The Wind Country was once the heart of the Birthright Empire, the greatest empire the world has ever seen... either in the North or the South. Their present, degraded state is the result of a series of misfortunes. Some would even say it is a policy of deliberate malice, to strip an once great nation of its resources."

"Ah, so the Wind Country should be restored to its ancient glory, is that it? That is the same logic that led to the December 7th attack, I remind you."

"Be careful, Mr. Burgouine. We were talking about trade tariffs. The United Countries charter includes internal free trade, with controls, among signatory countries. It says nothing about foreign trade outside of our community. The UC Security Council has the authority to negotiate such future trade agreements, yes... but only by unanimous consent. Including that of the Kazekage."

"The Kazekage is a boy of fifteen. I'm confident you can bring him along. I ask only for your assurance of support—in outline, not detail. The minutiae of any trans-continental trade pact can be worked out later. Now... do you want my help, or not? I promise you, it will be worth your while."

The Hokage paused. "Very well."

"Then here is the situation. Someone bombed Tsukai Gardens and killed your man Baki. If Sawar gets his way, Doi Dragonsight will take the fall for the murder. He looks awfully guilty, I grant you... but he is not the true culprit. Doi did not bomb your villa. Nor did he kill Sougon Shirasu. I think you know who did—just as well as I do. Yet you do not act, Tsunade. Why do you refuse to make this choice? The rot must be cleansed from the roots if the tree is to survive. Are you afraid of what you will find, if you dig too far beneath the surface?"

"Is this the aid you offer me, Mr. Burgouine? Words?"

"Ah, but words are a most valuable currency. Words are history, and information... and secrets. Do not refuse my tale, I implore you. It is an old tale, and a most enlightening one. As told to me by your old comrade... Orochimaru the White Snake."

"Orochimaru?" Tsunade frowned. "As I recall, you gave him asylum in Genoa, after he was exiled from the rest of the ninja world. You wanted him to teach you his forbidden jutsu."

"That was the idea, yes. In practice he proved quite the troublemaker. Conducting experiments on unwilling subjects, you know, and other such unfortunate incidents. The President of Genoa was quite upset about it. Eventually we had to drive him out."

"Your President is a good man. I shall have to write him another letter."

"The two of you do keep up such a lovely correspondence. I think it is because you both share a certain... idealism, shall we say? Still... I would not so quick to praise Genoa. There was a reason..."
we invited Orochimaru to Genoa in the first place—even knowing what kind of creature he was. At the time the White Snake was considered a vital resource. In the South we also have knowledge of spiritual energy, and its uses. Do not forget it was in Genoa that the Sage of Six Paths himself created the principles of chakra. It was in Genoa that he awakened the Rinnegan eye. Yet over the centuries the development of chakra jutsu in the South had become stagnant. There was a hunger for more advanced techniques from the North. Orochimaru knew that—and it led him to make a fateful decision."

"What are you getting at?"

"As you know, in the Third Ninja War, Genoa was a vital supplier to the Fire Country: foodstuffs, materiel, weapons. Without our constant aid, Fire would have starved. It was the difference in the war."

"And we are grateful for your assistance, for which you and your countrymen were amply rewarded in gold."

"It was not just gold. The mines of the Earth Country are overflowing with gold, but we got a better deal from the leaf-nins. Orochimaru came to us with a deal, representing the Third Hokage. He offered us a Sharingan."

"What?"

Sakura stared at Tsunade-sensei. The Hokage could not hide a look of shock on her face.

Imanuel Burgouine smiled. "You did not know. You were on the frontlines, and the Third Hokage did not trust you. At that time the White Snake was his closest adviser, along with Danzou the Termite. But if you want the truth of it, ask those decrepit old men on the High Council. Ask Koharu Uatatane the Sleeper. They know."

"Keep on talking."

"It was an offer we could not refuse. We Genoans have more advanced technology, yes, but far less powerful chakra jutsu. And we have no bloodlines at all. They all appeared in the North. And to have possession of the Sharingan… oh yes, the earth-nins had a similar treasure, but they refused us. The honorable Seurin Shadowstar would never have done it, even at the cost of losing the war. Come to think of it, she did."

"What was the deal?"

"The initial deal was to sell Uchiha eyes, in exchange for a certain amount of supplies. We wanted Uchiha bodies. Orochimaru said if we signed an exclusive trade agreement for Konoha for the duration of the Third Ninja War, he would give us a live child. We accepted, and the deal was done. Surprising how easy is to make a young Uchiha boy disappear in the middle of a war."

"Uchiha Shion," whispered Sakura.

She paled, realizing the truth. The Shion Affair. The scandal had nearly ripped Konoha apart at the height of the war effort. Even a decade later, the memory of their disappeared child had haunted the Uchiha clan. Uchiha Shisui had never gotten over the disappearance of his little brother.

"Yes," said Burgouine.

"And the child now?" asked Tsunade.
"Dead. A sad story of scientific malpractice…. I won't bore you with the details. In any case, we held up our end of the bargain, and—ultimate failure though it was—we would have made it again. But by then the war was over, Konoha had won, and they were not interested in another trade. That seemed the end of it…” Burgouine smiled. "Unfortunately, the Uchiha clan found out about it."

"How?"

"Orochimaru, of course. His experiments caught up to him and Sarutobi Hiruzen, softening with age, finally had to push him out of the village. In revenge the White Snake tipped off the Uchiha to the real story behind the Shion Affair. Tensions within Konoha were already critical… that was the straw that broke the hawk's back, if you understand my meaning."

"The Uchiha Massacre," Tsunade said. "There were always rumors… but I never heard this story."

"You have been away too long. You are the Hokage, but you do not even know the history of your own village. Did you know for example… that Uchiha Itachi, the public culprit of the attack on his family, was a secret member of ANBU ROOT? That he was spying on his family for Danzou? Orochimaru told us all."

Tsunade did not speak for a long moment. Then she whispered, "Thank you for your help, Mr. Burgouine. I shall not forget it."

The Ambassador bowed, his eyes inscrutable.

As soon as Burgouine withdrew, the Fifth Hokage flew into a rage. She punched her office desk—smashing the fine polished wood into a pile of twisted smithereens. "They know! Utatane knows, the Council knows. They didn't tell me. Damn that woman! Damn her and Danzou!"

Sakura felt nauseous. What did I witness today? Her chest felt like it had been soaked in ice.

The Hokage gripped Sakura by the shoulders. Sakura had never seen the look in her sensei's eyes, that she saw then.

"Tsunade-sensei?"

"You will not repeat anything that you heard today. Ever. To anyone. This is S-level classified information. You know the violation for that." The penalty of death. "Do you understand, Sakura?"

"I understand." Sakura could hardly speak. "It's true. Isn't it? About the Third Hokage… he's just as horrible as Micho said. Just like Orochimaru. And… the Uchiha Massacre… Shion…"

"There were always stories surrounding the Uchiha Massacre. I do not know the truth. But here are the facts. There had been a falling out between the Uchiha and the village leadership. Resentment from the Kyuubi attack… natural tensions… and then this sick story. If, as Ambassador Burgouine claims, Uchiha Itachi was a member of ANBU ROOT… if he was spying on the clan on behalf of Danzou… then…” Tsunade's voice trailed off. "I heard a rumor once during my exile, but I gave it no credence. The rumor went like this. The Uchiha clan had been planning a rebellion."

"A rebellion?" Sakura paled.

"Again, this is speculation. You can imagine what this would have done to the village. It could very have been destroyed, and surely the rebellion would have metamorphosed in a wider conflict, a Fourth Ninja War. If such was truly in the offing, the Third Hokage would have wanted it nipped in the bud. You see what that means?"
"But… the Uchiha… I mean, the Uchiha was one of the founding clans of the village."

"Yes. And the Uchiha Founder, Uchiha Madara, was killed by the other Founder, my grandfather Senju Hashirama. Sentimentality means very little in the ninja world. A final solution to the Uchiha problem… I don't doubt that the Third would have considered it. And if Itachi was really working for that bloodthirsty bastard Danzou… well, the connection is obvious. But I will tell you this. Uchiha Fugaku had a best friend… his closest wartime comrade…"

"My father," said Sakura. "They grew up together. They were on the same team—comrades, both on the battlefield, and in the village. My father introduced Fugaku-sama to his wife." She knew the tale all too well. How many times had her father repeated it? It was because of their family friendship that she had first met Sasuke. First as babies, and then as playmates. They'd taken a dislike to each other immediately. Sasuke was a bit of a bully, always pulling on her hair, and she punched Sasuke in the nose once so hard that she broke it. Sakura remembered she would always start to cry whenever their mothers forced them to play together. But Sasuke's brother was always very nice, she had thought. Itachi was such a polite young man. Whenever she got a cut from roughhousing, Itachi would always blow on the wound softly, and smile, and poke her forehead, and make her feel all better.

A chill ran down her spine just from thinking about it.

"Yes. Haruno Arashi. He was the greatest hero still left over from the war, after the Sannin’s… inglorious departures, and the death of Namikaze Minato. He sat on the High Council and Hiruzen-sensei trusted him. So did Fugaku. Arashi was the only one implicitly trusted by both sides. It's possible… again, this is speculation… but if there was a rebellion, a crisis… Arashi would have been the only one with the power to negotiate a peaceful resolution. Certainly he would've had the time to attempt it. Orochimaru had fled two years before the Uchiha Massacre—according to Ambassador Burgouine, that was when he tipped off the Uchiha about the secret trade with Genoa. But then…"

"The wasting sickness." *Tuberculosis*. No one understood why it had hit him. He had always been so strong, so healthy. It had hit him, right to the core, and he just wasted away, slowly, day by day, in bed. No one could do anything. Not even Tsunade-sensei, she knew that now. "He died a few months before the Uchiha Massacre."

"How convenient."

"You think… you think my father was murdered?"

"Ninjas rarely die peaceful deaths. As for the truth of the matter, I cannot tell you."

Sakura did not know what to say. There seemed a horrible unreality to everything— the room, the Hokage's words, the air itself. It was hard even to focus on her father's murder. For some reason all she could think was, *Does Sasuke know?* Was this secret why Sasuke had abandoned the village—abandoned her? If Sasuke did not know before, he certainly knew now. The White Snake would have told him all.

"ROOT," she whispered at last.

Only then did Sakura notice that her hands were bleeding. Her nails were digging so tight into her palms that they drew blood.

"ROOT," repeated Senju Tsunade.

And was silent.
It suits him, Sakura thought. The humble adobe was as spare and restrained as Doi himself. Of course, the ancestors of the Haghira clan had lived in opulent luxury once upon a time. The ruins of the ancient Haghira Tower still stood on Aoyama's highest hill, covered in faded stone gargoyles and haunted by the spirits of the dead buried in the Catacombs below. The tower of ghosts.

It was revealing that Doi had chosen to build his home near Haghira Tower. Perhaps it was a reminder of what he had lost. All his dreams turned to lifeless ruins, like Seurin Shadowstar. Seurin was the only woman he had ever loved. It was said that the day Doi learned of Seurin's death he had vowed to never take a woman into his bed again… and he never had since.

In fact, as far as Sakura knew, Doi had never laid with anyone except Seurin.

Except once.

The byproduct of that unfortunate tryst kicked down the door of Doi's house with a vengeance seventeen years in the making. Haghira Geigin was positively bursting with glee at his father's downfall. An impressive downfall it was indeed. Shock troops ringed the small mud hut in every direction, like sieging a castle, and the party that entered was as illustrious as a painted fresco.

First came Geigin, breaking into his own house.

Then Nobunaga Kikuko and Hiroshi Keel of Kirigakure, two of the Swordsmen of the Mist.

Then Senju Tsunade, and her assorted retinue, including Team Tsunade.

Then Sougon Sawar.

Sosano walked by his father's side. So did his teammate Bakura Orajuchi. Sougon Charasu, the Tsuchikage's brother and iron right hand, guarded Sawar's back. Evidently Charasu was feeling much improved after his bout of illness. Rounding out the stone-nin continent were not less than three members of the Iwa High Council: Chuzuru Kazan, Iranki Okita the Fearless, and Tokako Matsushita the Stonecrusher.

The hut was so small that the party could barely all fit in it. Fortunately, only one person awaited them inside.

Haghira Doi stood calmly against the far wall. He was a thin, skeletal man, as black and spindly as a long-necked spider. Or perhaps a leafless, gnarled tree. Oddly, his grim face seemed to contain a trace of amusement. "You didn't have to kick down the door, Geigin. It was open."

"Haghira Doi." Sougon Sawar spoke in the icy tones of judgement. "You are under arrest for treason."

Doi laughed.

"I do not see what is so amusing. Our investigation has exposed you as the mastermind behind my
brother's murder. Do you deny the charge?"

"I declare my complete innocence."

"Liar!" shouted Geigin. "You killed Shirasu-sama! You wanted to overthrow the rightful Tsuchikage and subordinate Iwa to the apes. You scum, you will hang in Uzaemo Square and patriotic villagers will spit on your corpse!"

"That is quite a list of crimes. I confess, I have lied once or twice in my life. I am a renowned killer. Ambition dwells in my heart. Yet for all my sins… I have no regrets but one. Truly, no man has ever had a more worthless son than me."

"Shut up!" Geigin shrieked. A vein almost popped out of the boy's forehead. He would have rushed Doi with his fists if Orajuchi had not restrained him. "You are not my father! Sawar-sensei cared more for me than you ever did!"

Doi said nothing.

"You will not be hanged," assured Iranki Okita the Fearless. "That is why Tsunade, Kikuko, myself, and the others are here to witness this arrest. We have all agreed you are not to be condemned until a fair tribunal has established your guilt or innocence. The stakes are too high for there to be any mistake. Until then you are to be held in Sakaicho Prison, pending trial."

And so it was.

Sakura watched as Haghira Doi was escorted out of his home in chains. He is a prisoner now, and at the Tsuchikage's mercy. Sakaicho Prison was one of the more infamous prisons in the world. It was built underground deep into the side of the Dreamstone Mountains, stretching hundreds of meters under the earth in its namesake Sakaicho district. It was not a place that people escaped from easily. Nor was it a place known for its safeguards to protect prisoners. Inconvenient people disappeared in the prison all the time, never to come out back again.

Sougon Sawar has won.

"This is a farce," muttered Temari. The crowds were rapidly dispersing in the wake of Doi's successful and bloodless arrest, the unlikely party scattering to their usual stations. "The masses may be fooled… but I am not. The Dragonsight was not the man who murdered Baki-sensei."

"How can you be sure, sister?" asked Kankuro. "All the evidence…"

Sakura drifted away from the Sand Siblings's conversation, walking back toward the house. The door was knocked into pieces, its wattle and daub frame a silent witness to the ruination of its occupant.

The Hokage was the only person that remained. She lingered in Doi's plain little house, standing in Doi's plain little living room. Tsunade was looking at a framed picture above the rough stone mantle. No, not a picture. Calligraphy. The lines of the script flowed together in an extraordinary, unforgottably elegant style. Sakura looked more closely to read the words:

**INTO THE RUSHING GRACE**

It was a line from an obscure Kiyome sutra, if Sakura remembered correctly—a sutra about the afterlife beyond death. Sakura had not known that Haghira Doi was religious.

"He is not," the Hokage replied. "Nor was Seurin Shadowstar. But she was a lover of literature. The
sutras of the Kiyome Toso are the most beautiful kinds of poetry, she used to tell me. *Into the Rushing Grace.* That was her favorite line. Seurin interpreted it to mean that change is the essential process of all existence. It is neither to be feared nor hoped: but simply ridden, like the inexorable ocean tide."

"Is that her handwriting?"

"Yes."

"And Doi kept it all these years."

"He would never throw anything that Seurin made away." Her sensei's voice was soft as a fluttering leaf. "That is all he lives for, I think. To keep alive her memory."

"Do you think Doi did it?"

This time Senju Tsunade did not even hesitate. "No."

"Then why—"

"I cannot be sure. The evidence is incontrovertible, it seems. But evidence can be planted. Manipulated. I know Haghira Doi the Dragonsight... he is not a man given to such underhanded tactics as assassination. Nor would he put his own ambition over the greater welfare of his village. Doi is a man of honor. That is why Seurin Shadowstar chose him as her lover over her own brother and husband. No, I do not believe it was Haghira Doi that was responsible for this Shadow War."

"Then who? The Tsuchikage?"

"Perhaps. He has all the motive. If Sougon Shirasu was truly prepared to break with his brother over the matter of Akatsuki, the High Council would have fallen into Doi’s grasp. By killing his brother, Sawar deadlocked the council—and then, by framing Doi, he took control of it himself." The Hokage shook her head. "But I fear it was not Sougon Sawar, either. No… this is the work of a far vaster conspiracy."

"ROOT."

"Yes. Though it galls to me to say it, I now suspect that your boyfriend was right all along. ROOT has been trying to destroy the UC Embassy from the beginning. This talk of an Akatsuki spy was only a shield to deflect suspicion. By killing Sougon Shirasu, Koharu Utatane was able to eliminate one of Doi’s key allies and exacerbate the tension between the UC and the CF. The bombing of Tsukai Gardens accomplished a similar objective by framing Doi and removing him as an internal threat. Now ROOT is perfectly positioned to reap the rewards of their treachery."

Sakura frowned.

"I don't understand. If you knew Doi was innocent... why let the Tsuchikage arrest him? Now the Sun Breaker controls the Iwa High Council. He can do anything he wants... I mean, there's nothing stopping him now. He will attack the United Countries. There's going to be war." It chilled her just to say it.

She hoped the Hokage would contradict her, but her sensei only said, "I agree. There is no possibility for negotiation now... the situation is utterly poisoned, and events have moved too far beyond my hopes. The United Countries and the Confederacy will go to war, and soon. Yet the time for battle is still not... ripe. I cannot tell you more than that."
"You wrote Doi off as a loss. Even though he was innocent."

"On the contrary, one chapter has ended. But the story is far from over. Doi Dragonsight is in prison, I remind you, not dead. And prisons have a way of developing… holes."

Senju Tsunade smiled.

It was the first time that Sakura had ever seen it. Of course, she'd seen Tsunade-sensei smile before. But not like this. It was not a smile of laughter, or amusement, or candor—but of pure and utter malice. It was the smile of a child's worst nightmares. The sight froze Sakura to the bone and stopped the breath in her chest. *So this is the true face of the Queen of Torment.* As long as she lived, she knew she would never forget it.

The Shadow War drew to its final climax.

"What now?" Sakura whispered.

"Now? We convene our forces in Tsukai Gardens. It is time… to do what I should have done long ago." The Hokage's eyes flashed as she curled her fingers into a fist. "Destroy ROOT!"

"Hokage-sama!"

Both Sakura and Tsunade turned to stare at the unexpected interruption. The cry came from Temari. She ran over to them in an agitated state, her chest heaving up and down, as if she'd sprinted half the continent, though it had only been several steps. Temari hardly seemed less agitated than when she'd found the corpse of her sensei in Tsukai Gardens. Kankuro, Dr. Micho, and several other leaf-nins followed close behind.

"What is it?" asked the Hokage.

"It's Shikamaru! We… we just got word." Temari's face had drained of all color. "He's disappeared!"
The Fifth spread a map on the conference room table. Several places all across Iwa were circled and marked: known ROOT hideouts and secret bases. There were more than Sakura expected. Somehow, in the space of barely one month, Utatane's several dozen ROOT operatives had somehow assembled a formidably complex and secure secret, underground operation—in the heart of Iwagakure itself. *Like a fungal virus, she thought, like a festering canker that spreads more quickly the larger it is.*

"It's time," Tsunade declared. "I hoped it would not come to this... but so it has. They have gone too far this time. Like a flourishing weed, like a cancer, ROOT must be dug out of its dark hiding places and eliminated, before they destroy us all. This operation is extremely delicate. We must coordinate and strike all of ROOT in one blow. We will strike tonight."

"And Shikamaru? Where is he?" Temari's lips were a tight line, her face hard with cold fury.

"I don't know."

"If ROOT has kidnapped him—if they are doing to him what they did to the leaf-nins Genma and Aoba—"

"—I don't know," repeated the Hokage. "We must hope for the best... but prepare for the worst."

Sakura shivered. Shikamaru had still not been found... it had been almost two days since anyone had last seen him, as best they could figure. In two days Sakura did not even want to imagine what could have happened. Genma and Aoba had disappeared for a week and when they appeared again it had been in charred, tortured pieces... even if they were really Akatsuki traitors, as ROOT maintained, no one deserved such treatment. There was still a chance that Shikamaru's disappearance had nothing to do with ROOT, of course. But nobody in the room thought that very likely. Knowing what she'd learned about Morino Ibiki, and his methods of interrogation... *no one has seen Ibiki either.*

It was the dead of the night. The Hokage had gathered her most trusted advisors for this secret meeting—the best of the United Countries. Densuke Tosuken the Chameleon. Hattori Otokaze the Shattered. Unchiku Narumi. Ashuju Ikoma of the Dust. Field Commander Sarutobi Inishu. ANBU Squad 1. Hyuuga Hiashi and Dr. Honjo Micho. Round and round they debated the logistics and details of how to proceed with their secret strike against ROOT. The Hokage had acquired intelligence on the locations of ROOT's bases, but did not know the precise strength or identity of their guards. *We don't know which base Shikamaru is in.* Without knowing all the details of each ROOT hideout, they had come up with viable, strong enough strike forces to hit all at once, under cover of night. Dividing their forces to hit each hideout. Even the Hokage herself would be part of the lightning operation—committing her own power to crush ROOT. Holding nothing back.

"I have two final objections," said Dr. Honjo Micho at last.

"Speak."

"First, as you know too well, ROOT's operations here are supported directly from Konoha. Koharu Utatane is merely the instrument of Danzou the Termite, the true power. If we move against ROOT in Iwa—"

"We will act against ROOT in Konoha as well. Kakashi has made all the preparations... he is ready to move at my command."
"Second… what if the mission goes wrong? If there is an extended battle… and if Sougon Sawar decides to strike us when we are divided among ourselves…"

"That we will all die." The Hokage's face was impassive. "It is a risk we must take."

Tosuken frowned. "About what about Utatane the Sleeper? She has struck an alliance with the Sun Breaker, the boy Sosano claims…"

"Leave Koharu Utatane to me. Dr. Micho and I will deal with her… personally."

Tosuken frowned. "Will you kill her?"

Tsunade shook her head. "If it comes to that… no, but that is not the plan. Koharu Utatane remains a member of the Konoha High Council. Technically, her legal authority is equal to mine own. If I kill her, Danzou will have found the final excuse he needs to depose me as Hokage. No, I think I have found a way to remove her power and prevent her from interfering in this mission. But for the rest of ROOT… do what you must. They are our own countrymen, our own brothers and sisters. They are leaf-nins… yet this night, they are also our enemies. They must be stopped before they destroy all we have worked for as part of the United Countries. Do what you must, my friends. Let it be known that this night shall be ROOT's last. Hereafter… ROOT shall no longer exist in the United Countries Embassy!"

And so the darkest mission of Sakura's life began.

Afterward, she could scarcely remember most of it. The Hokage barking out orders. Multiple teams fanning out from Tsukai Gardens in the heavy beating rain, beneath dark thunder clouds, hitting all of ROOT's locations—their known hideouts. Temari and Kankuro went with Hattori Otokaze toward the basement of the Mannen House orphanage and poorhouse in Sakaicho district. Tosuken and Pou and his rain-nins headed for a palatial estate in Aoyama. And so on, and so on. Sakura was assigned to go with ANBU Squad 1 to root out a base in the Street of Beggars. A very secret, lightning operation. It was almost like a dream, a fading nightmare. A thing out of stories, happening to someone else and not to her. The whole mission had an unreal quality to it.

It was the last moments of the mission that scarred her. The last moments that she would never, ever forget.

ANBU Squad 1 and Sakura arrived on a Street of Beggars that was subdued, gray and dark in the rain—though not silent. The Street of Beggars was never silent. There were always those who felt the need to pay coin for sexual entertainment, at any hour of the day. It was cold and wet and foggy. Captain Yamato guided them stealthily through a side door of a particularly notorious establishment on the main thoroughfare—the beating, debauched heart of the rowdy Sakaicho district.

The House of Brotherly Love, the sign said.

"Iwa's biggest boy brothel," whispered Sakura.

The ANBU Captain nodded grimly. "A place where nocturnals visitors are not questioned, and screams unremarked upon. Prepare yourselves, for what we may find here."

The House of Brotherly Love was not particularly active at this time of day, though a few young boy geishas—teenagers mostly, by the looks of them—were lounging in the sitting room, playing at chess or gossiping. A tall thin pimp came over to solicit custom, but Rhino only grabbed him by the throat and slammed him against the tiled walls.

"I know you're working with ROOT," said Rhino. "Tell me where Morino Ibiki is. Now."
The pimp did not require much further persuasion. He scurried along the opulent marble hallways, leading Sakura and the ANBU Squad 1 to a dim, out-of-the-way suite of apartments. The way in was barred by a stout, locked oaken door.

With a single slash Captain Yamato cut through the locked door. Inside was an empty parlor draped in pictures of naked boys, as well as another door, this one made of reinforced steel. Yamato hacked that apart as well.

Behind the steel door was more formidable guards, these of the trained assassin variety. Two ninjas stepped from the shadows, garbed in the black hoods and black animal masks of ANBU ROOT.

Captain Yamato seemed to know the guards. "Stand aside. We're here on orders from the Fifth herself."

Neither made any move to do so. "Are you now, Yamato?" sneered one, his mask carved in the shape of an elephant. "You and what army?"

"That's not how it works, you numbskulls," growled Honeybee. He pulled twin nunchaku from his back.

The elephant-mask guard considered them. "No army at all, then. One ANBU team, and one little genin."

"Enough for your ilk," said Ink. "I've killed men ten times better than you, Torune."

There was a long, tense standoff, silence stretching in time to the pulse of their heartbeats. But suddenly the ROOT guards nodded, touching a hand to their ears. "Understood," Sakura heard the man named Torune say. Then, "Chief Ibiki-sama says you may pass."

The guards parted to either side, revealing a long staircase descending into darkness, with doors to other rooms and hallways at regular intervals. Flickering fluorescent lightbulbs lit the way. My god, Sakura thought, it's an entire torture dungeon.

It took quite a while to reach the bottom.

When they did so, and opened the windowless cell door carved into the stone, they found Shikamaru.

Sakura did not recognize him at first. Shikamaru was naked, and suspended in midair, his ankles and wrists shackled to chains that descended from the ceiling. The chains were arranged in such a way that Shikamaru's limbs were spread out to four corners, his limp head hanging facedown. This stress position itself was very painful, Shikamaru's hands and feet turning blue from lack of circulation, but that was the least of the horror. Instruments of torture lined the walls of the dungeon, every conceivable one known to man's depraved imagination, and all of them had seemingly been applied to Shikamaru's body. His naked flesh was covered in whip wounds and bruises, with acid burns and drill holes, with burns from electric current, with flayed skin exposed to the bloody bone, and with his own feces and vomit. One of Shikamaru's eyes had been gouged out, and half his fingers and toes were missing, the rest either crushed into pulp or with their nails ripped off. The worst thing that was Shikamaru was still conscious, moaning softly. Sakura gagged, overwhelmed by the stench and the horror of it all.

In the shadows of the dungeon, behind the tortured boy, a man in a black trenchcoat stepped forward and smiled.

"A traitor," declared Morino Ibiki. "The boy admitted so himself. Isn't that right, traitor?"
"Oh, yes," whispered the shell of what had once been Shikamaru. "I'm a traitor, I'm Akatsuki scum. I deserve my punishment. Oh, Ibiki-sama, please punish me."

"By the Sage," said Rhino. "What have you done, Ibiki?"

Sakura could barely speak. "The Fifth Hokage outlawed all forms of torture." Her throat was dry as dust. "This is illegal. You will be tried for crimes against humanity."

"I do not answer to the Hokage." The deep scars on Ibiki's face make his sneer positively grotesque. "I am under the jurisdiction of ROOT."

"ROOT has no jurisdiction here."

"On the contrary, Danzou the Whisperer has jurisdiction everywhere."

Ibiki pulled a piece of paper out of his trenchcoat and handed it to them over Shikamaru's suspended body. Captain Yamato took the paper in silence, his wolf mask utterly impenetrable.

"It's from the High Council," said Yamato at last. "It is an express authorization of Chief Ibiki's intelligence-gathering activities, whatsoever they may be, in the name of paramount national security." His voice was full of loathing, and helplessness. "The voice of a united High Council supersedes the Hokage's military authority."

For a moment Sakura was too dumbfounded to speak. Can this truly be? No, I cannot let this stand, I must save Shikamaru, whatever the cost.

"This is a coup," insisted Sakura. "We're not in Konoha, we're on a hostile battlefield. As commander-in-chief the Hokage's commands take precedence over all, unless that paper authorizes Ibiki to relieve the Hokage of her position."

"The Queen Bitch is not here," Ibiki said. "Only you. Only a little girl."

"I speak for the Hokage." Sakura pointed at Ibiki, at the other ROOT ninjas, summoning up her most commanding voice. "Arrest them, Squad 1. I command you!"

"Sakura," said Ink softly. "You forget your own words. We aren't in Konoha. We can't arrest them, there's nowhere to put them that's safe... there's no one we can even spare to keep watch. We can't arrest them." He did not unsheathe his sword. "We can only kill them."

Morino Ibiki laughed. Around him, his gathered ROOT ninjas closed ranks. At least a dozen operatives. "Good luck with that, Yamato. You'll have one more chance to leave, and then no more. Now let me get on with the dark but necessary work of protecting Konoha."

"This is wrong," Sakura said. "Evil."

"Necessary," said Ibiki.

"You're torturing the wrong person. There's no fucking Akatsuki spy, don't you get it? Shikamaru is innocent!"

"Is that so? You should have told your high-minded, moralizing Queen Bitch that, before she stuffed Maito Gai in the Asylum."

Sakura has no answer for him.

"One more chance," Ibiki said. "Leave now."
"No!" Sakura cried out. "No, you have to do something! Look at him." She pointed to Shikamaru. "Look at him, we've got to save him. This... this is the same guy who raped Pug."

Captain Yamato did not speak for a long moment. Then he made a fist. "Damn it!" he said in a disgusted voice, turning to back away up the stairs. "Retreat."

Ibiki grinned. "I knew you wou—"

The Captain's katana slipped out, lightning fast, and cut off Ibiki's head. The head spun lazily in the air, almost as if it was hanging by some providential fate, spurting blood.

Absolute silence.

Then pandemonium.

The surprise attack caught ROOT off guard. In an instant ANBU Squad 1 was on them—Yamato slashing with his katana, Rhino barreling two ROOT guards into the dungeon wall, Ink making strange creations of roaring ink with a brush, Honeybee beating away at his enemies with his two nunchaku. ROOT responded quickly, however. The elephant-masked ninja called Torune released a cloud of black insects from his hands, and another ROOT ninja attempted to use Mind Body Switch on Sakura. She fell back, using her genjutsu, her Mirrored Clone, and her Chakra Enhanced Strength. One of Sakura's uppercuts blew a ninja through the roof of the black torture dungeon, bringing a shower of dust and stone down on the battle. A storm of swords, shuriken, blood, human grunts and human screams, thundered through the dark dungeon. The good guys were badly outnumbered. That is, until Yamato used his Wood Release to summoned a great white tree—

It was over quickly after that.

They stood over the dead bodies of the dozen ROOT operatives. The power had been knocked out, and everything was in pitch-black darkness until Honeybee used his fire jutsu to make a glowing ball of light. Morino Ibiki's headless body had somehow been trampled in the heat of the battle, crushed to a pulp. ANBU Squad 1 was all badly injured, except for Captain Yamato—Rhino leaning heavily against Ink's shoulder, Honeybee groaning as he tried to move a broken arm. Sakura herself was on her knees from where a ROOT sword had slashed open her side. That was okay, though. She could take it—at least using Mystical Palm and chakra stitches to heal her internal wounds. Gritting her teeth, she got up and went over to Shikamaru. Yamato had protected the leaf-nin boy in a gentle cradle of leaves and white branches. Sakura scarcely recognized him. Shikamaru was muttering a stream of insanity in a hoarse whisper. "Oh please, don't hurt me," he begged. "Please, I'll be good, Ibiki-sama, I'll be your good boy, please. I'm an Akatsuki traitor! A traitor! Traitor..."

Shikamaru had gone completely mad, his mind destroyed by the torture.

She stared at the ANBU with hollow eyes.

None of them spoke.

"Let's get out of here," said Yamato at last.

They had gone halfway up the steps before they realized Sakura was not following them.

"Sakura." The ANBU Captain's voice was soft as he placed a gloved, bloody hand on her shoulder. She was still kneeling on the floor, cradling Shikamaru's naked, broken body in her arms. "It's over. You saved Nara Shikamaru's life."

Yes, whispered Sakura inside herself. Yes, I did, but who will save his soul?
And who will save Maito Gai?
Nara Shikamaru lay unconscious in the hospital bed, a shrunken wraith on a pale white sheet.

Sakura could scarcely look at the broken boy. Dr. Micho had tried his best to repair his wounds, but his body was still covered by scars, his face an unrecognizable morass of pus and burns and bandages. The scars that Sakura could not see were worse. "He will never be the same."

"Yes," said Senju Tsunade. The Fifth Hokage of Konoha spoke with a barely restrained fury. "Ibiki broke him. No one could survive such torture with his soul intact… not me, not you, not anyone. The person you knew as Shikamaru is no more. Only an insane ruin remains."

A leaf-nin chuunin entered the room, kneeling at Tsunade's feet. "Hokage-sama. Sabaku Temari insists on speaking with you."

"Send her in."

Temari was half a corpse herself, her deep teal eyes lidded with dark circles. She had not slept in days, sick with grief and anger. "Can you help him?"

"Not by any ordinary medical means."

"Then let me kill him."

The bluntness of her words surprised Sakura, but not their meaning. The last time Shikamaru had woken up, just after Dr. Micho's surgical operation, he had started screaming and did not stop until he was sedated again. Not even Temari could calm him down, could stop his delusions. Shikamaru had pleaded for Ibiki-sama to punish him. He'd said he was a bad boy, and he had thrashed, crying and raving, for his master Ibiki-sama to come back.

"Kill him?" asked the Hokage. "For what purpose?"

"The winds blows in the heart of this passing life, but God is infinite and forever. The sandstorm passes, but the stars remain. So it is with death. You are a healer, are you not? If releasing Shikamaru into the care of God will bring his soul peace, then we must do it. Kindness at all cost."

"A comforting story. Yet what lies beyond the veil of death no man truly knows. Tell me, girl. What makes you think God cares?"

Temari's face was white and hard as chalk. "Because I have faith."

"So you do." The Hokage's voice was very soft. "My fiancé, Dan, had faith as well. Day and night he prayed to the Sage of Six Paths, and to the Five Gods of Zen, and all the many other divine incarnations of the one true Kiyome God. In the end it served him not at all, and his head was blown off was by the pious unbeliever Seurin Shadowstar. Seurin's apostasy did not save her either." She turned abruptly toward Sakura. "And what do you think, Sakura?"

The voice of Kikuko the Spinster floated before Sakura, just out of reach. Why did you ever give me those three days, lion? You should have eaten me up as soon as you saw me. Those three days were worse than death!

Sakura shook her head. "I… I don't know. Death is so terribly final, but life is full of possibilities."
"Look at him," Temari said, "look, Sakura, how can you say that? Death will be a mercy."

The Fifth Hokage moved to the corner of the room, staring out the window at Sougon Castle on the other side of the plaza. "There is another option." She paused for a long breath. Two breaths, three. "A way to bring Nara Shikamaru back."

"Tell me," demanded Temari. "You just said there wasn't."

"I said there were no ordinary medical means. Medicine has advanced very far since the time of the Sage of Six Paths. A man can break every bone in his body and yet be walking within weeks, a child can be born with a hole in her heart and live to ripe old age in perfect health. I have seen such miracles with my own eyes. Yet for all our skills of healing, we know next to nothing of the soul. Jutsu for repairing physical health we have in extreme abundance, yet there is no such thing as a mental health jutsu. No way to heal a mind. Except one. And it is no medical jutsu at all."

"Then what is it?"

"Sanity."

Sakura remembered the name. "A spiritual jutsu?"

"Yes. I developed it during the course of my research into Death Demon Seal… a jutsu that draws on the power of the Shinigami itself. Once, long ago, I used it to bring back Mukai Hanzou the Reaper back from a spell of insane grief, and he has been indebted to me ever since. It is the counterpart of the Torment genjutsu, in so many ways. Torment shatters the target's soul, breaks it apart with the force of irresistible death. Sanity puts a broken soul back together again with the same power. But as with Torment… there is a cost. Always."

"A sacrifice to the Shinigami."

A piece of your soul.

"Yes. But I do not not just mean a cost to the user of the jutsu. There is a price the patient must pay as well. Just as you cannot piece a broken vase together the same way, so a restored soul is not the same as a soul that was never broken in the first place. There will be… changes." Tsunade stared at Temari. "Shikamaru may not remember you at all."

"He does not remember me now." The sand-nin girl was a pale husk, drained of all vitality. Temari looks as if she is about to cry, but she's afraid. Afraid the tears would never stop. "Do it, if you are the Hokage you claim you are."

"As you wish."

The Hokage stepped forward to lay her hands on Shikamaru's head. The bandaged boy did not stir. "This will take time," she continued, "and involve much risk. Sakura—you must watch carefully. I dare attempt the Sanity jutsu only once… and we can only hope it is enough. When I ask it of you, assist me without question. Do you understand, girl?"

"I understand."

There was little talk after that, though sometimes the Hokage would ask Sakura questions. Prodding her to analyze what was happening, explaining an unorthodox medical maneuver. Mostly there was just the sound of their shallow breaths, all four of them, and the Hokage's chakra pouring into Shikamaru's brain. The complexity and sheer mass of the chakra was baffling, though soon enough Sakura began to see the pattern in the movement of the various chakra fields. "It's like the Fear
genjutsu,” she said when Tsunade-sensei prompted her. "You're tapping into Shika's emotions. Manipulating them."

"Fear is the destroyer of the human mind. Fear is also its liberator. All men fear death; and it is that primal emotion which connects us to the Shinigami. So the same power can be used both to create and to destroy. Death Demon Seal and Death Soul Salvation. Torment and Sanity. Two sides of the same coin, if you know how to wield it. The world beyond does not follow the same rules as ours. Spiritual power can be temporarily borrowed, channeled… if you are willing to pay the price. And then—for a single moment—you control death and life itself."

Sakura saw.

The Hokage's chakra field had entered deep into Shikamaru's limbic system. The hippocampus that controlled memory. The amygdala that was the seat of human emotion. The Sanity jutsu seemed part genjutsu, part chakra scalpel. Altering neural connections, changing the structure of Shikamaru's brain. And his soul? Sakura could not see it. The soul did not exist in the body as a physical object. But it could be sensed, could even be influenced, by those with enough spiritual awareness.

A spiritual jutsu. Only the most powerful shinobi could use spiritual jutsu. Hanzou the Reaper. Uchiha Itachi of the Dark Mask. Hidan of Bloodthirst.

And Senju Tsunade.

Her sensei was sweating from the strain. "Sakura. Help me."

Sakura did not question her. Stepping forward, placing her own hands against the top of Shikamaru's skull. His hair had been shaved away during surgery, and the bare skin beneath was burning hot. Tsunade-sensei means to burn away all his pain. "Use your chakra to reinforce mine," the Hokage commanded. "See the path I'm making through his brain, follow me." And then, later, "No, not there. Strike deeper. Fear is the most powerful emotion, I told you. The first emotion, and the last. The window into a man's soul." Sakura struggled to keep up. "Yes, there. Good."

Tsunade-sensei is showing me how to use Torment, Sakura realized with a start. It's the same jutsu as Sanity, only reversed. The same chakra field. The same access point. All that was required was… was the most terrifying part of all.

The sacrifice of a part of the user's own soul.

"Sanity," whispered Senju Tsunade.

Afterwards, Sakura could not say how it was done. She had no connection to the Shinigami like her sensei. She only felt death, like a shadow in the night, chilling her breath, making the room dim. Yet within the heart of that darkness was something else as well; a creative force. Seeds of spirit, blossoming into new life. A power from beyond that entered Shikamaru, and returned to him what he had lost.

It was over.

Temari could not restrain herself any longer. "Did it work?"

"After a fashion." The Hokage turned away. "Ask the boy yourself."

Nara Shikamaru was waking up.

Temari knelt by the side of the bed. "Shika. Shika, are you all right?"
"I… I'm better." The leaf-nin boy's voice was hoarse, and brittle as a reed. *But no longer insane.*
"Temari."

"I prayed for you," she whispered fervently.

"I know."

"I love you."

"Yeah. I know that too." Shikamaru smiled wanly. "You never left my side… even after I lost my charming good looks."

*Is he well enough to make jokes about himself?* Sakura spoke up. "Do you remember what happened?"

"All of it. But it's… it's like a dream. Like it happened to someone else, not me. Which means I can forget it. Thank you, Sakura, for saving me from Ibiki's dungeon." He turned to Tsunade. "And thank you, Hokage-sama, for saving my mind."

"It was my duty," said Tsunade. "Were I a better Hokage, this would never have happened. I take full responsibility."

"I am a chuunin of Konoha. And I take responsibility for my own life."

"Then I leave you in the capable hands of Sabaku Temari."

Sakura followed her sensei out of the hospital room. Several leaf-nin bodyguards were without, and a disheveled-looking Sabaku Kankuro. He rushed into the room himself when Sakura told him the good news, whooping at the top of his lungs.

But the Hokage was frowning.

"Tsunade-sensei?"

"Tell me, girl. How did Shikamaru seem to you?"

"He… he seemed fine."

"Did he now? Do not be so sure. When Sanity is successfully performed, the patient often appears to make a full recovery. But there are always things that the patient never gets back. Hanzou the Reaper lost his conscience when he went insane, and afterward he never quite found it again." She paused. "Did you notice what the boy said? Or more precisely… what he did not?"

"What do you mean?"

"There was no anger in his voice. None at all. Very odd. Nor any warmth, as far as I could tell."

"You mean… you mean Shikamaru can't feel any emotions?"

"We shall see."

Sakura was not sure what to say to that. *Better emotionless, than insane or dead.* Temari would surely agree.

Wouldn't she?
The Hokage changed the subject abruptly. "The Third Trial is almost upon us. It was an open question whether it would occur at all, with the Shadow War raging around us... but Doi's arrest has calmed the situation considerably. I think now that the chuunin exam will reach a final conclusion. Are you ready, girl?"

"Yes."

"The new director of the chuunin exam will be Sougon Charasu."

Sakura had heard. Haghira Doi's fall from grace had stripped him of his title as Director of the 54th Iwa Chuunin Exam. Predictably, the Tsuchikage had appointed his own brother to the position. Sougon Charasu was famous loyal to his brother; the Tsuchikage's iron right hand. He was also badly sick... or at least he had been. "Not exactly the most unbiased of examiners," Sakura said finally. "It doesn't matter. The bracket of matches is already determined."

"If you make it far enough, you will be matched with Sougon Sosano."

"Yes."

"And do you trust him?"

"I don't know." Sakura shook her head. "He helped us, didn't he? During the Second Trial we fought side by side against his own Confederacy—he saved my life half a dozen times. Then he helped us destroy ROOT and put an end to the Shadow War."

"His actions are not in dispute. Only what is in his heart. Even he himself may not know." Senju Tsunade's eyes gleamed the color of dried blood. "He helped us, yes. I did no less for the Sougon clan, myself, before I betrayed Seurin Shadowstar and helped start the Third Ninja War. She was my best friend, but in the end it did not matter. In the end I killed her with my own hands. The boy's own mother. Do you imagine he has forgotten that fact, girl? Even for a moment?"

"I don't know."

"I fear you will find out soon enough."

Sakura did not find out. In fact, when she saw Sosano, they barely talked of the past. They barely talked; Sosano constantly finding new tricks in bed to make her forget all her fears, to comfort her with his strong arms and strong body. Meanwhile Sakura helped Temari see Shikamaru off. Shikamaru's father, Shikaku, had been tasked by the Hokage with escorting his son back to Konoha. There was much physical and mental therapy to be done, and only Konoha had the appropriate long-term care facilities. Shikamaru left Iwa wrapped in bandages, strapped to a padded bed as if reverting to swaddling clothes. He barely spoke; quiet to the point of silence. Perhaps that was for the best. Afterward, Temari turned to Sakura and hugged her for a very long time.

Temari was bent, but not broken. She threw herself into training for the Third Trial harder than ever. Sakura trained alongside her. Hour passed by hour, day by day. The Third Trial approached.

There remained only one thing left to do.

It was almost sunset when the caravan of dead ninjas lined up in front of the gates of Iwagakure; the bridge of lion sculptures that led across the river south and east. The road all the way back to Konoha.

The caravan of ANBU ROOT.
Koharu Utatane stood at its head.

*The Sleeper,* they called her. A wrinkled old woman leaning on a wrinkled wooden cane. Yet as dangerous in her own way as anyone Sakura had ever met; as dangerous as Sougon Sawar the Sun Breaker, or Yoshitomo Nagato the Akatsuki Leader. *Ibiki's master, and the lover and partner of Danzou the Termite.*

For a moment Sakura wondered why'd she come. Then she saw Utatane's gray eyes staring at her, cold as iron, and she knew.

*I want to look my enemy in the face.*

"Councilor." Sakura did not bow.

"I'm leaving," Utatane told her, without ceremony. "Not by choice… be that as it may. ROOT shall no longer interfere in events here. What happens next is all on Tsunade now. And on you, child."

"I have no regrets."

"How young you are. Morino Ibiki was a faithful shinobi of Konoha. The intelligence he gathered led to the saving of countless lives. A man such as him comes once every generation. Yet Tsunade would not even allow him the dignity of a military burial. I am taking him back to Konoha myself. I shall see to it there that Ibiki is properly honored. As a hero."

"Ibiki was a monster."

"Yes." The old woman's gaze was as hard as rock. "And he was a hero."

"No. If there's a hell out there, then Morino Ibiki is in it. He created more enemies than he ever stopped. Sarutobi Iniden went over to Akatsuki because of him. Even Anake…. you sacrificed your own son. It's people like Ibiki and Danzou, people like you. You kill and you torture and you destroy in the name of peace, until the only peace you have wrought is war. A cycle of death that never ends."

"I heard those words once, a very long time ago. From someone much like you. It would shock you to know his name."

"Who?"

"Sarutobi Hiruzen. The Third Hokage, and the true founder of ROOT."

Sakura tried to summon up the Third Hokage as she remembered him. The kindly grandfather, the harmless old man who'd used to visit the Academy and joke around with the children. But that image was gone, shattered in the wake of the revolting revelations that came one after the other, of the Shion Affair, the Uchiha Massacre, the Third Ninja War, the experiments of Orochimaru, the predations of Morino Ibiki. That Hiruzen and his closest ally Danzou had created ROOT, she did not doubt. That Hiruzen had ever been like her, she could scarcely imagine.

"I'm sorry he changed for the worse, then."

"Hiruzen grew up. As you shall, Sakura. Join us."

"What?"

"ROOT is always in need of loyal ninjas."
Sakura could not help but laugh. "You want me to join ROOT?"

"The reign of Senju Tsunade has been one blunder after another. Making an alliance with the sand-nins. Letting Uchiha Sasuke run off to the White Snake. Sending away the nine-tails. This disastrous United Countries misadventure. Yet even as the tree burns the roots survive. Tsunade will not be alive forever, cruel child. Or even next week. One day soon she shall be gone, and when that day comes ROOT shall be ascendant again. You would be wise to think on my offer."

"You're going to try to fight her, aren't you? You're going to cause a civil war."

Koharu Utatane closed her eyes. Opened them again. Her steel gray eyes were cloudy, and bloodshot. "Do you know about the Leper Sickness, child?"

"I've heard of it."

"Then you do not know it. I was in the Wind Country when it happened. In the slums of Sawara, trying to help the sick and dying. Children would go to sleep healthy and wake up screaming in the middle of the night as their limbs started to fall off and purple lesions oozing with pus sprouted across their entire bodies. They would scream for days until the lesions started to grow on their hearts. By the end of the first month there were so many dead the streets of Sawara were paved with corpses. Half the medic-nins who went into the city to help never came out again. There was no cure, no treatment. Not even Tsunade herself could do anything when she tried. The Leper Sickness spread on the air like a swarm of locusts, in all directions. A million people died, and even more were crippled, wishing they'd died when they had the chance. The Wind Country was utterly destroyed. Even to this day it has never recovered. We knew it was just a matter of time before the Leper Sickness crossed the border into the Fire Country. We tried to seal the border, but an infected Konoha shinobi slipped through the blockade in a fit of mad terror. There was a city there, near the border. Mino. I daresay you have not seen that name in your history books."

"No."

"That is because Mino no longer exists. The Third Hokage surrounded the city with a barrier wall and quarantined it. The people of Mino pleaded with him to let them out. Locked up together with the infected, it was a certainty that half or more of them would perish. They thought the Third might help them, because of his kindly demeanor. In his personal life Hiruzen was the most sweet and honorable gentleman you could ever meet. But he was also a man who knew what had to be done. It was so easy for the Leper Sickness to spread long distances by air. The possibility of further infection was too great, even with a quarantine. Hiruzen... he gave the order to raze the entire city. In one night he burned Mino to the ground with fire. Thirty thousand people died, but the country survived. The Leper Sickness never reached deeper into the Fire Country than at Mino. Sarutobi Hiruzen did that. He did not balk at doing his duty. He was a great man, the greatest man I ever knew. He saved our village."

"As he saved it from the Uchiha," said Sakura. "And my father."

Koharu Utatane said nothing. Her face was sick and angry and proud all at once.

"I'm glad the Third is dead." The words came blurring from Sakura's mouth. But even as she said them she realized she was telling the truth. The story about Mino was almost too ghastly to comprehend, yet it might not even have made a top five list of Sarutobi Hiruzen's most morally unconscionable actions. Not for the first time, she wondered how Asuma could have been Hiruzen's son. The son is not always the father. "I'm glad that he paid the price for his sins."

"As do we all."
Utatane snapped her head, abruptly ending the conversation. The caravan was starting to move now, finally, and a carriage came trotting up to Utatane. A driver jumped off and bowed low, as befitting her distinguished and powerful rank as Konoha High Councilor. She leaned on her wooden cane to ease the pain of her rheumatic joints, letting the driver help her into the carriage. The rest of the caravan flowed by in noisy, creaking streams around her; the funeral biers that bore the heavy coffins of Morino Ibiki and the other ROOT ninjas. No doubt draped in the flags of their country for which they had died. In the carriage Koharu Utatane once again closed her eyes, and again opened them. Her white lashes fluttered.

The Sleeper turned back to look at Sakura.

"One last thing. You said before, that you were not sure whether or not hell exists. But I am sure, blood child. Dark child." The old woman smiled then. Her grin was full of decayed teeth, ghastly and horrible in the red evening's light. A queer sound came from her throat, a rattling noise as loud as the caravan of dead shinobi passing through the open gates. "Oh, yes. Hell exists, and we are living in it."
The United Countries

The Third Trial of the 54th Iwa Chuunin Exam began on a bright sunny day, beneath fluffy clouds that blew gently across a sky blue as water. Aoyama Stadium was packed full of spectators—travelers from all around the world, come to see the culmination of what had been advertised as the greatest chuunin exam in history. Tales of the earthquake which had interrupted the First Trial, and of the Akatsuki mind control conspiracy which had derailed the Second Trial, had spread widely in news accounts, in propaganda advertisements, and by word of mouth. Surely, people thought, the Third Trial could not be any less exciting.

Even the political chaos of the recent Shadow War in Iwagakure had not deterred them.

For some tourists, it had been a selling point.

The daimyo of the Earth Country was there at the Stadium, as were the daimyos of Swamp, River, and Grass. Terumi Mei the Fifth Mizukage herself had arrived from the Water Country with an extensive entourage, including a third Swordsmen of the Mist, the savage beast-man called Hachiko the Hound, and the legendary Anayama Chiyo the Weaver had led another substantial delegation from Sunagakure. An unprecedented three out of five kages were in Iwa to witness the Third Trial.

This is the endgame, Sakura thought as she walked into Aoyama Chuunin Exam Stadium. It was the final arc of both of the chuunin exam, and of the entire story that had been leading up this moment; the story that had begun nine months ago, when Senju Tsunade had returned to Konoha to become the Fifth Hokage and announced her plan to create the United Countries. A new world order, based in international cooperation and the rule of law to maintain peace.

Sakura knew that the next few weeks would decide whether that order would survive, or whether it would go down in flames, and drag the world down with it. This was the high-stakes drama which was the backdrop to everything.

What role would she play in that drama? She was not sure, even now.

I just need to do my best in the Third Trial. I need to fight to the best of my ability, so I can show the world that Tsunade-sensei chose the right person to be her apprentice. Sakura's performance in the Third Trial would be a proxy for the overall strength of the entire village. That was not fair, perhaps, but it was the reality. And Sakura was ready.

She was more than ready.

"Please, ladies and gentleman, be seated!" blared a disembodied voice over the loudspeakers, over and over. "Please be seated! The opening ceremony of the Third Trial will begin soon."

The opening ceremony consisted mostly of speeches. Most of them were dreadfully boring, and things that Sakura had heard a hundred times before. The new chuunin exam director Sougon Charasu gave a lengthy lecture about the noble purposes of the chuunin exam, the virtues of Insight, Duty, and Strength, et cetera, et cetera. Sougon Sawar got up to welcome all the guests to Iwa, though by the expression on his face, and the way he ground his teeth together, he would much rather have burned them to ashes where they stood. All the other kages and villages leaders were also expected to speak, so they did. Some were mercifully brief; others held forth in great and numbing detail. Sakura did not pay much attention, truth be told.

"Everyone can see you yawning," Sosano teased her.
They were sitting in the genin section, on the ground floor of the stadium opposite the main box where all the luminaries sat—the VIP section.

"Who?"

"The people looking at us through binoculars. We're the stars, you know. They're all here to watch us."

"I don't care." But upon reflection Sakura supposed she was representing Konoha's commitment to diplomacy, so she sat up straighter, and tried to look very interested in whoever was droning on at the dais.

Sosano was, of course, the perfect image of a young shinobi. His austere gray robe seemed to speak to his humility, yet the plainness of it only highlighted his handsome features, his magnetic charisma. Every movement he made was elegant, every glance of his dark slanted eyes a hint of some inscrutable design. Half the women in the stadium could not keep their eyes off him. A gaggle of teenage girls crowded the edge of the genin section, holding giant fan posters of Sosano in suitably heroic postures. Sosano flashed the girls a suitably mysterious smile in turn. One of them actually fainted.

_They don't know him as I do_, Sakura thought. _They don't see him snoring in bed in the morning, they don't hear him whining about his pet deer. He's not so damn mysterious when you get to know him._

Temari sat with her arms crossed. She still did not trust Sosano, Sakura knew. She could hardly blame her. _His father is still trying to kill us._ But Sosano was not his father. That had been made abundantly clear during the Shadow War, and while Sakura did not fully understand Sosano's intentions, she could not doubt his heart. _He loves me, doesn't he?_

"People are such fools," said Temari. "A little boy from Seija Island came up to me the other day and asked for my autograph. He wanted to know how I was going kill my opponents in the Third Trial. Whether I'd break their bones with my fan, or if I would tear their flesh apart with wind instead. A little child, come from across the world to witness the death of a complete stranger. Humans are bloodthirsty creatures… worse than any animal. And these cheerleaders from the sidelines are the worst. They have no understanding of what it is to be a shinobi. They do not understand that our life is not about pleasure, no more than it about killing."

Sosano smiled. "You think it is about sacrifice."

Temari looked at him sharply. "Yes."

"Yet is that all there is? Is there nothing more to being a shinobi, than sacrifice?"

"Something worth sacrificing for." Temari's voice was blunt. "Something you lack, Sougon."

"That's not fair," said Sakura. "Sosa's family is crazy… we all know that. But Iwa is still his home."

"I did not mean his family."

Sosano was no longer smiling. "All right, Temari. What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you, since you asked me. I think you're dangerous. I think that from the moment we met you, you have been taking risks for no rational reason. No reason at all except to live your life on the edge. Betraying your comrades, your own family, your village, and then all over again, but to what end? Just for the thrill of it? No, Sougon, you do not fool me, though you have so hoodwinked poor Sakura she is still trying to rub the dirt from her eyes. A man who throws his life away on a whim
does not believe in life at all. You're not afraid to die because you have nothing to live for."

"Temari!" protested Sakura.

"It's all right, Sakura," said Sosano. "She speaks the truth."

"What?"

"Or a version, in any case. The Sage of Six Paths united the world under Kiyome, yet in the five hundred years since a thousand different interpretations have arisen, each an imperfect reflection of that single truth. Temari says that I do not fear death. That is true, in some sense. I do not believe there is as clear a distinction between life and death as she suggests. We all must live life by leaving behind. And there may be no moment when we are more alive, than the moment when we staring death in the face. I have experienced such a feeling myself, in the heat of battle. But that brings us back to our original topic of discussion, does it not?" Sosano turned to Temari. "You do not believe that we shinobi should take any pleasure in what we do."

"People are fools," Temari said again.

"I do not disagree. Even so, is there no meaning you find in our lives, except duty and sacrifice?"


"But not ourselves?"

"It is the bonds we create with others that make our individual lives meaningful."

"Spoken like a true sand-nin. Or a leaf-nin, for that matter." Sosano turned smoothly to Sakura and put his hand around hers; a movement no doubt calculated to draw the attention of the binocular-gawking spectators. "What say you, Sakura?"

"The stone keeps to its path," she whispered.

A chill went through her.

Sosano felt the way her hand moved, her fingers clutching tight, scrabbling, as if trying to grab at the edge of a cliff before she fell. He looked at her, concern written in his face. "Sakura?"

"Nothing," she lied. She put a smile on her face, trying her best to look charming, and beautiful, like everyone always said that she was. "Both of you are too good at arguing. I can't make heads or tails of it."

Sosano did not look convinced at Sakura's attempt to deflect her unease with babbling nonsense. He seemed to want to probe her further, but then all around them a murmur began to spread through the crowd, a pregnant electric anticipation that swept the stadium from top to bottom. Sakura looked up, and she saw what had caused the crowd to finally stir from its lethargy.

On the dais, the Fifth Hokage was walking to the podium.

"My fellow countrymen, fellow shinobi… fellow citizens of the world. We are gathered here today on this great occasion to celebrate the 54th Iwa Chuunin Exam. I would like to make a few remarks before we proceed to the matches."

The great dais of Aoyama Chuunin Exam Stadium faced outward, visible to the tens of thousands of people crowded into the stadium's every row. The Hokage in her white robes on the dais seemed
very small indeed. Yet her clear, clarion voice carried through the air like fire.

"It is fitting that this week—the final week of the chuunin exam—marks the seventeenth anniversary of the Third Ninja War. The Great War, many have called it; the war to end all wars. Every nation in the North participated in this conflict on a scale of mass destruction. The war remade our nations, our geography, our peoples, our economies. Even today, seventeen years later, the conflict at the heart of the Third Ninja War has resurrected itself in a new yet familiar form: the rivalry between the United Countries and the Confederacy, with the same players on the same sides. So I say to you today, my fellow citizens, the Third Ninja War is with us still. The only question is… can we learn from our history, or are we inevitably doomed to repeat it?

"Seventeen years later, every aspect of the Third Ninja War has remained intensely controversial: its origins, its prosecution, its aftermath. On both sides, bitterness and recriminations prevail. Yet there is a deeper truth… if we have the courage to face it. And the truth is this: Konoha was solely responsible for instigating the Third Ninja War. Konoha unilaterally broke the Treaty of Miyawe with the secret but avowed intention of total world domination. Konoha's invasion of the Swamp Country was unprovoked, unjustified, and unprecedented, directly leading to the deaths of tens of millions across the North. The man who authorized these despicable acts was none other than the Third Hokage, Sarutobi Hiruzen, my sensei. He is a war criminal of the highest order. As the leader of Konoha and the Fire Country, I officially extend my sincerest apologies to all those who have suffered at our bloody hands."

There was a sudden hush among the crowd. Sakura herself sat bolt upright. This is not what I expected. She'd thought Tsunade-sensei would talk about the United Countries; but not this. In the VIP box behind the dais, the other luminaries of the world were equally surprised. Sougon Sawar had narrowed his eyes to small slits, and the Mizukage Terumi Mei was whispering furiously to Nobunaga Kikuko the Spinster.

"For my fellow countrymen, the leaf-nins who fought bravely in the Third Ninja War, this truth may be hard to accept. It is essential to separate the heroism of the soldier from the larger question of justice. We must never confuse a war with the warriors. All veterans of this terrible conflict deserve our deepest respect, gratitude and support whenever and wherever they serve. Yet we cannot also absolve our leaders of their ultimate responsibility… for good or for evil.

"If the villain of the Third Ninja War is Sarutobi Hiruzen, it also has a hero: the Third Tsuchikage, Sougon Onoki. Onoki was not a man of war, but a prophet of peace. The Second Ninja War ended because of Onoki's singular courage and foresight. The Ceasefire he negotiated with his enemies lasted for six years and, I believe, had the potential to become an enduring peace for all time.

"Many see Onoki's actions during the Ceasefire—his policy of appeasement—as a unmitigated failure. I see it differently. Alone of all the leaders since the founding of the hidden village era, Sougon Onoki understood the larger futility of war. The larger truth that mankind must put an end to war or war will put an end to mankind. It's one of the strangest things that all the great military geniuses of the world have talked about peace. And the leaders of the world today talk eloquently about peace. On the very eve of the invasion of Kurenkara, Sarutobi Hiruzen talked eloquently about peace. What is the problem? They spoke of peace as a distant goal, as an end we seek. Only Onoki understood that we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal we seek, but that it is a means by which we arrive at that goal. We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means.

"The legacy of Sougon Onoki's Ceasefire is with us still. This great edifice we are gathered in today is the very symbol of his enduring achievements. Prior to the Ceasefire, all chuunin exams were held in the isolation of each hidden village. It was Onoki who organized the first international chuunin exam in Iwagakure. Young shinobi from across the world came here to take part in a grand contest
that would foster lasting friendships between our villages.

"That is the great purpose of the chuunin exam: not simply to pass a test, but to promote understanding among diverse peoples. For that is the fundamental truth which we must learn—that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction—towards a better future for of children and our grandchildren. We are tied together in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. In this very stadium, Sougon Onoki kindled a new vision of the future. Onoki failed in his time, but his dream lives on.

"Today, that dream is the United Countries—the last, best hope for peace on earth.

"I am sure you have all heard many things about our organization. Let me be clear. The United Countries is a diplomatic organization of nation-states around the world to promote international cooperation and mutual security. It is founded on the principle that the only true basis of enduring peace is the willing cooperation of free peoples in a world in which, relieved of the menace of aggression, all may enjoy economic and social security.

"We live in an age where the instruments of war have far outpaced the instruments of peace. Countries, like individuals, do not always see alike or think alike. International progress is not helped by an country assuming that it has a monopoly or wisdom or of virtue. Yet we must not let our differences blind us to our more important common and continuing interests in creating a permanent structure of peace.

"To that end, we, the people of the United Countries, determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which thrice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, have vowed to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and to ensure that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest, and to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples.

"I do not wish to give the impression that many disappointments are not inevitable in the realization of this dream. Indeed, I must confess to you that not long after talking about my dream I started to see it turn into a nightmare. The United Countries was intended to be a universal organization that would one day grow to encompass all the peoples of the earth. It was never meant to spur the creation of an opposing military alliance. Yet that is exactly the horrific scenario which has unfolded before us. So two great and powerful groups of nations stand today on the brink of mutual annihilation.

"To the leaders of the Confederacy, I offer both a pledge and a plea. First, we the people of the United Countries pledge never to strike first in any military conflict. We will not use or threaten the use of military force against the Confederacy unless we have already been attacked. Second, we the people of the United Countries plead with you to join with us in a new era of brotherhood.

"This plea is most especially directed to the Fourth Tsuchikage, Sougon Sawar. Sawar, my old friend, I beg you, do not let us repeat the mistakes of the past. Let us cast aside the evil example of Sarutobi Hruzen, and follow the wisdom of your visionary father. Let us renew the quest for peace before the dark powers of destruction engulf all humanity. Let us come together with our united strength to defeat the triple scourges of war, poverty, and prejudice. Let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths and encourage the arts and commerce. Let us join as one, United Countries and Confederacy, leaf-nin and stone-nin, and hold hands as brothers and sisters. Let us make a new beginning."

The Hokage paused.

There was a short silence.
Then the crowd began to boo. Sakura glanced at Sosano, who shrugged indifferently. The crowd had been rocked on its heels for a moment by the Hokage's admission of guilt for the Third Ninja War, but this was too much. They were back—the mob. The same mob that had nearly destroyed Iwa during the Shadow War. "You lie!" they shouted. "Liar! Liar! Betrayer! Death to the Betrayer! Death to the Betrayer! DEATH TO THE BETRAYER!"

Senju Tsunade the Queen of Torment was unmoved. She let the roar of hatred wash over her… let it break. Her eyes flashed.

"So be it. Let the Third Trial begin."

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN… HARUNO SAKURA OF KONOHA!"

Sakura emerged through the tunnel and walked through the low-slung gate into the arena. The summer sun shining bright on the hard stone blocks. The crowded roared—deafening cheers.

They're cheering for me, she thought. That was a new experience; an electric excitement ran down her spine. Is this how Sasuke and Naruto had felt, during the Konoha Chuunin Exam? Yet the Aoyama Chuunin Exam Stadium was bigger than the one in Konoha, and absolutely packed with people. This was the greatest spectacle in the world, and she was a part of it all.

For a moment, Sakura almost forgot that there were larger issues at stake than a sporting event. For a moment…

"AND HER OPPONENT… HIGERU SHINREN OF KAWA!"

The middle aged river-nin walked out of the tunnel at the other end of the arena. Together they crossed over to the central dais. They bowed to the gathered leaders and VIP guests, then to their referee and chuunin examiner Sougon Charasu, and then to each other.

"The first match of the 54th Iwa Chuunin Exam," Shinren told her, smiling. "It is a honor to draw you as my opponent."

"And you as well, Shinren."

"Let us make it a good one." The river-nin laughed deeply, shaking the jade rings in her graying hair. "You know my motivations. I don't care about winning the Third Trial, and I wish you all the best of luck in your future matches. However… I have a challenge for you, Sakura. Something to spice up our fight a little, for the audience."

"Tell me."

"You sensei is Senju Tsunade the Queen of Torment. You can defeat me easily with genjutsu, I have no doubt. But can you defeat my Secret Truth Reflection directly?"
"You mean without using genjutsu?"

"That's right."

Sakura smiled. "I accept your challenge."

"Then let us begin!"

Sougon Charasu brought his arm down, signaling the official start of their match. The crowd roared at their top of their lungs. Sakura versus Shinren was not exactly a premier match—it was actually nothing more than a first round play-in—but that scarcely mattered. The audience had been whipped into a frenzy by the sheer excitement of the first day. A thousand voices shouted Sakura's name.

Shinren brought a small, glittering jade mirror out the pouch at her waist. *Her Reflection Mirror*. The special chakra mirror, secret property of the Higeru clan of Kawa, had the unique ability to absorb any ninjutsu in combination with the jutsu Secret Truth Reflection. During the Second Trial, in the Battle of the Jewel Islands, Shinren had used her Reflection Mirror to absorb a massive explosion and then redirect it out of the mirror again back at her attackers.

It was a formidable technique.

*I wonder how the Reflection Mirror will deal with taijutsu?*

There was only one way to find out. Sakura charged forward, clenching her right leather glove into a fist, flowing earth chakra rapidly through her knuckles. Her Chakra Enhanced punch connected directly with Shinren's outstretched mirror…

… and disappeared. All the energy released by her punch was absorbed into the Reflection Mirror. Shinren shook her head. "You're just giving me ammunition, Sakura. Secret Truth Reflection!"

Sakura threw herself backwards just before her own punch came out of the Reflection Mirror, this time directed at its originator. The Chakra Enhanced blast missed her and collided with the far arena wall, shattering the stone blocks.

"Wow, that's a big punch." Shinren smiled, twirling her jade mirror in her hands.

"Just giving the audience a show."

Sakura hefted her two chakra-cast kunai and threw them at Shinren. The river-nin absorbed the explosive force of one of the kunai into her Reflection Mirror, letting the weapon clatter to the ground. The other kunai zoomed past Shinren's body. *Now!* thought Sakura. She spun, pulling on the chakra strings attached to the base of both kunai. The second kunai cut toward Shinren's waist, glittering like diamonds in the bright sun. The first zoomed again for Shinren's hands. A lesser ninja would have been trapped by the sudden movement.

But Higeru Shinren was no slouch herself. She dodged the obvious attack easily…. and also countered Sakura's second, hidden attack. When Sakura tried to hook her first kunai around the mirror's back, she failed completely.

"Clever. You tried to use your kunai to entangle my Reflection Mirror. If I hadn't noticed, you could have used the attached chakra strings to steal the mirror away from me. The fight would have been over." Shinren smiled. "Except I noticed."

"Your challenge is harder than I thought," admitted Sakura.
Sakura surmised she could probably win by brute force. Attacking Shinren with Mirrored Clones from all directions, for example, or summoning Katsuyu, or even just throwing boulders on Shinren from afar. But that would not be very sporting. No, I want to defeat Secret Truth Reflection directly. But how? Sakura knew she had to disable the Reflection Mirror somehow, or steal it. But any direct attack she launched would be absorbed by the mirror. Unless…

Sakura flashed a quick hand seal. "Mirrored Clone!"

Two mud clones formed from the arena floor. They rushed at Shinren, one after the other, and growing in size with each passing second. The river-nin frowned. "Your clones won't do better at a frontal assault than you did."

Sakura concentrated, and then the first mud clone exploded.

The energy of the explosion was absorbed by the Reflection Mirror, just like last time. But that was not Sakura's primary plan. The clone also discharged outward all the mud that made up the structure of its body. The wet, clinging mud splattered everywhere… including on the mirror itself. The translucent, reflective surface was coated in a coat of thick brown mud.

*If the mirror cannot reflect, Secret Truth Reflection cannot work.* Sakura's hypothesis was borne out a second later when the second mud clone exploded. Even more mud splattered over the mirror, completely covering its surface. The disabled mirror was rendered utterly useless. Shinren shook the mirror in vain, trying to shake off the sticky, chakra-laced mud, but quickly gave up the attempt. Then she laughed.

"Sakura, well fought. I concede."

"Well fought," agreed Sakura.

From the sidelines the referee, the new Chuunin Exam Director Sougon Charasu, called the fight. "The winner of the first play-in match is Haruno Sakura!" he announced.

Shrieking applause.

A thousand camera flashes.

Higeru Shinren bowed to her once again.

Sakura bowed back to her friend, smiling, and they walked off the field together.

There was a pause between the matches as the chuunin examiners went to work repairing the stadium arena. Generally speaking, two matches had been scheduled for each day of the chuunin exam: one in the morning, one in the afternoon. This schedule was designed to allow each of the combatants time to adequately rest and recover from one round to the next, as well as to maximize revenue by stretching the whole tournament over an entire week.

As this was the first day of the Third Trial, however, both of the first round matches had been scrunched together in the afternoon—prime time. The only delay was to clean up the arena and restore it to its original, pristine condition. It was not a particularly long wait: Sakura's fight with Shinren had been short and sweet. Truth be told, Sakura had dominated the fight from start to finish, even with one hand tied behind her back.

The disparity in strength was due to a flaw in the tournament seeding. Eighteen genin had entered the Third Trial, and they had been ranked objectively by an uncontroversial measure: the time it had taken them to complete the Second Trial. Theoretically, stronger ninjas would finish the Second Trial
faster and thus gain higher seeds. However, due to… unique… circumstances, Sakura had been the very last person to finish the Second Trial. This meant she had to fight Shinren, one of the actually weakest genin, in an extra play-in match just to make it to the main round of sixteen. It made for somewhat undramatic viewing.

The outcome of the second play-in match would be the same, Sakura knew.

Up next was Sougon Sosano.

The loudspeaker blared the introductions. "LADIES AND GENTLEMEN. ARE YOU READY FOR THE SECOND FIGHT OF THE THIRD TRIAL?"

A roar from the crowd.

"I GIVE YOU… THE PRINCE OF DAWN… THE PRIDE OF THE EARTH COUNTRY… THE SCION OF THE OVERLOOK… SOUGON SOSANO OF IWA!"

Sosano emerged from the arena tunnel to defeating applause. He bowed, then waved.

"VERSUS… HIS OPPONENT… ASHUJU RYUA OF DASUTO!"

Ryua emerged from the other arena tunnel. He was a bland boy, dressed all in beige, with his beige clothing, and beige bandanna. Ashuju Ryua could have disappeared into a can of yellow paint and never been seen again; he did not wear his United Countries vest. The only decoration was his forehead protector. Six scattered dots arranged in an equilateral triangle pointing to the left, like an approaching storm of dust. He was short, scrawny, and in all respects utterly unremarkable… except for the gaping black hole in his face where his nose had once been.

Scattered, half-hearted applause greeted the appearance of the disfigured dust-nin. The hidden village of Dust did not have many fans in Aoyama Stadium. Together the two of them faced the dais and bowed to the judges and the other gathered personages. Then they bowed to each other…

… perfunctorily.

"Ah." Sosano smiled, showing his perfect white teeth. "You don't like me."

The sullen dust-nin glared at him. When he spoke, a soft whistling sound came out of the hole in the center of his face. "The whole world likes you. But not me, no. Never me."

"Did I do something to you?"

"What did you ever do, to make the whole of the rest worship at your feet?"

Sosano laughed. "I see. So you're jealous."

The two genin shifted to their starting positions, prepared to do battle. "Are you ready?" Sougon Chegga stepped between the two genin, raising his arm to signal the moment of decision. "Begin!"

"Dust Cloud!" shouted Ashuju Ryua.

Ryua threw up clouds of dust from pouches on his belt. The chakra-laced dust quickly created a cloud of impenetrable swirling dust around the boy, hiding him from sight. The cloud began to expand to cover the whole arena.

Sosano stood where he was, motionless. He had not even drawn his katana from its sheath. Nor did he activate his Enshogan. *He doesn't want to end the fight so fast,* thought Sakura. The Enshogan
could easily see through any dust cloud… not to mention blow up the boy hiding within it. Ryua, a C-rank ninja according to the Databook, was completely outmatched by Sosano. It was like a fight between a mouse and a lion. But Sosano seemed to want to enjoy himself. He's toying with Ryua.

Ryua emerged from within the Dust Cloud in a whirling blur, trying to strike Sosano with his kunai from above. Sosano drew his sword and parried the attack easily. The strength of his cut sent the smaller boy flailing forward and over Sosano's head.

The dust-nin skidded to a stop on the opposite side of the arena. "You won't even use the Enshogan against me?"

"I don't need to."

"You arrogant son of a bitch!" Ryua brought his hands together. "I won't hold back! Defiled Scent!"

A noxious smell emanated from every pore in the dust-nin's body. The scent was so concentrated that it was actually visible, wafting from Ryua's body in thin white wisps. Defiled Scent, the secret clan jutsu of the Ashuju Clan of Dasuto. Within seconds the smell had spread across the arena and then into the stands where thousands of unsuspecting audience members began to gag, throw up, and even pass out. The scent was truly overpowering. Even Sakura, whose nose was used to long hours in the hospital treating infections and rotted flesh, gagged on the nauseating smell. It was worse than decomposing bodies, worse than feces or skunk or toxic sludge, worse than anything she had ever experienced in her life. She couldn't imagine how bad it smelled up close, in the arena.

"Shit," wheezed Kankuro next to her, stuffing his face in his jacket. "What the hell is that?"

"The secret weapon of the Ashuju clan."

"A bunch of fucked-up psychos, is what they are."

"Even smells can kill."

Boos and jeers were coming from the stands. Hecklers were throwing things down into the arena. Everyone else was running for the exits, a veritable stampede to escape the smell. What a way to end the first round of the 54th Iwa Chuunin Exam. Sakura suspected that the dust-nin Ashuju Ryua was, at that very moment, the least popular person in the history of Iwagakure.

He did not seem to care. There was a gaping black hole in Ryua's face where his nose should have been. He had cut it off on purpose in order to protect himself from his own Defiled Scent jutsu… the smell did not affect him at all, since he had no sense of smell in the first place. It was said that the Ashuju clan of Dasuto lived permanently in a dark cave filled with Defiled Scent, so powerful and foul that even insects dropped dead at the entrance. Originally founded during the Second Ninja War by the Ashuju clan as a way to escape persecution for their unpopular techniques, the village hidden in the Dust was essentially a shinobi ghetto. Apart from the rest of the ninja world, Dust neither interfered with, nor was interfered by, the greater powers that surrounded it. The noxious fumes of the village's environment left it near invulnerable to outside attack. Not even trained ninjas dared to breathe in such air.

Except for Sougon Sosano.

Ryua backed up a step, his eyes widening. "You… you aren't affected by Defiled Scent?"

"No."

"How?"
"Because I am Sougon." The stone-nin walked forward steadily, gracefully. Sosano had finally activated his Enshogan. Waves of heat rippled from the air in front of his burning, golden eyes. "Because I am the master of fire and ice, and odorous molecules are easily denatured by heat."

"It's not fair… damnit. I cut off my own nose to survive in Dust. Never to smell a flower again. Never to smell a girl's hair," Ryua's whistling voice climbed to the edge of hysteria. The sullen boy was on the verge of tears. "I made that sacrifice because there was no other way. And you—you just…"

"You should not be jealous of me," said Sosano sadly. "I am jealous of you."

"You?" Ryua shook his head in frenzied denial. "You have everything I never had."

"Except freedom." Sosano lashed out with his sword, attacking with a speed that Ryua could not match. Ryua's kunai were knocked out of his hands, and the dust-nin stumbled hard to the ground. "You do not know me, Ashuju Ryua, yet I know you. I have been to the hidden village of Dust. I have seen its poverty, and bleakness, and isolation. The dark caves, the great howling storms of the Barren deserts. Yet I have also seen its love. A true family of people who care for each other… so unlike my own."

"Love? You bastard, why don't we trade places then? Cut the big talk, Sougon, and see how you like my life!"

"I would do it without a second thought." Sosano looked past Ryua, up into the genin section. Right at Sakura. His smile was wry and sad. "All a dust-nin ever has to do is worry about his belly. There are no expectations, for the likes of you. But I have the burden of the whole world on my shoulders… I always have, since the day of my birth. Do you understand, dust-nin? It is enishi… fate goes ever as fate must. I am Sougon. I am the Prince of Dawn, and I must walk this path which ends only in death. Now get out of my way!"

His katana flashed in a low slashing arc. The sharp edge slid right against the bare neck of the stunned Ryua and drew a trickle of blood.

It was over.

The chuunin examiner Sougon Charasu called the fight immediately. "The winner of the match… is Sougon Sosano of Iwa!"

Cheers and claps rained down from the scattered audience remains that still remained in the stadium, all of them for the defeat of the hateful Ashuju Ryua. A wrinkled old woman sitting in the front rows, holding her sundress over the lower half of her face, boosed Ryua lustily and threw a bottle of beer at him.

Sakura felt bad.

A little.

Temari turned to Sakura. "Now do you see how crazy he is?"

"Ryua?"

"No. Your boyfriend."

Not this again. Sakura groaned. "Temari… what did he do wrong? What did he say that wasn't true? It's not easy being the heir to the Sougon clan. It's perfectly natural to feel oppressed, don't you see?"
"He's a suicidal, unbalanced megalomaniac."

"Will you even admit the slightest possibility that you're wrong about him?"

"Even Orajuchi agrees with me."

"No, he doesn't."

"Yes, he does. Go ask him." Temari jerked a thumb at a nearby clump of stone-nin genin. Bakura Orajuchi, Sosano's teammate and best friend, looked at Sakura with his huge black bat eyes and scratched his head ruefully. With his enhanced hearing, Orajuchi had evidently heard everything they'd been saying. Sakura glared at him. The bat-boy shrugged, making a helpless, somewhat pathetic gesture with his long pointed ears. Then he nodded.

Sakura threw up her hands in frustration and stormed away, refusing to admit defeat to Temari. Sosano was standing in the center of the arena, using his Enshogan to wipe the edge of his dreamsteel katana smoking clean. She gave him a quick kiss, to congratulate him on his splendid victory, and he returned the compliment for her win against Shinren.

Then he said, smiling, "Come, Sakura. Do you want to meet the Confederacy?"

He gestured to the VIP section.

Why not?

All eyes were upon the two of them as they ascended the dais from the arena. All the luminaries and leaders of the ninja world were sitting in the stadium's main VIP box. The Hokage, of course. Densuke Tosuken the Chameleon. The renowned sand-nin Anayama Chiyo the Weaver, lately arrived from Suna to replace the fallen Baki. Unchiku Narumi of Wave, and Ashuju Ikoma of Dust, both United Countries representatives. Kasuga Darui of the unaffiliated Lightning. Sosano walked right past them to the side of Sougon Sawar the Fourth Tsuchikage. Sawar glowered at them both, his eyes narrowed into black slits, and ground his teeth loudly.

"This is my father," introduced Sosano.

"We've met," said Sakura.

"This is her esteemed highness, the Fifth Mizukage, Terumi Mei, called the Lady of Dew." He bowed, then gestured from Mei back to Sakura. "Mizukage-sama. This is my girlfriend."

Terumi Mei was, without question, one of the beautiful women that Sakura had ever seen. Her eyes were the most startling shade of blue, and beneath her kage robes there grew a most ample, youthful bosom. At first glance Mei did not seem nearly as intimidating as her three companions. Yet Sakura had learned not to judge by appearances. In the past decade this woman had risen from obscurity to rule over the village known famously as the "Village of Bloody Mist." She may be the most dangerous of them all.

The Mizukage laughed in a sing-song voice. "Haruno Sakura. You have your father's eyes."

"Did you know my father well?"

"Oh, yes. He almost killed me many times. But not quite."

Sosano continued his faux introductions. "These are Mizukage-sama's three companions… each a member of the legendary Seven Swordsmen of the Mist. This is Nobunaga Kikuko, called the
Spinster, who carries the infamous blade Red Needle. This is Hiroshi Keel, called the Annihilator, who wields the powerful Blast Sword. This is Hachiko, called the Hound, who owns the lightning blades of the Thunderfangs."

Sakura had met Kikuko and Keel before, of course. In fact, she'd killed two out of Keel's three students during the Second Trial. This was well known to all. Keel the Annihilator was a taller, older, and far stronger version of his late student and nephew, Hiroshi Fue. A massive, black two-handed greatsword was sheathed on his back—the explosive Blast Sword.

Hachiko the Hound was a new face. Sakura saw instantly the origin of his sobriquet: the man had a face like a bloodhound, with droopy cheeks and a nose so large and black it defied any sense of human proportion. It was said that Hachiko was as loyal as a hound, as well… the savage and utterly devoted attack dog of his master, Terumi Mei.

"This is her esteemed highness, the Eighth Kusakage, Ikenobo Zeami, called the Princess of Dragonflies," Sosano went on. "This is his esteemed highness, the Warlord of Blood, Makoto Muro, First of His Name. This is Shigeru Yorai of Swamp, called Yorai of the Crag, distinguished jounin and the representative of Numagakure in Iwa." Sakura nodded stiffly to each in turn. "This is Rouga Eneki of River, called the Nightingale, renowned kunoichi and member of the Kawa High Council."

"Well met, Sakura," said Eneki pleasantly. "My student Shinren has told me stories of your exploits. I am pleased that Shinren were able to match her strength with yours in this Third Trial. I congratulate you. It was an honorable victory."

"Thank you."

Rouga Eneki laughed lightly. A hundred tiny jade rings tinkled in her long, curled black hair. "Honor is not… however… always the most valuable coin in the ninja world."

No, thought Sakura, or you would not have joined the Confederacy. The River Country had no historical, cultural, or ideological reason to ally with Sougon Sawar. They'd simply joined him out of pure expediency—the river-nins had calculated the Confederacy was going to win.

The last member of the Confederacy was there for an altogether more sinister reason. Sosano bowed low. "This is Misain Dayu of Waterfall, called the Cinder, the strong right hand of his father, Misain Seve the Thrice-Dead."

Dayu's face was hideously ugly. It was completely covered in scarred, burned skin, dead and black. It was said that Dayu had intentionally turned his Mizuho fire on himself in order to liberate himself from the fear of pain, from the threat of being burned ever again. The Cinder. The contrast with the beautiful Mizukage three seats away was whiplash.

The look Misain Dayu gave Sakura was just as hideous. He hates me. Maybe even more than Keel the Annihilator hated her; than Sougon Sawar hated her. Not only had Sakura killed Dayu's students in the Cathedral of Hearts, she'd also foiled the Akatsuki plot to brainwash every genin in the chunin exam. She'd even fought Dayu himself in the Battle of the Asylum. Dayu the Cinder is a member of Akatsuki. In the Fire Country he would have been prosecuted as an openly declared terrorist. But in Iwa the Confederacy's alliance with Akatsuki made him indispensable.

"Little girl." Dayu's words were like a saw on stone. "I am surprised you lived through the Second Trial."

"Perhaps you underestimated me."
"No, I think not. It was the Queen Bitch who saved you. But you cannot hide behind Tsunade's skirts forever." Dayu the Cinder almost smiled. He never did, but the threat alone was terrible to behold. "Her time will come as well."

"Sosano." The Tsuchikage's voice broke through the tension. "Is this farce over? I did not bring you into this world to waste your time at idle games. Do your duty—I demand it."

The boy smiled. "Of course, Father. Your will be done."

He turned to go, leading Sakura off the dais, but not before she saw the gleam in his eye. The gleam of keen amusement. He wants to show me something.

She saw it.

Seven villages, thought Sakura. Iwagakure, Kirigakure, Kusagakure, Chigakure, Numagakure, Kawagakure, Takigakure. Seven countries. The Confederacy had grown to encompass them all. At first glance it was a very bad look for the United Countries alliance. Not only did the Confederacy outnumber them by two countries, it was also significantly more powerful.

Yet the two alliances were very different.

Each country that had joined the United Countries had done so because it believed in the radical potential of the UC Charter to establish a new form of international government. There was a core to the Confederacy as well: the tripartite axis of Earth, Swamp, and Waterfall. But that core was animated by something quite different: the destruction of Konoha. Around this tripartite axis revolved several auxiliary powers, each with its own agenda. The territorial ambitions of the Water Country. River's careful hedging. Blood's grisly calculations. The enmity between Grass and Rain. And—most unpredictable of all—Akatsuki.

In other words… the Confederacy was a expedient military alliance, not a lasting framework for international reform. It would collapse as soon as the military situation turned sour. Hard and strong, yes, but brittle.

Like the Fifth Tsuchikage, she thought.

The Confederacy will break before it bends.
The second round of the Third Trial was deadlier than the first. Sakura knew this when Jibachi blew up Naemura Jun's head.

It was the first fight, early in the morning.

Naemura Jun was a D-rank ninja on Team Dakun, utterly outmatched by the B-rank Jibachi. Sakura watched the fight with only an academic interest. Jun was from the Steam Country, one of the new lesser countries created as a "buffer country" between Earth and Wind in the aftermath of the Third Ninja War. Like Dust. Unlike Dust, however, the Steam Country had recently been transformed by the introduction of advanced steam technology from the empires of the South. The new hidden village of Steam worked feverishly to apply the principles of steam power to ninja warfare. Thus far, it was the only military force in the North which employed it, though if their steam weapons and armor made a good showing in the chuunin exam, there would no doubt be many clamoring buyers.

Sakura had yet to see this new kind of technology in action, however.

It proved to be a short-lived chance. The steam-nin boy Jun wore a suit of mechanical metal, leaving not even his face uncovered; Sakura could barely see the ugly fat boy beneath. His headband wound around the outside of his helmet: three lines curling up into the air, like rising steam. Steam came of the armor, too, smoking from between the joints of the brass plates, from the steam engine on Jun's back. The Steam Armor multiplied the boy's strength and speed; it also protected his body and gave him access to special steam-powered weapons.

"Steam Armor: Steam Frenzy Fighting Style!" Jun shouted as soon as the match started. Rockets exploded out of the sides of the suit at his opponent, the stone-nin Chuzuru Jibachi. Jibachi dodged, licked the mouths that grew out of his palms, and tossed exploding clay figurines back at the armored steam-nin. An intense incendiary battle then ensued... for about half a minute. It ended when Jibachi dropped a bomb on top of Jun. The bomb went right through the Steam Armor, collided with the steam engine on the boy's back, and then the whole apparatus exploded.

Naemura Jun dropped to the arena floor dead. His head was missing, a smoking crater.

The crowd positively booed at how fast the fight had ended. Jun did not belong in the Third Trial,
Sakura thought, no more than the dust-nin Ashuju Ryua had. Sosano had spared Ryua, but Jibachi was far more cruel. The steam-nin boy had paid for his mistake with his life. He and his armor both.

Sakura was moved to pronounce that the Steam Country's revolutionary technology was overrated hype.

"That's where you're wrong," said an accented voice next to her.

It was the Ambassador from the United Republic of Genoa, the distinguished diplomat Sir Immanuel Burgouine. Sakura was watching the match from the VIP section today, having first delivered an urgent message to the Hokage and then stuck around. The suave ambassador was wearing a blue pin-striped suit, in the fashion of his country, and smoking a large scented cigar. After his revelations about the end of the Uchiha Clan, Sakura felt a chill whenever she saw him. This man knows much. I must listen to what he says.

"What do you mean, Mr. Burgouine?"

"I mean Naemura Jun lost badly… but perceptive observers will note, he was hardly even a ninja in the first place."

"He made it through the Second Trial."

"Exactly. He used his suit to make it through. Not his own chakra powers, or jutsu. How did one of the weakest genin in the whole exam get to the Third Trial, when even prodigies like Misain Sebi or Kyoroku Erima, or your very own Rock Lee, could not?"

Sakura considered this. "You mean Jun had no traditional ninja skills. All he had was his Steam Armor."

"And if he can do it… why not others? Why not everyone?"

"You're talking about mass production."

"Smart girl. Warfare was originally conducted as a clash between great armies. A numbers game, if you will. The bigger your army, the more powerful you were. That all changed with the advent of the shinobi mercenary. Oh, we still use foot soldiers now, of course, but… an elite ninja is worth infinitely more. A shinobi is always the decisive factor in battle. And so the North has built its entire political and military structure around the hidden village system. Yet… what if the era of mass armies was to make a return? What if every soldier on the battlefield, no matter how common, had a Steam Armor of his own?"

That gave her pause. "It's not that easy."

"I never said it was. But believe me, it can be done."

"The Steam Country originally imported their technology from Genoa."

"That's right."

"And in Genoa… in the south, is this mode of mechanical steam-based warfare the dominant one? And has chakra jutsu become less important?"

"A mixture of the two types, you might say. The situation in the South is more complicated. We do not have the same powerful bloodlines that you do in the North, nor do we have the same kinds of geothermal energy so prevalent in the Steam Country. But here is the fact… Ishikawa Goemon the Tinkerer, the leader of Steam, did not send his strongest ninjas to Iwa. In fact, he probably sent some
of his weakest. True shinobi in name only, really... nothing more than half-trained children in armored suits. Yet they were still comparable to the power of your average C-rank ninja. And these suits are nothing like the advanced Steam Armor prototypes currently being tested..."

"Why?" Sakura frowned. "Why wouldn't the Tinkerer send his best to Iwa? I'd think he would want to make a good showing at the chuunin exam."

"I told you—he did, if you are a perceptive observer. And there is another reason. The Steam Country itself is in danger. Akatsuki desperately wants to get its hands on the steam-nins' new technology. And they are willing to overthrow the entire country to do it. Remember this little tidbit, Sakura. The Annihilation Device is not the only new weapon being developed in this world."

_Akatsuki_. Tsunade-sensei had mentioned something about a revolution in the Steam Country, she recalled. Sakura had not realized how serious the situation was. _So it's true then. A new era of warfare is approaching_. The greater villages would have to be ready... if they survived the current crisis in Iwa, that is.

"The Hokage knows all that you've told me," she said.

"Of course. And so does the Tsuchikage. They have both sent agents into the Steam Country."

"Agents?"

"Wakanura Jiraiya the Toad Sage, the legendary shinobi. And your friend. Uzumaki Naruto, jinchuriki of the nine-tailed demon fox." Immanuel Burgouine smiled, debonair and sophisticated, puffing on his cigar. "They are having some most interesting adventures, my sources tell me. You should ask Tsunade about it sometime."

Sakura never got the chance. The Hokage had disappeared from Aoyama Chuunin Exam Stadium as soon as she'd received Sakura's message and never returned for the whole day. Meanwhile, the matches of Round Two proceeded apace. There were only one match scheduled for the day; but that match also ended so fast that the examiners decided to fast-track the third day's match for that afternoon. So there ended up being three on the same day.

The match between the cloud-nin Kirazu Raiki and the blood-nin Makoto Mazu was as completely lopsided as the first. The two genin had completely different fighting styles. Raiki was a range fighter, using his Human Battery bloodline and mastery of electromagnetism to manipulate his opponent from a distance. The amoral mercenary Mazu was a close-range bruiser, relying on his sword and his secret clan jutsu Impure Blood to draw Raiki's blood and increase his own strength.

The only problem was, Raiki never let Mazu get close enough to use Impure Blood.

Sakura was surprised to see how how subtle some of Raiki's techniques were. Using his Magnetic Charge jutsu, the albino cloud-nin could magnetize any kind of metal, easily deflecting Mazu's shuriken attacks and even forcing him backwards by repelling his steel sword. Mazu could do nothing—and when Raiki magnetized several copper wire shuriken to follow Mazu around like a homing beacon, the blood-nin shrugged his shoulders and conceded the match.

The speed by which Mazu lost was impressive. Mazu was a strong B-rank genin. But Kirazu Raiki was more formidable still—one of the strongest and most complete fighters in the whole chuunin exam. He would face Temari in the semifinals of the Third Trial, if either got that far. Except the cloud-nin would need to go through Hoshigaki Makera first. _That's Raiki's next match. The vengeance he wants, right there for the taking._
The last match of the day was by far the best.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMAN… THE DEADLY VIXEN OF THE DESERT… THE SISTER OF THE FIFTH KAZEKAGE HIMSELF… SABAKU TEMARI OF SUNA!"

Temari emerged from the arena tunnel. Sakura's teammate wore her customary ninja uniform of mesh and blue-beige nylon, her light blond hair done in pigtails, her Giant War Fan slung on her back. Dark teal eyes glinted beneath the metal plate of her forehead protector, the symbol of the hidden village of Sand: an upside-down hourglass, a symbol of the passage and the urgency of time. *The sand in the hourglass is running out.*

"VERSUS… HER HATED RIVAL… THE BOY WHO CONTROLS SOUND… THE SON WHO SEEKS VENGEANCE FOR HIS FALLEN FATHER… RYOKAN SATETSU OF SUNA!"

It was not quite true, that part about the vengeance. Ryokan Satetsu was the son of Ryokan Mukade, the man who had tried to overthrow Gaara in the Battle of Red Rock Cliff. Nobody had forgotten that—not Temari, certainly not Satetsu. Events only two months past seemed to hang over Aoyama Chuunin Exam Stadium like a pallid, noxious smoke.

Yet Satetsu was not his father.

"T-t-temari," said the sand-nin boy, stuttering over his words, as was his peculiar affliction. "So we f-f-fight again."

"Indeed." Temari hefted her War Fan and unfolded it, showing the three purple dots. "I remember the last time we fought, in Red Rock Cliff. You almost killed my brother Kankuro."

"So many d-d-dead."

Thousands had died in Red Rock Cliff, corpses littering the white sand, staining the dunes red with blood. And before… in the Lighthouse, when Sakura and the Sand Siblings had fought Mukade's henchmen. Akasun Baki had killed Subashi Basho, one of Mukade's deputies and Satetsu's sensei. Baki himself was dead, too, assassinated by ANBU ROOT while walking in the flower beds of Tsukai Gardens. So was Satetsu's best friend and teammate, Hattori Bakan, killed during the Second Trial in the Battle of the Jewel Islands. *So many dead.*

Of Satetsu and his closest comrades, only he had survived. The boy wore an air of subdued resignation. *He does not expect to win this fight,* Sakura realized. *Nor does he care if he does.*

Yet it was as if Temari had closed her heart to the other young sand-nin. *Their fathers were rivals… she has despised Satetsu for her entire life.* Her eyes were chips of flint. "Not all deaths are equal, Satetsu. Your father was an Akatsuki traitor."

"Yes. He was my—my f-father."

"I know all about fathers. I did not like my own very much. Sabaku Tojuen made many mistakes… arrogant mistakes that led to his death by the White Snake's treacherous hands. Ryokan Mukade was worse. I know how Mukade treated you. I know you rejected your father's puppet techniques and sought out Basho because you did not want to follow your father's path. Yet you still fought for him in Red Rock Cliff. You betrayed the village, Satetsu! How dare you ask for my trust!"

She swung her War Fan.

A sudden, fierce gust of wind billowed from Temari's fan across the length of the arena. *Wind*
Satetsu countered with another wind jutsu of his own. "Wind Release: Sonic Pulse!" he shouted. A shockwave of highly concentrated wind burst out from his hand. The shockwave was powerful enough to destroy stone… instead it collided with Temari's Wind Scythe in a powerful roar; the clash of jutsu was large enough to shake the walls of stadium.

More jutsu quickly followed, a veritable torrent of offensive, destructive wind jutsu. Even though they were both wind element users, Temari and Satetsu's fighting styles were quite different. Temari's jutsu were mostly based on sheer force—the sheer pressure of the air itself, balanced between offense and defense and exaggerated to an extreme limit of potency. In contrast, Satetsu relied on more subtle manipulations of air waves. His jutsu altered the wind's frequency and speed and direction, buffeting enemies in unexpected ways.

"Wind Release: Shatter!" shouted Satetsu.

Then he opened his mouth and screamed. Holy crap, thought Sakura, clamping her hands around her ears. The stuttering, inarticulate sand-nin suddenly produced a sound of supersonic intensity. It was a kind of supersonic vibration that traveled through the air from Satetsu's mouth.

The Chakra Barrier around the arena did not recognize or catch all of the vibration. After all, it was only a high-pitched sound. Leaking waves propagated outward, shattering every single brittle or pressure-sensitive object in its area of effect: glass, electronic equipment, even human eardrums. Sakura could almost feel the blood coming out of her ears, and she was not even inside the arena. The whole half of the stadium facing Satetsu's scream was thrown into pandemonium. People were screaming, shrieking, running for the exits.

"Wind Release: Storm Shield!" Spinning her metal War Fan, Temari created a funnel of wind that swirled around her. The pressurized wind was like a wall, deflecting the Shatter jutsu away from Temari's body. If it had hit her, she probably would have fainted from the extreme sonic vibration. Instead Satetsu switched tacks, using his other elemental jutsu affinity. "Water Release: Hiding in Mist!"

A cloud of fine mist materialized around Satetsu, shrouding the arena in an impenetrable white fog. Sakura could hardly see Temari, and could not see Satetsu at all. The stone-nin boy had disappeared into the fog, trying to hide himself from Temari's strikes, trying to find a subtle opening to attack Temari.

Temari swung her fan this way and that, but could not seem to find Satetsu. Sakura realized that the stone-nin boy was using another one of his special wind techniques, False Echo. Satetsu used False Echo to confuse enemy senses. Using a chakra field to alter how sound vibrated in the air, he could cause opponents to perceive sounds as coming from somewhere else than were they really were. Combined with Hiding in Mist, the misdirection was effective indeed.

Multiple sounds echoed throughout the mist-filled arena—footsteps, spinning shuriken, heavy breathing, even jutsu. But they were almost surely fake. Finally, a real Sonic Pulse screamed out of the mist at Temari's back. Temari barely dodged the deadly attack in time. Frustrated, she created great gusts of wind out of her War Fan, trying to clear away the mist. But Satetsu only made more of it.

"What's she doing?" asked Kankuro, standing by Sakura's side in the genin section. "Temari should use Vortex! That would suck away all the mist. The little rat-boy won't have anywhere to hide."
"I think she's saving it," said Sakura.

"Why?"

"Temari doesn't want to go all out. It would be... demeaning."

She wants to prove that the faction of Sunagakure she represents is stronger than Satetsu's faction. And not just a little stronger—ascendant in a dominant faction. Sakura looked up toward the VIP section on the opposite side of the arena. Anayama Chiyo the Weaver stood there with her wrinkled hands on the railings, watching the proceedings closely.

"Trying to make the family look good, eh? Well, she better do something quick. Or she's going to lose."

Temari's solution to the problem of False Echo ended up being a matter of observation rather than any specific jutsu. Ignoring the fake sounds Satetsu was making in the fog, she focused instead on air currents. The mist hid Satetsu's body completely... but every time he moved, he also slightly displaced the droplets of mist in his way, creating an ever so slight air current. By analyzing the pattern of currents, Temari could trace Satetsu's location backward. Sakura saw her stand still for a long moment, hunting the moving Satetsu. Then Temari struck. Creating a flexible funnel of wind and then lashing out at the spot where she thought Satetsu was hiding.

She hit gold.

Satetsu bounced out of the cloud of mist, groaning. Temari was on him in a flash, bashing at him with her Giant War Fan. The crowd whooped loudly—this part was more exciting than the lengthy game of invisible cat-and-mouth the two sand-nins had been playing before.

Satetsu abandoned his attempts at trickery, now engaging Temari in a straight-up taijutsu battle. "D-d-do you remember?" he cried, pulling a long glowing white whip out of his belt. A chakra-cast whip.

Sakura recognized the whip very well. It was the same whip that Satetsu's teammate Hattori Bakan had used—the chakra-cast whip he used in combination with his bloodline, Glass Release. Bakan had used it to great effect in the Battle of the Jewel Islands. After Bakan died, Satetsu had gathered up the whip and claimed it for himself. Satetsu uses the weapon of his fallen friend, to honor his memory.

The taijutsu battle was short but fierce. Temari was larger, more powerful, faster. Satetsu was short and slight like his father, his face pinched and beady like a little leathery rat. Yet he wore the same sand-nin uniform that Temari did. The same forehead protector. It almost looked like an older sister beating up on a younger brother—as if they were family.

But they were not, of course. Satetsu stumbled backwards, badly bruised from a dozen solid hits with Temari's fan. He wielded his whip in front of him like a snaking shield, cleverly imbuing it with wind chakra-flow for extra speed and slicing power. But Temari could do the same. "B-b-bakan... died," Satetsu said. "C-can you say he was—was disloyal?"

"He died at the right time."

"Your b-brother... p-p-pardoned us. We f-f-fought for the United Countries. We... d-d-died. Why isn't that enough?"

"Because you tried to kill my family!" shouted Temari.
"And what…. what about G-god?"

"How dare you."


"How dare you invoke my religion. What do you know about Kiyome, Satetsu? About symmetry and truth? Beauty and forgiveness?"

"I f-f-forgive you."

*For killing my father.*

Sabaku Temari, for once, was silent.

But that did not mean she hesitated.

In the next instant she had barreled into the smaller Satetsu, using her War Fan to knock aside his whip and then slam the boy down to the ground. Temari planted a foot firmly on his chest. "Surrender!" she shouted. Satetsu did not resist… only accepted his fate.

The fight between the two sand-nins was over.

Afterward, Satetsu exited the arena all by himself through one of the tunnels. Temari made her way back to the genin section, barely the worse for wear. Kankuro was exultant as he hugged his older sister. "Congratulations, Temari! You really kicked his ass!"

Temari was not in a talkative mood. Knowing Temari and her brooding tempers, Sakura suspected it would not go away until a cleansing session of prayer in Katsu-ji Temple. Satetsu had obviously touched a sensitive nerve by bringing up Temari's Kiyome faith. *Kindness at all cost*, he said, and accused Temari of not following her own doctrines. *I must talk with her, and Satetsu, and see if it is possible to reconcile them.* The Wind Country was the second most important member of the the United Countries, after only Fire, and it was important for them to present a united front. In the meantime, Sakura had her own fight against Kawai to prepare for. She glanced up at the giant scoreboard hung above the VIP section. Five fights remained in the second round of the Third Trial. And up next…

… was the most anticipated match of them all.

*Niji versus Aumono.*
Sakura found Hyuuga Neji where she'd known she would find him.

At Rock Lee's bedside.

Lee was sleeping, still drugged from all the medicine and painkillers the doctors were giving him. He sleeps like a corpse. The windows of south patient ward in Kindness Hospital were open, sending bright morning light filtering down into the small white room, the white walls and linoleum floors, the white bed. It was such a clean place—as clean as the world outside was red with blood.

Neji turned. "Did Tsunade send you?"

Sakura frowned. "No."

"I thought she might. To convince me not to kill Mukai Aumono."

If you kill Aumono, the alliance between Rain and Leaf will fall apart. If not right away, when both were confronted by the immediate threat of Sougon Sawar, then surely later. No peace between the two countries could endure with such bad blood as had developed between the Hyuuga and Mukai clans, between mutual pacts of murderous vengeance. The endless cycle of death and hatred would continue.

Sakura did not say that, however. She knew her arguments would do no good, that her words could not reach her friend. No more than Temari's words could reach me, when she tried to tell me about Sosano. It was not a comparison she wished to dwell on.

"I just came… to wish you luck."

"Thank you."

"How is he doing?"

"He stopped trying to kill himself. At least that's what he promised me. Rock Lee would never break his word… or least the old Lee wouldn't. The doctors aren't quite certain yet." Neji gestured to the
thick fuinjutsu restraints around the bed, holding Lee's arms in place. "But how is he doing? Worse than you can imagine."

"It takes time." Sakura's words were not convincing even to herself. "People can adjust to even the most crippling injuries. Tsunade-sensei says—"

"Don't talk to me about Tsunade, Sakura. She was the one who sentenced Gai-sensei to the Asylum. She is an appeaser and a coward." Neji turned away. "The Hokage is not totally heartless, I will give her that much. I know she will sometimes come here alone, to comfort Lee in her own person. It's the least she could do, after Lee was crippled in the service of her idiotic United Countries scheme."

"Neji… Tsunade-sensei was the one who healed Lee's broken legs in the first place. Don't you remember? After the Konoha Chuunin Exam."

The irony was not lost on the other leaf-nin. "Oh, I remember too well. To think that it would come to this… it doesn't matter. Tsunade can do nothing for Lee now. She can't heal his legs now, can she? He doesn't have any legs." Neji gave a bitter laugh.

She had no answer to that.

"Regardless of the outcome of the match between Aumono and myself… no matter what happens today… will you promise me something?"

Sakura knew what he would ask. "You want me to kill Onira Kawai."

"I wish it was me. I wish I could have the opportunity to take that mist-nin's disgusting stitched face and rip it out of him. To avenge my teammate and best friend… to deliver justice. But the way the seeding worked, you'll face him in the second round, Sakura, instead of me. So it's up to you. End his life. After what happened, after what you did… you owe Rock Lee at least that much."

Don't make promises you can't keep.

"I promise."

"Good. And I will do the same with the frog boy."

Later that morning, Aoyama Chuunin Stadium was packed from top to bottom for the match between Neji and Aumono, and the atmosphere was louder and more riotous than a carnival. They cannot get enough of the blood sport. Sakura took her seat in the genin section, by her teammates Temari and Kankuro. Nearby lounged Shinren, and the cloud-nins Raiki and Kazuno, and her other friends. Everyone was waiting in anticipation.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMAN… THE FIGHT YOU HAVE ALL BEEN WAITING FOR!"

The crowd roared. Ten thousand voices raised in bloodlustred cheers.

"IN ONE CORNER… I GIVE YOU… THE ASSASSIN OF RAIN… THE BLOOD OF HANZOU THE REAPER HIMSELF… MUKAI AUMONO OF AME!"

Aumono emerged to a smattered of applause, and more anticipation. The tall, lanky boy wore a purple and black wetsuit, armored and covered with a thin layer of metal scale. His handsome face was pallid beneath a mane of long brown hair. Under his hair, his forehead protector glistened in the morning light, the symbol of the hidden village of Rain: four vertical lines in parallel, like falling rain.

"AND IN THE OTHER… THE GENIUS PRODIGY OF THE HYUUGA CLAN… THE
"WIELDER OF THE WHITE EYE… HYUUGA NEJI OF KONOHA!"

More boos than cheers. Neji strode confidently into the arena. His robes were perfectly spotless, white as fresh fallen snow.

"BOTH COMRADES OF THE UNITED COUNTRIES… YET BOTH MORTAL ENEMIES! WILL THESE TWO YOUNG SHINOBI SHED EACH OTHER’S BLOOD TODAY? CAN THE FRAGILE ALLIANCE BETWEEN RAIN AND LEAF SURVIVE SUCH A SHOCKING RIFT?"

"That stone-nin announcer is not biased at all," observed Temari dryly.

"It's a guy who used to teach me at the Iwa Ninja Academy," explained Orajuchi. "We think he was a failed actor."

It was the first match between different villages in the United Countries. And unlike Temari's match versus Satetsu, the bad blood in the air was palpable.

"Hyuuga Neji." Aumono laughed. "Look at your face. You look like you have a stick stuck up your butt."

"Have you no remorse?" replied the leaf-nin boy. "Have you no guilt, or conscience, for what you have done?"

"I didn't do anything."

"Your grandfather stole my sensei's soul."

Aumono shrugged. "So why don't you bring that up with Lord Hanzou, instead of me? Hell, go attack Tosuken-sensei if you wish. Or your precious Queen of Torment, Senju Tsunade. They were responsible for Maito Gai's demise. I had nothing to do with it."

"You were complicit." Neji shook his head. "There are those more guilty than you, it's true. In time, I shall have my rightful justice on them all." Hyuuga Neji's eyes bulged with the unfathomable power of the Byakugan. "But I will start with you! Mukai Aumono, I will show you the wrath of true suffering!"

Neji attacked. A flurry of blows, perfectly precise and blindingly fast; the famous Gentle Fist Fighting Style taijutsu of the Hyuuga clan. Aumono met him blow for blow for a few exchanges, wielding poisoned senbon in his hands, but shortly backflipped away under the relentless assault.

"You dumb ape, you know nothing of suffering! Or my life."

"I know you were born with a golden spoon in your mouth. You were born with all the advantages of being the heir to a dictatorship, and yet you did nothing with them. Nothing to help people, nothing to uphold the honor of our profession. All you do is chase skirts and make idle jokes. You are a worthless excuse for a shinobi."

"And you are an over-sentimental child who knows nothing about the true corruption of this world. There is no justice, do you understand? No gods who watch over us. Yes, it's true, your sensei is screaming his brains out in the Asylum. So what, Hyuuga? Get over it."

"Gentle Fist: Vacuum Palm!"

A beam of concentrated white chakra shot from the palm of Neji's hand. The offensive jutsu
extended the range of Neji's Gentle Fist techniques beyond close range, giving a new dimension to his fighting ability. Aumono dodged the slicing white laser at the last moment, throwing himself to the side. Neji did not stop. He blasted out more Vacuum Palms one after the other, tracking the fleeing Aumono around the arena. At last one of the beams caught Aumono in the shoulder, searing through his black wetsuit armor and into the flesh below. The rain-nin cried out in pain and rolled to the ground. A red stream flowed down his arm and dripped onto the stones of the arena floor.

First blood.

The crowd roared.

"Aumono's in trouble," said Temari.

Yes, he is. Neji was out for blood. He's going to kill him, Sakura realized. Aumono could do little about it. The rain-nin's whole fighting style revolved about feints, stealth, and sudden attacks from the shadows. It was a horrible matchup with the Byakugan. Aumono could never surprise Neji because Neji could always see his every movement, no matter where he was or where he tried to hide. Aumono might be able to do better against an opponent like Raiki, or Sakura herself. But against Neji?

Neji stalked methodically toward the injured Aumono. "Aren't you going to use any jutsu against me? Or did you already give up?" His voice was like ice. "You worthless, good-for-nothing loser. It should've been you who lost your legs in the Second Trial, instead of Rock Lee."

"Oh, on the contrary." Aumono laughed. "If I fought Onira Kawai, I wouldn't have lost my legs at all. I know how to hide, remember."

"You cannot hide against the all-seeing power of the Byakugan. There's nowhere for you to run, rain-nin. You can only die."

"Funny. I was just about to say the same to you."

Neji charged forward—

Aumono brought his fingers together in a flashing seal. "Hidden Chameleon!"

—and Aumono disappeared.

Neji skidded to a stop in the place where Aumono had been crouching. There was nobody there. But where was the rain-nin? It was as if Aumono had just disappeared into thin air with one supersonic crack. It was obvious that Neji could not see him. Neji actually turned his head to stare around the length of the arena, though he had already activated his Byakugan.

"Hidden Chameleon… that's the jutsu of Densuke Tosuken the Chameleon, isn't it?" asked Shinren.

Sakura nodded. She had seen it for herself once before, during the Battle of the Asylum. Or more precisely before the battle… when Tosuken and Maito Gai had been dueling each other to the death. "It's a space-time ninjutsu. The user bends the electromagnetic spectrum around his body, making him undetectable to any kind of sense or instrument. Even the Byakugan. Now the whole fight is changed. By countering the vision of the Byakugan, Aumono could push Neji back on the defensive, and then go on offense himself. "Aumono couldn't use Hidden Chameleon before. He must have just learned it from his sensei."

BOOM!
The air cracked as Aumono emerged from his hiding place… slightly. The crack was the only thing that Sakura actually saw or heard.

That, and the dart.

**Blink Dart!** The dart materialized out of thin air off Neji's left, already zooming at its maximum acceleration toward Neji's neck. Blink Dart was one of Aumono's signature jutsu. He used his own body as a blow gun, shooting a small but precise dart out from his mouth at extremely high speeds. It was undoubtedly coated in deadly poison—a perfect assassination jutsu.

The Blink Dart had appeared no more than three meters away from Neji. At that short of a range, Sakura doubted she could dodge it even using Chakra Gates. Neji was much faster, however. Astonishingly, he was able to spin around and use Gentle Fist to knock the dart away…

**BOOM!**

..only for another Blink Dart to appear from the opposite direction.

"Shit!" cried the Sarutobi twins simultaneously in dismay.

Sakura shared the sentiment. Aumono was flinging deadly darts at Neji from all directions now. Neji could only bat away at the darts as they emerged… he was entirely on the defensive. He had no ability to go on offense because he did not know where Aumono was. The cracks in the air only revealed where Aumono had already been, not where he was going. **Neji is in trouble now.** Neji was doing an amazing job of protecting himself from Aumono's attacks. But he could not keep up such a blind defense forever. Any mistake, and a poisoned dart would end the fight—if not his very life.

"Kaiten!"

Neji released a huge burst of blue-white chakra from all his tenketsu and spun rapidly in place. **Kaiten**, the defensive jutsu famed the world over as the "Absolute Defense." The whirlwind of blue-white chakra was an unbreakable shield, protecting Neji from the darts… and more. The Kaiten was so large that it extended outward for over twenty meters in diameter from Neji's body.

There was a thundering crack as it hit the hidden Aumono.

Mukai Aumono was thrown back by the force of the chakra shield, hitting the floor with an crunch and skidding ignominiously on the stones. His Hidden Chameleon jutsu had been exposed by Neji's Kaiten. The rain-nin boy dusted himself off, blood trickling from his forehead. "Ah. So your strongest jutsu has come out, has it, Hyuuga? A good reminder. I shouldn't get too close."

"Kaiten is not my strongest jutsu," said Neji.

"Really? Do you know how to use Death Demon Seal now? Frankly, I don't believe you." The rain-nin boy laughed, shaking his mane of matted, dark brown hair. Yet there was a surprising anger in his voice. "Now do you see? You damn fool, you can't even beat me. What makes you think that you can defeat Lord Hanzou the Reaper, the greatest shinobi that ever lived? My lord grandfather would crush you like a little bug underfoot. You have no chance."

"Then I shall die in the attempt. Like any true shinobi must."

"Now you sound like your moron teammate in the green spandex. Oh, the Will of Fire! Oh, protecting the people precious to you! Spare me your useless prattle."

"If I forgot my friends, and did not honor their memories, I would be even lower than a beast."
"Humans are beasts. We are nothing more than animals with pretensions to power. Our lives on earth are poor, nasty, brutish, and short. Let you tell something, Hyuuga Neji. Your sensei Maito Gai betrayed and murdered my father in cold blood. Do you think I care? No. People die. Get over it."

"You are truly without honor."

"Oh, I thought like you once… when I was a little child. I thought Lord Hanzou would protect me. The most powerful shinobi in the world, my father said. But then my father died and at the funeral Lord Hanzou held his own son's corpse, crying so loud I could hear it even over the pouring rain, and I knew that even all Hanzou's power meant nothing, that he could not even protect his own son. So what was the point? All your little plans and toys, and your petty revenges? You damn apes can't understand. You grew up in your nice homes, your false peace. You know nothing. We rain-nins know all. Decades of unceasing war turned the fertile valleys of our country into the Weeping Lands. The Curse of Rain, they call it. What an apt name. My father died? So what? I saw my mother die, too, and my brothers, and all my friends, cut down either for Hanzou the Reaper or for Akatsuki, does it make any real difference? The cycle of suffering goes on forever. There is nothing else to fight for but yourself. Only a fool wastes his time trying to create a world that can never be! The only destiny that everyone shares… is death!"

For a very long moment Hyuuga Neji did not speak.

"Yes, now I see." Hyuuga Neji's head was bowed. When he raised it, his white bulging eyes were very cold, seething with power. "Yes, I see now."

"Oh, you do?"

"I see. You're just like I used to be."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"I used to be a person who cared for nothing else but myself. I used to be an unfeeling beast who abandoned all my responsibilities toward my comrades, only following my own selfish desires… and I was not worth the air that I breathed on earth! Just like you!"

Neji leaped forward, billows of blue chakra sloughing off him in waves, an aura of pure glowing power. His speed was even faster than even—a blur of motion. Sakura suspected that the leaf-nin boy had activated at least one Chakra Gate, if not more. His Byakugan was pulsing with bulging white veins.

"Hidden Chameleon!" Aumono disappeared again.

But this time Neji did not stop. Without even breaking stride he turned direction, chasing an unseen target. Spinning forward in a smooth motion, using Gentle Fist to punch a space in the air with his palm—

BOOM!

There was an earsplitting crack, like the sound of a mountain splitting in two. Then Aumono appeared in the shockwave of Neji's attack, flung so far and so fast backwards that his body slammed against the arena wall and cracked it. The rain-nin boy was slow getting back up. It looked like some of Aumono's internal organs were damaged. Gentle Fist specialized in attacks not on an opponent's bones and joints but on his chakra circulatory system, disabling their tenketsu and inhibiting their ability to use chakra jutsu.

"What the hell?" cried Aumono, holding onto his chest in pain.
Sakura understood. Neji had extended a chakra projection field across the entire stadium arena. It was almost like a pseudo-Kaiten, in a way—Neji flinging a constant stream of chakra outward from his tenketsu. The rotation was not fast enough to act as a real shield, but it was sufficiently dense to obstruct Aumono's movements, even when the rain-nin was hidden from sight. By sensing that slight obstruction in his pseudo-Kaiten chakra field, Neji had tracked Aumono across the arena and neutralized Hidden Chameleon. Incredible, she thought.

The tables were turned once again.

"I told you before," said Neji. "There's nowhere for you to hide."

"Exploding Needle Shower!" Aumono shouted.

The rain-nin did not bother to use Hidden Chameleon any longer. Instead he threw a spinning bamboo tube at Neji. Thousands of long, thin, senbon needles burst from the tube, glittering a deadly gray-white in the bright morning sun. Poisoned, Sakura knew.

"Kaiten!"

The senbon bounced harmlessly off of Neji's spinning defensive shield. But Aumono was not done. The senbon that were deflected off the whirling Kaiten did not clatter to the ground, but instead hung poised in the air. Aumono had attached barely visible chakra strings to each end of each needle. Hundreds of deadly senbon, floating in the space between the two shinobi like a cloud of razor steel.

Aumono controlled the cloud with his fingers. With one swipe of his arm he brought half of the whole senbon cloud down on Neji. The force of the attack was so powerful that the needles which missed Neji stabbed straight through the stone floor. The leaf-nin did not use Kaiten this time, instead opting to attack Aumono head on. He charged forward into the curtain of razor needles.

"Gentle Fist: Vacuum Palm!" Glowing white beams shot from Neji's palm and burned through the senbon cloud, cutting the chakra strings that allowed Aumono to control the senbon. Neji dodged through the rain-nin's web of defensive razor needles, slicing them to pieces. Senbon fell all around him, their strings cut. Aumono could not land a single successful hit. In one swift motion Neji had closed the distance between them and slammed his palm into the rain-nin's face.

"Ahh!"

Aumono reeled back under the vicious punch, yet somehow managed to dodge Neji's next strike. More senbon appeared in the rain-nin's hands, slicing at Neji, cutting the front of his robe and and forcing him backward. Aumono was tall and lanky, with a longer reach than Neji, and his every strike was lethal poison. Neji was faster and had the superior technique—the unmatchable accuracy and grace of Gentle Fist. The two United Countries genin collided in a colossal taijutsu battle. Hand to hand, fist to fist, jutsu to jutsu.

"Reap!" shouted Aumono.

It was Aumono's strongest frontal attack, an Instant Death jutsu. An invisible cutting blade of pure chakra burst from the tips of Aumono's fingers. The edge was sharp enough to slice through solid steel. Sakura had seen Reap cut through a man's chest with such razor precision that the victim had not even known he was dead until the top half of his body slid off the bottom half and into the cold black water of the Asylum.

Neji dodged.

And struck back.
The first strike caught Aumono hard in the gut. Another strike connected between Aumono's legs, lifting him into the air, and Neji followed the assault with a flurry of merciless punches and kicks, brutal and savage. It only ended when Neji drop-kicked the rain-nin boy down into the ground with such force that the stone floor shattered into pieces. A cloud of stone chips flew into the air…

There was a deep crater where the center of the arena had once been.

"Holy crap!" whispered Kankuro. "Sakura, remind me never to piss that guy off."

Aumono lay stunned at the bottom of the crater. It was a long moment before he could struggle to his hands and knees. The boy's black wetsuit armor was in rags and pieces, and beneath it his pallid white skin was bruised and swollen. Blood poured from the boy's broken body and drenched his uniform. Aumono staggered to one bent knee before finding himself unable to get up further. His very movement was crippled, Sakura knew, badly inhibited by the damage Neji's Gentle Fist had done to his internal body systems. It was just a twisted irony that he had no broken bones.

"You dumb ape," the rain-nin gasped, blood leaking from his eyes and mouth. "That was your chance. You should have finished it."

"It is finished."

"Yes… it is. But not the way you think!" The boy pressed his bloody hand to the stone floor. "Summoning Technique!"

There was a giant puff of smoke.

A huge gray salamander appeared under the crippled rain-nin, so larger that Neji had to jump back to avoid being crushed. The salamander was slimy, round, and extremely fat. When it opened its blind mouth, rows of razor teeth greeted its master.

"Ibuse!" Aumono shouted. "Poison Mist attack!"

Ibus the Salamander roared. From its mouth came not words but a cloud of poison. The release was astonishingly fast. In a single second the entire arena was covered in clouds of green poison mist. If it were not for the Chakra Barrier that divided the audience stands from the arena, everyone in the stadium might have died.

"Kaiten!"

Neji went into his signature whirlwind spin. The swirling Kaiten shield kept the deadly poison mist back, protecting Neji's body. But how long could Neji keep his spin up? The instant he stopped, he would be exposed to the poison…

"I knew you'd use that!" Aumono cried triumphantly.

The rain-nin jerked his hands. At first Sakura did not understand what he was doing. There seemed nothing there… until she noticed the faintly glittering threads. Chakra strings. Aumono had gathered thousands of chakra strings in the hand. They were the remnants of the thousands of strings Aumono had been using to control his cloud of senbon needles earlier in the fight.

Neji had cut the needles down with his Gentle First taijutsu, scattering them all across the floor of the arena. Many other needles were stuck embedded deep into the stone. Sakura had noticed them lying there, of course, but she had not paid any attention to them. Lying in plain sight. Neji had not paid any attention, either.
His fatal mistake.

"Fuck your Absolute Shield!" screamed Aumono. He pulled on his reconstituted net of senbon, every single last one now under his precise control. Thousands of chakra strings tightened like a net around the spinning Neji. Then at last Sakura saw Aumono's true plan. Even though Neji was spinning, the rotation itself was stationary. He could not actually move away or dodge attacks… that was the sole weakness of Kaiten. "Now draw your last dying breath, you white-eyed bastard, just like you promised!"

The thick chakra strings wrapped around Neji's spinning Kaiten shield like so many boa constrictors, each of them staked to the ground on both ends via the buried senbon. Neji was tangled up inside a shrinking web of thin, deadly chains. Even with all the chakra Neji could blast out of his tenketsu, the total drag of resistance was too much.

Neji's rotation slowed…

… slowed…

… stopped.

Instantly the chakra strings caught Neji in a vice grip. The leaf-nin boy cried out in pain as they twisted around him. He was wrapped up in the strings almost like a mummy, his arms pinned helplessly to his sides, his legs locked together as well. The chakra strings were twisted so tight that they sliced into Neji's skin, drawing a gush of blood. It ran down the leaf-nin's body in a hundred small streams, staining his white robes the color of dusk, red and black.

There were shocked gasps in the audience.

*My god*, Sakura thought, *Aumono has him.*

Aumono had unsummoned his salamander. He'd also managed to climb to his feet, though the boy would probably fall flat on his face if he tried to take a single step forward. "Ah, still standing, I see. I thought Ibuse's Poison Mist would have killed you by now. You must be using your chakra control to slow down the poison from infecting your body. Oh, well. It doesn't matter. I beat your strongest jutsu, and you have nothing left." Aumono raised his bloody hand, pointed the fingertips at the captured Neji. "The poison didn't kill you, Hyuuga Neji. But this will. My Reap jutsu will split you right in half."

"It's over," said the bat boy, Orajuchi.

The stone-nin's voice was ashen.

"I agree." The albino cloud-nin Kirazu Raiki seemed amused. "Aumono's right, Hyuuga should have finished the fight when he had the chance. Now it's too late. A most entertaining match indeed."

"Wait," said Temari. "Look."

Sakura followed Temari's pointing finger. Hyuuga Neji stood in the midst of the tangle of senbon threads, blood pouring from his wounds, staining his white robes. Yet his eyes were as calm and cold as they were ever. A smile actually twisted on his bloody lips.

He did not look beaten.

Not at all.
"I shall win this fight," declared Hyuuga Neji.

Aumono laughed. "Oh, will you?"

"I shall win… because you are afraid to die. You are fearful for your own benighted life, Mukai Aumono, and that makes you weak."

"Everyone is afraid to die."

"That is because you don't understand… you have not even the faintest comprehension… the freedom I feel when I chose to die to protect my friends!" Neji raised his head and roared above the noise of Chuunin Exam Stadium. "And I told you! Kaiten is not my strongest jutsu!"

"Really? Then show—"

"—CLAWING KAITEN!"

A hurricane of blue-white chakra burst from Neji's entire body. Kaiten, thought Sakura for an instant, but no, that was not right. Kaiten had already been defeated. This was something else. A hurricane with churning sharp edges that sliced apart the enemy chakra strings which chained Neji in place. A roiling tempest of power and rage and seething anger.

An orb of divine judgment.

Sakura had never seen anything like it.

And then Neji… moved.

He charged forward, still spinning, still enveloped in his shield of churning chakra. The Clawing Kaiten was not bound by the stationary limitations of its weaker, more basic cousin. With Clawing Kaiten, Neji could easily attack and defend at the same time. The whirlwind spin was not spherical, not smooth at all, but jagged, with a leading edge and an imbalanced force distribution. The leading edge generated an intense forward momentum from inside the Kaiten itself, allowing Neji to move in any direction even while spinning. From the outside, the surface of the churning whirlwind looked like a continuous wave of sharp, jagged blades.

A Kaiten with claws.

"No!" shrieked Aumono. "Damn you—take this—" The boy thrust out both hands at the approaching Neji. "—REAP!"

The dual cutting attack hit Neji head on, ripping into the Clawing Kaiten in a sizzle of blinding, dazzling power. Billowing, smoking, shrieking chakra sparked from the point of contact between the two jutsu. But it was not enough. Neji's Clawed Kaiten deflected the Reap, slowing only for a moment. The whirling chakra claws tore up everything they touched, senbon needles, chakra strings, even the ground underneath Neji's feet—

"Mukai Aumono!" screamed Hyuuga Neji. "Now you die!"

His Clawing Kaiten slammed into Aumono—

A flash of light.

It came from neither of the combatants. Instead an outside force had intervened in the battle… interposing herself between Neji and Aumono at the last moment. Holding Neji's Clawed Kaiten at
bay with her bare hands just before the attack ended Aumono's life.

It was the Fifth Hokage.

"Not today," she whispered.

It was so silent in Aoyama Chuunin Exam Stadium that you could have heard a pin drop. Sakura could clearly hear the sound of her own pounding heart.

The referee, Sougon Charasu, broke the spell at last. He brought his arm down, signaling the end of the match.

"The winner is… Hyuuga Neji of Konoha!"

And then, finally, the waves of applause began.

Wave upon wave. A standing ovation for the greatest, most thrilling, most epic fight that the spectators had yet witnessed in the Third Trial. Perhaps that they had ever witnessed in their entire lives. Women shrieked in excitement, men hollered and threw celebratory thrash into the arena, even trained genin jumped up and down, a veritable riot of roaring and applause and shrieking cheers.

Yet it was as if Hyuuga Neji heard nothing.

Neji had stopped spinning. He stood still as a statue and stared at the Hokage. Senju Tsunade was slowly melting down into a puddle of wet brown mud. A mud clone. Neji had destroyed it with his Clawing Kaiten; its arms churned into a pulp by the relentlessly spinning chakra claws.

After another moment the poison in the air dissipated; drained by the Chakra Barrier now that the match was over. Other shinobi streamed down into the arena, including Tosuken the Chameleon. The defeated Mukai Aumono lay unconscious on the ground, his chest and face ravaged and bloody. Tosuken cradled the fallen rain-nin boy against his chest—an oddly gentle gesture in the hulking, elephantine man. The man turned toward Neji; he nodded. Then he turned aside, carrying his beaten student away.

Sakura found Neji sitting in the middle of the shattered arena.

The boy was not all that seriously injured, physically speaking, the copious blood all over his skin and robes mostly the result of shallow cuts. But when Sakura used Mystical Palm to delve more deeply into Neji's body, she saw that he indeed had been infected by Aumono's Poison Mist attack. It was slowly taking over his body. First making him numb, then unconscious; and, if left untreated for too long, would certainly kill him.

Dr. Honjo Micho, Chief of Konoha Surgery, appeared with a medic-nin team and stretcher. "I'll take it from here, Sakura," he said gently. "Neji, let's go…"

"Wait," said Neji dizzily. "I want to talk to her."

"Who?"

"Me," said a proud, ringing voice.

Sakura turned to see her sensei walking toward them.

The Hokage had come back from death and returned to Chuunin Exam Stadium in record time. *Sweet Sage of Six Paths, how many mud clones does she have?* Neji tried to stand up to
confront her, but only managed to splay himself ignominiously into Sakura's arms. He glared angrily upwards at the proud Tsunade, white eyes cold as ice.

"You interfered in the match," said Neji. "You had no right."

"I have every right."

"It was my fight. My vengeance."

"And I am the Fifth Hokage. Your Hokage. I ordered you not to kill Aumono, and you did not listen to me. You disobeyed a direct order. That is grounds for a court martial."

"But you won't. You're weak, just like Utatane-sama said you were. You'd rather appease our enemies than deliver justice for our own people. You sacrificed Maito Gai, Konoha's most loyal shinobi, to the Asylum, and you saved Mukai Aumono, a worthless piece of trash. Gai-sensei believed in you. He believed in this lie of the United Countries. He was wrong about both. You coward, you never should have come back to Konoha in the first place. Danzou should have been the Fifth Hokage, instead of you."

The Hokage did not reply. "Dr. Micho, the boy is not in his right mind. He scarcely knows what he is saying. Please see that you give all the medical attention he needs, and plenty of rest."

The old grizzled doctor bowed, leading the fading Neji away on a stretcher.

Senju Tsunade watched him for a while. After a silence, she turned toward her apprentice. "So, girl. Hyuuga Neji has made his views quite plain. Tell me, what do you think?"

Sakura hesitated. "You did what you had to do. To protect the alliance between Leaf and Rain."

"Did I? Perhaps I have done nothing more than postpone its inevitable end. And there was a cost. A very great cost. I fear that… by preventing his vengeance… I have forever made Hyuuga Neji my enemy. The boy is a powerful shinobi, one of Konoha's greatest prodigies… and now he blames me for all his troubles. For all his hatreds and grievances. Even now Danzou the Termite whispers in his ear. Such a shinobi is the very one that shall walk down the path of ANBU ROOT."

ROOT. Sakura shivered. "If—if that's so… then…"

"Why save Aumono's life? Because there was another reason. A reason that Mukai Aumono, the grandson and only living relative of Lord Hanzou of Rain, must live."

"What?"

"You will know soon." The Hokage paused. "Everyone will know soon."
"YOU KNOW HIS NAME… THE STRONGEST GENIN IN THE WORLD… THE ONLY SON OF THE FOURTH TSUCHIKAGE… THE PRINCE OF DAWN HIMSELF… SOUGON SOSANO OF IWA!"

"Holy crap," complained Kankuro from the seat next to Sakura. "It just get more ridiculous. By the Finals they'll be calling him the second coming of the Sage of Six Paths."

"AND HIS OPPONENT… THE APPRENTICE OF THE LEGENDARY KIKUKO THE SPINSTER… THE GIRL WHOSE VEINS RUN COLD WITH ICE… TOUIN YUKARI OF KIRI!"

Yukari walked out to scattered applause… and not a few boos. She was not exactly the most popular person in the chuunin exam at the moment. She was a mist-nin, supposedly allied with the Confederacy, but had also betrayed them to fight with Sakura during the Second Trial. She and her teammates on Team Kikuko were of neither side, isolated from any alliances. Nor did Yukari's bald, short, pale, and pugnacious appearance endear her to the crowd.

She couldn't care less.

As soon the referee Sougon Charasu signaled for the match to begin, the two genin got into a fighting stance. Yukari grinned. "So. Another body for the meat grinder."

"You look most lovely today, my dear Yukari."

"Your charms don't work on me, Sougon. I'm a lesbian."

"So you keep on telling everyone."

"Especially your girlfriend, eh?"

Sosano unsheathed his katana, the edge gleaming in the morning light. "Ah. So you're jealous."

Yukari laughed loudly. "It's so hot today, why don't we both… cool down?"
She spread her hands, needles of sharp white ice billowing outward from her fingers. The ice shot forward with such force that it pierced deep into the stone walls of the arena, but Sosano was unfazed. He took one step forward, slashing with his katana, a wave of red-hot fire trailing behind him. The wave of fire met the ice needles and melted them. Puddles of steaming water splashed harmlessly on Sosano's sandaled feet.

The stone-nin boy smiled. "I'm quite fond of the heat, I'm afraid."

"That explains a lot about you Sougon."

"Ah, but ice and fire are two sides of the same face, they cannot exist without each other. Like life and death… two extremes along a single chain of fate. The Ice Release of your clan at one end, and the Explosive Clay of the Chuzuru clan at the other. How much heat can you take, mist-nin, I wonder?" The boy's slitted eyes burned with golden flames as he pointed the tip of his katana at Yukari, standing across the arena. "Bakudan."

The air around Yukari's body began to glow with heat… but it disappeared as quick as it came. The Bakudan had dissipated to nothing. "That almost tickled," declared the uncouth mist-nin girl, laughing.

"What happened?" asked Ashuju Ryua.

"She countered Sosano's attack with Ice Release," said Sakura. "In all the chakra techniques known to the ninja world, there are only two jutsu that can directly counter the Enshogan. The Kaiten defense of the Hyuuga clan is one… and Ice Release is the other."

"Unlucky for him," said Kankuro.

"And her." Temari gestured to Sosano's glowing red sword. "The Enshogan counters Ice Release just as well."

The two fighters seemed to be done with poking cautiously at each other. "Ice Prison!" cried Yukari. A thick dome of semi-transparent ice erupted around Sosano's half of the arena, drawing its energy from the water vapor in the air itself. For a moment Sakura couldn't see what was inside. Then Sosano blew up the dome with a massive, roaring Blast Wave. The superheated ice rapidly turned to steam, covering the entire arena in a thick white fog.

Yukari had disappeared in the steaming mist. Now an ice mirror suddenly crystalized behind Sosano's back, and Yukari's reflection appeared in the mirror like a white shadow. The bald cat-like girl thrust a metal senbon right at Sosano's neck. But the stone-nin dodged the attack at the last second, slashing with his sword to shatter the mirror. No sooner had the first mirror been destroyed that another one appeared from the opposite direction. Again, Yukari tried to stab Sosano with a senbon. Again, he dodged.

More mirrors appeared everywhere. Windows of ice, with images of Yukari reflected in every one. No matter where Sosano moved, the mirrors followed him, a constant barrage of senbon from multiple angles. Sakura could not tell where the real Yukari was at any given moment… nor, it seemed, could Sosano.

"She's fast," Temari observed.

"Yes, but speed will do her no good." Sakura had flashbacks to her first real fight. During the mission to the Wave Country, on the bridge against Zabuza and Haku. Haku had created the same sort of Demonic Ice Mirrors as Yukari, trapping Sasuke and Naruto inside, but in the end he had lost
when Sasuke used the Sharingan. "Yukari won't be able to hurt Sosano like that. She needs to use a power jutsu."

Just as she finished the thought, Yukari cut Sosano in half. The water chakra-flow senbon went through his torso and sheared off a large portion of his upper body. But it was only a mud clone. Several more Sosano clones emerged from the fog, shattering Yukari's ice mirrors with glowing red swords.

"Water Release: Water Dragon Bullet!" Yukari cried from one of the mirrors, her hands a blur of seals. A large wave of dragon-shaped water burst across the arena. Then Yukari used Ice Release to turn the water into more ice, freezing the Sosano clones. Huge spikes of ice rammed down into the stone floor and walls of the arena.

"Fire Release: Phoenix Flowers!"

Sosano climbed from between the ice spikes. Balls of flame swirled around him, each one heated to a blinding white temperature by the power of his Enshogan. Then he released the fireballs all at once. The balls flew through the arena into the sky, leaving behind a net of fire in their wake. Yukari tried to respond by cooling the fire with Ice Release… only for the ice to evaporate into steam.

*He's creating a vacuum*, Sakura realized. Sosano had used his Phoenix Flowers jutsu to thermally heat the sky, making the hot air rise and drastically lowering the air pressure in the stadium. The combination of low pressure and high temperature was causing Yukari's ice to melt and even evaporate. When she tried to make new ice mirrors, the ice simply turned into billowing vapor.

"Don't think it's that easy!" Yukari yelled. "Wind Release: Sonic Pulse!"

She blasted a shockwave of highly concentrated wind from within her last surviving ice mirror. The Sonic Pulse was as fast as the speed of sound, and even stone crumbled before its onslaught.

Sosano stood his ground against the attack. His eyes burned with glowing power, with supreme arrogance. "Absolute Zero!"

Absolute Zero was Sougon Shirasu's signature jutsu. Sosano's version was not as powerful as his uncle's, but it was still enough to stop the Sonic Pulse dead in its tracks. The battlefield was reduced to such a low temperature that even the air itself was frozen…

… and became snow.

There was snow everywhere. The water vapor that filled the stadium had cooled rapidly under Absolute Zero, so fast the individual ice crystals didn't have time to join together, and instead become a cloud of snowflakes. Yukari's Ice Release was completely negated by the loose structure of the snow. Glittering white snow drifted slowly down onto Chuunin Exam Stadium, falling down on the gathered crowds. Sakura felt the snow fall on her face, as soft and light as a lover's touch.

In the middle of the falling snow, Sougon Sosano sheathed his sword. "Well fought," he said simply. "You've lost."

The crowds in the stands cheered loudly. Ten thousand spectators, all roaring with approval for such a magnificent end to this high-level fight. Ice Release versus the Enshogan, ice versus fire. In the end the fight had been decided not by brute force but by tactics, and Sosano's superior versatility sealed the outcome. Sosano waved, flashing a smile to some of his most dedicated fangirls.

"Guess I did." Yukari stuck out her tongue, shaking her head. "Camel cunt."
Sosano's victory was not exactly a surprise. It did not quite match the intense drama of the Aumono vs. Neji fight earlier in the day, though it was a spectacular fight in its own way: the first time that Sosano's Enshogan powers had been demonstrated in such remarkable fashion.

There had been some question whether the fight would even take place as scheduled. Aumono and Neji had destroyed the stone arena to such an extent that some speculated it might not even be ready in time for the afternoon match. However, Sougon Chegga, the new director of the exam, and his chunin examiners had spent hours of feverish activity just fixing up the arena. The afternoon match started only a little bit late. It was the strongest day of the Third Trial so far in terms of the quality of the matches… and nobody had died.

*Not for lack of trying.*

Sakura went to see Neji in Kindness Hospital afterward. Dr. Micho had patched Neji up well, and he'd back for his next fight against Sosano in the semifinals. Aumono would take a little longer to heal completely. But since he was already out of the exam, it didn't really matter.

Rock Lee was in surprisingly good spirits. He wanted to know the latest details about the chunin exam: who was beating who, who had the best chance of winning the tournament. "Sakura-chan, I think you'll win! Or maybe Neji!" *Can Lee really be moving on that quickly?* Sakura thought. Perhaps it was the antidepressant medication. Rock Lee did not mention his missing legs at all. He only referred to his hospitalization once, when he Sakura to remove the fuinjutsu restraints that bound his arms to the bed. The boy wanted to practice ninjutsu, he said.

"Ninjutsu?"

"To make myself stronger! That's my Ninja Way!"

*He's delusional,* thought Sakura. *He's in total denial.* "Lee… we can't remove the restraints yet. I'm sorry. It's for your own good."

"In case I try to kill myself again?"

She did not answer.

The crippled boy's face fell. His sweet, dumb face, round as a mooncake and as gentle as a child's love. His wide, pleading eyes were like two big glassy black buttons. "Sakura-chan… will you help me? I need to go to the bathroom."

"Of course."

The fourth day of the Third Trial dawned clear and unexpectedly cold, with a crispness that hinted at the end of summer. There were two scheduled matches for that day. First, in the morning, the glacier-nin Kozumi Saotome versus the stone-nin Haghira Geigin. Then, in the afternoon, the mist-nin Hoshigaki Makera versus the cloud-nin Imidori Jouda. Sakura suspected that neither of the two fights would be very exciting. Geigin was the second strongest genin in Iwa, after only Sosano, and Saotome was only an average C-rank ninja. The power difference between Makera and Jouda was similarly lopsided. Both matches were almost certainly an easy sweep for the Confederacy.

But she was wrong.

Saotome won his fight in a single second.

It happened almost as soon as the match started. The diminutive glacier-nin coughed and rubbed his hands in a kind of miserly irritation. The dark skin on his arms and hands were scrawled with a
spiderweb of even darker, glowing black tattoos, like night on purple. Saotome coughed again, then waved his right hand at the angry, hotheaded Geigin. "Hypnotic Scroll: Seal Ground!" he whispered in a barely audible croak.

Haghira Geigin disappeared down a hole.

There was a general commotion among the viewing audience as they absorbed what had just happened. Even Sosano stood up suddenly in his seat. "What the hell is that?"

"I have no idea," said Sakura.

Geigin had simply… disappeared. The stone-nin boy had not even had the chance to move. On the spot where Geigin had been standing there was an empty, black space. It almost looked like the ordinary stone floor had been replaced by… a hole. The hole was exactly two meters by two meters in length and width. But, when Sakura craned over the railing to get a better look at it, the hole seemed to have absolutely no depth. None at all. *Then where did Geigin go?*

"Fascinating."

Sosano had activated his Enshogan, and was now staring at the scene intently.

"Where's Geigin?" demanded Kirazu Raiki, the albino cloud-nin.

"He's in the hole."

"I don't see him."

"You wouldn't. But I can tell you he is definitely there… I see his heat signature. The hole has no depth because it does not exist in ordinary space. From our perspective, Geigin disappeared into the hole. From his perspective, it probably looks like he's been trapped in some kind of strange black box… not more than two meters across in any direction, I'd guess. It's some kind of space-time ninjutsu. In effect, Geigin has been trapped in a pocket of two-dimensional space. I don't think Geigin can get out."

"What about Gravity Wave?" asked Sakura.

"Using it from inside the hole? I don't know. Probably wouldn't be able to affect anything outside the hole except in two dimensions. Which, if you understand the principles of gravity, is equivalent to absolutely nothing."

*Geigin should have used Gravity Wave at the start*, thought Sakura. Geigin could have put out enough gravitational force to crush Saotome's bones against the ground…. certainly to prevent Saotome from moving or using fuinjutsu. Only he'd delayed, waiting to see what kind of jutsu the funny little man in the glasses could possibly produce, underestimating the ninjas from other villages like he always did. It had cost him the fight.

After some moments of confusion the Chuunin Exam Director, Sougon Charasu, finally began the necessary ten second countdown called for when one of the combatants had been disabled by technical knock out. The countdown was a mere formality; as soon as it ended the match was decided in Saotome's favor.

A wave of warm applause. Though nobody understood exactly what had happened, they knew the underdog had won. The crowd always loved an underdog.

Sakura noticed that the tattoo on Saotome's right hand had disappeared. *No, not a tattoo. A fuinjutsu*
A very powerful seal, by the looks of it, and not one of a type that Sakura had ever encountered before. Kozumi Saotome waved his hand again, and the strange black hole he'd created vanished.

Geigin reappeared also. He looked no different than before, except that his eyes were so wide that they almost bulged out of his face. When he'd heard that he lost, the stone-nin boy actually jumped and down in rage. The profanity-laced temper tantrum was a sight to behold.

Sougon Sosano laughed loudly. "I never liked Geigin… but I never thought he would lose like this." The boy shrugged, smiling. "How embarrassing for the reputation of Iwagakure."

"Sweet Sage!" said Kankuro. "Sister, you'll face that guy in the next round."

Temari was observing the victorious glacier-nin closely. Saotome seemed to have taken no pleasure in his unexpected win at all... he coughed and turned away, hunching his shoulders. "It seems our Databook did not provide accurate information on Kozumi Saotome. That Hypnotic Scroll technique is no mere C-rank jutsu. I have no idea what it is, but it is dangerous and unpredictable. He may one of the most formidable opponents in the entire Third Trial."

"It's a trick," said Raiki dismissively. "A clever trick… but just a trick. Figure out the secret, and he's done for."

The cloud-nin had a much different attitude toward the next fight. They all did. **Makera versus Jouda.** A charge of nervous energy and naked emotion filled the air. It was not so much Jouda, of course, as it was the shark-faced mist-nin boy, Hoshigaki Makera. Even before the First Trial, the Databook had called Makera the most dangerous genin in the chūnin exam. That might have been an understatement. Hoshigaki Makera was single-handedly responsible for most of the horrible things that had happened to Sakura and her friends in the course of the exam. The rape of Juukan Dee and the murder of her teammates. The ambush in the Catacombs. The battle in Senso-ji Temple atop Mount Echigo. The eruption of lava that had nearly killed everyone.

And their final, fateful encounter in the Cathedral of Hearts.

**Imidori Jouda has no chance against Makera,** thought Sakura. The pygmy Hoka boy was by far the weakest member of Team Darui. If it had been Raiki, or even Kazuno, with their powerful and unique abilities… but Jouda had nothing except a few lightning jutsu. He did not have a bloodline or Black Lightning or a giant flying crane or the Dynamo Bow. She'd seen the cloud-nin boy fight up close, she knew. He had no jutsu which could even get through Makera's tough shark-skin.

In fact, Sakura suspected that Jouda might show up only to concede the match. Team Darui was rightfully obsessed with bringing Makera to justice. But Jouda did not have to do it himself. The way the seeding worked out for the Third Trial, Makera's next match would be against **Raiki.** Raiki was Jouda's teammate, and also happened to one of the only people in the whole tournament who could actually kill Makera. It was a fortuitous coincidence…. one that worked in the cloud-nins' favor.

Sakura was wrong again.

Very wrong.

"He'll fight," Raiki told her. The albino was uncharacteristically unsettled. "Don't look down on his small stature… Jouda has his pride. Actually, he's never admitted that he's a weaker ninja than me."

Kazuno nodded. "There is a reason that Jouda-kun insisted on taking my key to pass the Second Trial, neh? And not the other way around."

Sakura frowned. "But he can't win."
"No." Lightning flashed from the tip of Raiki's finger to the top of his skull, lighting up the boy's slender bones like an X-ray. "He can't."
Imidori Jouda and Hoshigaki Makera were a study in contrasts. Makera was larger and taller than a normal man, with a hulking body of intimidating ferocity and a face that looked like a cross between a shark and a demon. Standing in the same arena as Makera, Jouda looks completely out of place. He looked like a small child.

He's no taller than my little sister, thought Sakura.

Jouda was no child, though. The cloud-nin boy actually had a beard—a most luxuriant one, flowing down from his face in a silky black point. And his bright hazel eyes were bold with years of long experience. Older than his teammates Raiki and Kazuno both, Jouda was a member of the distinctive Hoka ethnicity, the race of dwarf-like pygmy people originally from the Crescent Country. Sakura did not know much about them. However, she knew the Crescent Country was historically extremely unstable—constantly being invaded and occupied by foreign powers to exploit its substantial natural resources. The subsequent diaspora of Hoka immigrants across the world had resulted in a flourishing of unique artistic and intellectual achievements. There were many famous Hoka pygmies scientists, philosophers, poets, and sculptors. Hoka architects had been responsible for the construction of Ashwarren, Sougon Castle, and Takigakure, among other great works.

The Hoka were not known to be a violent people, however… just the opposite. There was a reason their country was constantly invaded, and a reason why they ran from battle instead of fight it. Hoka pygmies were thought generally to be peaceful, gentle, and easily cowed. Which made it all the more surprising that one of them had become a cloud-nin. A trained killer, and a good one.

"Hoshigaki Makera," declared Jouda in a sing-song voice, hopping from one foot to the other. "It is the luck of the draw that you and I face each other today. Lucky for me… and lucky for all of humanity. Because I will bring your monstrous life to an end."

The mist-nin grinned, baring rows of sharp glittering teeth. "Bold words, dwarf."

Makera was obviously not taking the fight seriously. He expected to win as easily against Jouda as Jibachi had won against Jun, or Raiki against Makoto Mazu. Sakura could not blame him; she thought the same. It was a great shock to everyone when Makera rushed the pygmy boy at full
Makera looked around, confused. He'd tried to bite down on Jouda's head with his teeth, but somehow the cloud-nin had slipped from his grasp. Jouda danced away, circling around Makera, laughing and making taunts. Sakura was not quite sure what had happened. Jouda was significantly slower than Makera, she judged. How had he avoided the attack? *Was it the cloud-nin's far smaller size? Or perhaps superior agility?*

"A little of both," said Raiki when she voiced her question aloud. "Members of the Hoka race have a number of physical features that distinguish them from ordinary humans. Most obviously, their dwarf-like size… but an even more important difference lies in their bones. Hoka have extremely light and flexible bones, far more elastic than even a human infant's. This allows them to bend their bodies, and to move in such a way, that would be impossible for you and me."

"But that is not the main reason why Jouda-kun avoided Makera's attack," Kazuno added.

Sakura frowned, puzzled. Down below in the arena, Makera had charged Jouda again. Yet again the pygmy boy avoided the attack. First he capered around Makera, getting behind him, then he actually dove through Makera's legs. It looked like was playing a game of hide-and-seek with the larger shinobi. Jouda was everywhere, it seems like, dodging all of Makera's blows, weaving between the punches and kicks. The style of his movement was not quite like anything Sakura had ever seen before; it was bewildering just to follow. *How is he doing that?*

Then Makera's shoulder exploded.

The crowd gasped as the mist-nin reeled backward, a explosion of flame and fire erupting from his shoulder, as if from nowhere. Yet when the smoke cleared, Makera and his shoulder seemed not much worse for wear. Makera grunted in annoyance. "Irritating dwarf," he spat.

Sakura looked at Temari, who also shook her head in confusion. "How did Jouda do that?" asked the sand-nin.

Raiki laughed. "You missed it, did you? So did Makera. Look again."

"Look at Jouda-kun's hands," advised Kazuno, "and where he puts them."

Sakura wanted to say that she had been looking at Jouda's hands. But when she looked more carefully, she saw that Kazuno had been right. It was a very subtle movement… but very intentional. When Jouda danced around Makera's attacks, he also touched Makera's skin with his fingers, leaving behind a small scrap of paper scrawled with seals. *An explosive tag.* It had detonated almost the instant it touched Makera's skin. That explained the explosion on Makera's shoulder. In fact, even as Sakura watched, Jouda placed another explosive tag on Makera's thigh. It went off in a blinding roar. Makera stumbled to the side, howling in frustration.

But how had Sakura not seen it before?

"Now you see me, now you don't!" cried Jouda gleefully. "You brute, your crude attacks don't work on me. As easy as stealing pocket money from a woman's purse!"

"Jouda really did use to be a thief," said Raiki.

"What?" asked Sakura.
"A pickpocket, to be precise. You know, like Butcho the Moonbandit of the Silla Brotherhood, and that sort. Hoka always make the best thieves because of their unique body structure. That's how Jouda grew up… an orphan on the streets of Taitan City, part of a gang of thieves. He was the best thief that ever stalked the alleyways and markets of Taitan, some say. Then he tried to steal Daruisensei's sword."

"He did steal Darui-sensei's sword," said Kazuno. "Only Darui-sensei tracked him down afterwards… and not so easily, either. Well, Darui-sensei took one look at this bold little orphan thief, and he made him an offer. Come with me, he said, and you will never have to steal again, or go hungry, or suffer abuse. You can become more powerful than you ever imagined. That's why Joudakun came to Kumogakure to become a ninja."

"He still fights like a thief, though," said Raiki. "You don't really see it so much when he fights in the team because Kazuno and I throw around so many lightning jutsu. But Jouda's true strength is in hand-to-hand taijutsu… it's the best out of all ours. That's because Jouda has mastered a fighting style which relies on a skill he spent a whole lifetime honing as thief. Mastery of misdirection."

Sakura saw it now. "I see… it's like stage magic. Making the audience pay attention to one thing, while really doing something else. Like Jouda's trick with the explosive tag. Makera was so focused on attacking Jouda he didn't notice when Jouda stuck an explosive tag on his shoulder. Even I didn't notice, and I was staring right at him the whole time."

"Have you ever heard of inattentional blindness?"

"No."

"It's what happens when you focus so intently on a single task that you fail to notice things in plain sight. Attention is a limited resource. The human brain… even the most highly trained brains… can really focus on one thing a time. It's like a spotlight in the dark. Your attention moves around from one thing to another—that's were the spotlight is. And the dark space around that spotlight is where Jouda dances. He plays in the dark outside your attention. It's almost like he's invisible—an invisibility that depends on the limits of the mind. You don't see what's he's doing, even though it's in plain sight, because you're focused on something else."

"Jouda-kun has another metaphor he likes to use," said Kazuno. "Attention is like money. You only have so much. You have to choose where to spend it… and other people can steal it from you. That's what Jouda does. He pulls your focus away, misdirects it, diverts it into another channel. Jouda-kun says his job is to steal his opponent's attention… if he can do that, then he's won. He usually succeeds, of course. Jouda-kun is the best thief in the world."

In the arena, Jouda was still making a fool out of Makera. Dancing around Makera, avoiding his attacks, hitting back when Makera was distracted. His movements were incredibly smooth and fluid—each action perfectly dovetailing with the next, with no extraneous steps or flourishes. The little bearded pygmy was using lightning chakra-flow kunai now, stabbing ruthlessly at Makera's body. Unfortunately, Makera's skin was so durable and tough that the kunai barely grazed through the upper layers—like a pinprick, or a paper cut. Still... the shark boy became angry when he discovered that his body was becoming covered with small bleeding holes. He screamed in fury. Jouda laughed, and the gathered crowds cheered. The crowds always loved an underdog.

Temari nodded thoughtfully in understanding. "Inattentional blindness isn't all bad. Our ability to ignore distractions around us allows us to retain our focus… that's what makes Hoshigaki Makera so dangerous. Makera is a single-minded hunter. Just like a shark, he only cares about one thing: his prey. He doesn't feel fear, he doesn't feel doubt. He will do anything to hunt down and destroy his enemies. But Jouda… Jouda's fighting style exploits that single-mindedness. He uses Makera's
obsession with killing him to counterattack in ways that Makera doesn't notice. It's the ultimate clash of styles."

Raiki giggled. "It seems you are quite the expert on Makera's fighting style, Temari."

"An obsession of mine, you might say."

Sakura frowned, whirling to face the albino cloud-nin. "But… if you knew Jouda could do this… that he had the perfect style to exploit Makera's aggression… why did you say Jouda can't win?"

It was Temari who answered. "Because a thief is not a shinobi. Jouda is the best thief… but not the best shinobi."

Raiki nodded. "It doesn't matter how many times Jouda cuts Makera. It doesn't matter how many explosive tags he plants. He still can't do any serious damage. Makera's just playing around with Jouda, don't you see? If that shark monster uses his ninjutsu—"

BOOM!

A large quantity of explosive tags exploded on Makera's back. The explosion was so large that it literally enveloped the mist-nin in a cloud of smoke and ash. Makera stumbled out of the cloud, roaring and howling. The upper part of the mist-nin's uniform had been blown to shreds, leaving his upper chest and back bare. It looked like the explosion had actually hurt him; blood streamed down his back. Makera stared at Jouda in utter and implacable hatred. His dead black eyes were tinged with red. "Dwarf!" he shrieked.

"My name is Jouda, proud warrior of the Hoka race! Remember it—"

"Water Release: Exploding Darkness Wave!"

A giant blast of black water poured of Makera's mouth, sweeping away all in its path. In seconds the entire arena was flooded with water, like a very large swimming pool. "Jouda-kun!" Kazuno shouted. The pygmy cloud-nin had disappeared into the depths of the black water. The Exploding Darkness Wave had climbed to such a height that it actually washed over the arena's ten meter tall walls. Only the Chakra Barrier and an active drainage system was keeping the water from swamping the stadium itself.

This is bad, Sakura thought. Raiki was right. Jouda relied on close-range taijutsu to hurt Makera. But Makera could use his powerful ninjutsu to blast Jouda away at any time. The black water of Exploding Darkness Wave took away Jouda's speed and ability to maneuver. What's more, it multiplied Makera's own speed. Underwater, the shark boy was completely unstoppable. Raiki leaned forward anxiously, gripping the railing with white knuckles.

There was a flash of lightning beneath the black water. Then there some splashing, and several loud bubbling sounds. Jouda and Makera were fighting underwater. Then Makera burst to the surface… with Jouda captive in his arms. "Damnit!" cried Jouda helplessly, struggling to free himself. Makera had grabbed the pygmy boy by the ankles and wrists, stretching Jouda's body to left and right.

With a triumphant roar he ripped Jouda in half.

"No!" shouted Temari—

—only for Jouda to explode in a barrage of electricity. A Lightning Shadow Clone! Upon destruction, this sort of lightning clone electrocuted whatever was in its proximity. That was Makera. The shark boy roared in rage, less hurt than supremely frustrated. So far, despite the length of the
battle, and despite the dozens of little paper-cut wounds he'd taken himself, Hoshigaki Makera, the most dangerous genin in the world, had not managed to lay so much as a scratch on Jouda.

Jouda rose from the black water. Actually, it'd be more accurate to say that many Joudas rose—in plural. Nothing less than a small army of Jouda clones surrounded Makera in a circle. Kazuno whooped, and the audience shrieked in ecstatic approval, stamping their feet on the stadium seats. It looked like a major upset was in progress. The Jouda clones all rushed toward Makera with raised kunai.

"Die!" screamed Makera. "Feeding Sharks!"

Hundreds of sharks materialized in the black water out of Makera's chakra. The swarm of glowing chakra sharks attacked the Jouda clones, hungry for prey, churning through the water. Sharks leaped out of the water and literally swallowed the small pygmy boys with a single chomp. At the same time, Makera opened his jaws and roared. Rows of sharp teeth exploded out of the mist-nin's mouth in all directions. Shark Teeth Attack! The combination attack wiped out all the Jouda clones in a seconds.

Soon only Jouda's real body was left. The cloud-nin screamed as a barrage of shark teeth flew into his body, embedding them deep into his flesh. As Jouda shielded himself from the furious attack with his arms, a chakra shark leaped from under the water and swallowed Jouda. Jouda disappeared under the churning black water for a moment. Then there was another flash of lightning, and Jouda escaped from the feeding frenzy literally by the skin of his teeth. The little bearded Hoka boy leaped onto a pole above the far wall of the arena. He was badly hurt. His silver spandex uniform was torn in several places, and blood flowed copiously from a dozen wounds where Makera's shark teeth had stabbed into him. When he lifted his kunai, his arms shook with strain. A swarm of sharks gathered in the water beneath him, circling, waiting. Jouda was trapped. He could not go anywhere without being attacked by the waiting sharks.

Hoshigaki Makera walked across the water, laughing.

The shark boy was no longer languid. A frenzied hunger, a sadistic brutality, animated his every moment. Like a shark, Makera rarely stirred for ordinary human concerns. But now he had tasted the scent of blood in the water. His lidless black eyes were turning a shade of bright red. He's close to a state of Bloodscent, Sakura saw with a chill. "Good prey." His voice was soft as a whisper, and excited as a leering pimp. "Pretty boy prey. I'll fuck your corpse in half."

Jouda's lost, Sakura thought. Imidori Jouda's run of unexpected success had come to an end. Makera had been forced to use his most powerful techniques to defeat the cloud-nin… but defeat him he had. Jouda could not compete with such overwhelmingly destructive jutsu.

Kirazu Raiki thought so too. "Jouda!" he shouted into the arena. "Jouda, concede! You did a lot better against Makera than everyone thought… there's nothing left to prove! Damnit, he's about to kill you!"

The Hoka boy wiped the blood from his face. "Sorry, Raiki. I guess I never learned to quit. That's why I always get into trouble." He laughed in a sing-song voice, hopping from foot to foot. "Besides… if I quit now, Dee would never forgive me."

"WATER RELEASE: ULTIMATE WATER SHARK MISSILE!"

A huge spear of incandescent water shaped like a shark exploded outwards at Jouda. He had absolutely nowhere to run. The Ultimate Water Shark Missile struck Jouda with such force that it destroyed the entire arena wall behind him and nearly buckled the Chakra Barrier itself. Even the
audience flinched as the mass devastation jutsu churned around the arena, throwing black water around in a storming whirlwind. Jouda had been completely engulfed in the chaos. Sakura had no idea where he'd gone until the water began to drain from the arena. Slowly at first; then with increasing speed as the chuunin examiners threw all the stadium's drainage gates open. Soon enough the floor of the arena became visible.

Then she saw what had happened to Jouda.

The pygmy boy lay sprawled motionless along the edge of the arena where the wall had been, facedown and limp. He was naked from head to toe. His entire cloud-nin uniform had been ripped and torn away by the destructive force of Makera's Ultimate Water Shark Missile, leaving nothing underneath but a welter of bruised, bloody flesh. Even Jouda's forehead protector was gone, washed away with the rest of the drained water.

My god, Sakura thought. Once she had seen two other cloud-nin boys naked in a position like that. Once… when Makera had raped them in the Catacombs below Iwa. Dee's teammates, brutally assaulted and tortured by Team Keel during the First Trial. The memory still gave her nightmares.

Sakura turned to the cloud-nins at her side. "Is he…"

"Not dead." Kazuno swallowed hard. "Jouda's Hoka bones don't break easily. They bend instead, absorbing impact force. He should have weathered Makera's attack… barely."

"Jouda!" Raiki screamed. He turned toward the chuunin examiners by the VIP section. "Call it, dammit! The fight's over!"

Makera stalked toward the naked boy with a leering grin on his face. There was a quite noticeable bulge beneath the mist-nin's blue mesh uniform, between his legs. Makera had become unbearably excited at the sight of Jouda's tiny, naked body. He reached down to his groin to unbuckle the belt of his uniform—

There was a massive explosion.

It was as big as one of Jibachi's full-scale bombs, as big as a Blast Wave. It enveloped Makera and the entire right side of the arena where he had been standing. The explosion was so intense that Makera was himself thrown back against the arena wall, where he crumpled into a ball. Blood and burns poured down his gray sandpaper skin. There was a shocked silence around the stadium as everyone took in this new twist.

"What the hell happened?" shouted Sakura.

Not even Raiki or Kazuno knew. Only Temari understood. "Explosive tags," she said. "Thousands of them, rolled into a single bomb and triggered by touch. Jouda must have prepared the bomb in advance and planted it in the ground. I guess he must have done it after Makera used Exploding Darkness Wave, but before the sharks. Nobody was paying attention, so Jouda got away with it. Then he made sure that he was in the right part of the arena, so that when Makera walked over he would step on the bomb. Another example of Jouda's misdirection and inattentional blindness at work." She grinned. "Absolutely brilliant. I ought to learn some thieving techniques myself."

Raiki's red eyes were wide. "I… I underestimated Jouda."

Down in the arena, Jouda groaned in pain. He'd been thrown back by the explosion, and now he was climbing to his hands and knees. The Hoka boy's bones were truly not broken… but he was not exactly in good shape. Sakura guessed at a myriad of internal injuries, internal bleeding and bruising.
And he'd lost a lot of blood from the wounds he had taken before. *He should be unconscious, but he's still fighting.*

On the other side of the arena, Makera stumbled to his feet. He was naked as well; his uniform utterly disintegrated in the massive explosion. Now the full scope of Makera's bloodline was revealed. *Yukari was wrong,* thought Sakura, *his Little Monster isn't little at all.* Yet even the mist-nin's huge erection was covered in blood and nasty burns. Much of his durable, sandpaper-like skin had been burned off by Jouda's bomb, exposing the vulnerable flesh underneath. Yet that was not what drew Sakura's attention.

The shark boy's eyes had turned blood red. Makera had finally gone into Bloodscent. Not only did his muscles bulge, but a kind of steaming vapor wafted from his pores, forming a glowing chakra aura around his body. Bloodscent was the final, most terrifying jutsu of the bloodline of the Hoshigaki clan—activated when the user had been pushed to his limit. Makera had entered a state of frenzied bloodlust, greatly multiplying his speed and strength, but at the cost of any rational thought. He would pursue Jouda until either him or Jouda had been killed.

The mist-nin screamed.

A scream of terrifying, pure hunger.

"Jouda!" Raiki shouted down to his teammate. "Damnit, stop! Concede, you don't need to throw away your life. That shark bastard's next match is against me. I'll avenge Dee, I promise!"

The pygmy boy got up slowly, unsteadily. "I know you would, Raiki. But a Hoka has his own stubborn pride. And this is personal between us. Too personal. You see… I promised Dee I'd never let her down again. Whatever the cost!" He raised his left hand. "Lightning Release: Lightning Whip!"

A cable of crackling electrical power snaked from his hand. It was a deadly lash of flexible, numbing electricity, about five meters in length, and with edges so sharp it could slice through stone.

"Jouda!" Raiki shouted again.

"Fool," whispered Kazuno. "Jouda-kun, you fool…"

Makera attacked.

It was the endgame. All knew it. The two bloody, naked shinobi had beaten each other to a pulp, destroying each other's bodies and uniforms, forcing each other to the brink of collapse, and now was the final climax. The final duel. Makera was a blur of insane speed, his very footsteps shattering the stone floor beneath him. In a single heartbeat he'd crossed the distance across the arena and grabbed Jouda by the chest. The cloud-nin had no chance at all to dodge. In a state of Bloodscent, Makera's speed was simply at another level. But Jouda did not want to dodge. He swung his Lightning Whip counterclockwise…

… and Makera bit straight through Jouda's neck.

The crazed, berserk mist-nin simply brought his mouth down and chopped through Jouda's neck with his glittering sharp teeth. Bone, tendons, muscles, skin—Makera's jaws sliced through all of it at once. Jouda's decapitated head went flying through the air. But even as the cloud-nin died, his Lightning Whip swung forward of its own momentum. The whip flew through the air, slicing through the space where Jouda's head had once been, and plunged like a dagger into Makera's eyes. Without his armored shark skin to protect him, the Lightning Whip pierced straight through the shark.
boy's eyes, skull, and into his brain. Blinding electrical current seared into Makera's head until charred smoke came out of the mist-nin's ears.

For a single moment the two ninjas stood motionless, frozen—suspended in a single moment of time.

Then they collapsed in a bloody heap to the ground.

Both were dead.

*Inattentional blindness*, Sakura thought numbly.

Jouda had misdirected Makera's attention again. In his Bloodscent-driven hunger, Makera was so focused on killing Jouda he hadn't even noticed the secret purpose of the Lightning Whip. Jouda had known Makera would try to bite off his head, of course. He'd counted on it. Only the misdirection he had used to distract Makera was his own life. He'd sacrificed his own life in order to lure Makera in and expose him to the deadly counterattack of the Lightning Whip. Inattentional blindness, Jouda called it. But there was another name for it, as well, an older and far more infamous name.

*Sheathing the sword.*

Across Aoyama Chuunin Exam Stadium, ten thousand souls held their collective breath.

There was a total silence. Total disbelief.

Sougon Charasu stepped in the breach. The Chuunin Exam Director leaped into the arena between the two fallen ninjas, holding up his arm as a signal to call the match. The two corpses piled in a bloody heap, one on top of the other, almost as if embracing each other.

"The winner is…. *Imidori Jouda of Kumo!*"
Jouda had won his match against Makera, even though, by some calculations, he died first. Yet both deaths had happened so suddenly that it was hard to say who exactly deserved the victory. A winner on either side, or a split decision, would all have been plausible outcomes. The new Chuunin Exam Director, Sougon Charasu, had been the one to make the final call. Surprising, Sakura thought, he would reward the victory to the Hoka cloud-nin, instead of his own Confederacy ally. Perhaps Charasu wished to maintain the appearance of fairness as Iwa continued to try to recruit the Lightning Country into the Confederacy. Or perhaps—like all the rest of the watching audience—he had been swayed by Jouda's extraordinary underdog pluck.

The victory made little difference to Jouda's friends.

"He's dead," said Raiki. His voice was as ashen as his albino skin. "They're both dead."

"I'm sorry."

They stood in a dark stone chamber underneath Aoyama Chuunin Exam Stadium. In the adjoining room Imidori Jouda's corpse lay on a table under a white sheet. Jouda's sensei, Kasuga Darui of the Black Cloud, was keeping watch over Jouda right now. Raiki and Kazuno, Jouda's teammates on Team Darui, stood a ceremonial honor guard over the door. Here Sakura had found them in a vortex of grief.

"I told him to stop," continued Raiki, "to concede the match. No one would've blamed him for it. His damn pride. His stupid promises, neh? Jouda threw his life away for nothing."

"No." It was the first time that Sakura had ever heard Kazuno disagree with Raiki—his teammate and lover both. "Jouda-kun fought with honor. He sacrificed himself to bring justice to the monster Hoshigaki Makera."

"I would've killed Makera in the next quarterfinal match."

"Would you? Would you have done it without any risk to yourself?" Kazuno shook his head; his posture stiff and sad at the same time. "Raiki... Jouda-kun might have saved your life."
Raiki's red eyes flashed with glittering anger. "I never asked him to."

"He did not need you to ask. That is why he was Imidori Jouda, and our friend."

There was silence for a spell. Sakura closed her eyes, absorbing the mood of this dark place—the weight of the stone stadium above them, the stillness of their breaths, the pall of death that lingered in the room beyond. She turned to go; then stopped. Turning back at the doorway, making her gaze meet Raiki and Kazuno's own. Making her voice as strong as she could.

"They killed him," she said.

Raiki understood what she meant. "The Confederacy."

"Yes. They killed Jouda. As they would have killed Dee, if we hadn't stopped them. As they tried to kill you in the Catacombs, and the Jewel Islands, and atop Mount Echigo. The Confederacy has been killing you and your comrades for months. They are not your friends."

"The United Countries?"

"Team Keel is dead, but their sensei lives still. Hiroshi Keel the Annihilator is one of Sougon Sawar's closest allies and advisors. How can you trust such a monster? The Fifth Hokage has never done wrong by Kumogakure. She offers you her friendship and her protection. Join us, Raiki, and you shall not regret it."

"A conversation for another time, perhaps."

"Now is the time. We all have choices to make. Jouda made his decision, and died for it. And you must make yours as well... before it is too late."

Raiki stared at her with red eyes the color of summer blood. A faint smile played on his pale, beautiful lips. For an instant Sakura thought he might actually decide then and there, commit himself and his village to an alliance with Konoha. But the moment passed. Instead the albino said, after a pause, "Tomorrow you fight Onira Kawai of the Waterfall."

"That's right."

"I hope you kill him."

"Oh, I will."

Kazuno spoke. "And Sougon Sosano? Will you kill him as well?"

Sakura did not expect the question. *I am dancing on rotten ice.* She fumbled for an answer that would satisfy them. "Sosa—Sosa is not Onira Kawai."

"That remains to be seen."

Sosano only laughed, when she told him of Kazuno's doubts.

"The cloud-nins must not get enough air up there," he continued, "even their threats are empty. A shinobi like Imidori Jouda is a rare breed. The rest of the fairies are so flimsy you can see right through them—literally. I'll tell you a little secret, Sakura. The ninja world is divided. The United Countries are one side, and the Confederacy on another. Kumogakure is the only major neutral power remaining. So the cloud-nins think they can tip the balance of power. True enough as far as it
goes… only there is a particular reason they have yet not allied at this late hour. " His eyes crinkled in amusement. "Once I visited Kumo with my Uncle Shirasu. Lovely little place, if you don't mind all the fog, and the frightfully ugly women—a skin condition related to the lack of sunlight, I'm told. Shirasu happened to bring along two of our very own Iwa geishas, from the Street of Beggars, as a present to the Raikage. The Raikage was quite pleased… only the trouble was, he could not decide which one to take first. He would just move from one to the other—then change his mind and go back. Poor man, he was like a deer in the headlights. My uncle had to point out to him, dear Raikage-sama, you can have both at once, you know."

Sakura had to giggle. "That can't be a real story."

"Real enough. Go to the Street of Beggars, and find a geisha named The Purple Peacock. She'll tell you all about it." Sosano smiled sharply. "In any case, the Raikage is a most prudent man. Cowardly, some might say. Don't worry about the cloud-nins. They bluster and flutter about, to be sure, but are no threat to actually do anything. The Raikage will join the winning side… after it's already over, and not a moment before. It's Tsunade you need to concern yourself with. She is the key to all of the United Countries alliances. Without her, you shall fall apart like a house of cards."

She knew Sosano spoke the truth. The Lightning Country was the second largest economy in the North and had its most powerful military; however, its influence was historically limited to nearby regions. Even during the Ninja Wars, Lightning rarely engaged in battle further away than the Waterfall Country. In part this was due to geographic insularity, and in part due to a mindset, emanating from Kumogakure, that it was not advantageous to be involved too deeply in distant lands. Even the Undeclared War with Konoha was viewed by some as a bridge too far. That was why Lightning had remained carefully neutral in the political conflict between the United Countries and the Confederacy.

She said, "The Raikage may profess neutrality, but the Raikage is a thousand kilometers away. Team Darui is not. They are in Iwa, and their very lives are at stake. Makera just killed Jouda. The cloud-nins will not forget that."

"You may be right." Sosano shrugged. "Tell me, Sakura. Were you moved by Jouda's… spectacular… death?"

"Weren't you?"

"You know my motto."

_All men must die._ "Not everyone is so philosophical about it."

Sosano smiled. "And which death has affected you the most? Of all the deaths in this chuunin exam?"

Rock Lee, she almost blurted. But of course that was not so. Rock Lee was not dead. Instead she answered, "Unchiku Nonou."

"Ah. The wave-nin who died in the First Trial. As I recall, you only knew her for a single night."

Sakura could not deny it. There was no shortage of possible dead people to choose from. She had seen Tenten's corpse with her own eyes, and Asuma-sama's. She had seen the charred, burned pieces of Aoba and Genma's remains, and Akasun Baki's dismembered metal arm. She had buried the sand-nin Hattori Bakan with her own hands, and killed the leaf-nin Shimura Anake with her own fists.

The list went on and on. The cloud-nins butchered by Team Keel. Akimichi Auni, her corpse floating in a puddle of water. The stone-nin Noatari Chusei. Shinren's middle-aged teammates. Fukki
Numazu, and Hiroshi Fue, and Houzuki Suigetsu. The little sadist boy Misain Sebi, crying, begging for his life in the dark passageways of the Cathedral of Hearts. Jouda and Makera.

But their deaths had not touched her the same way that Nonou's had touched her.

*I only knew her for a single night, but I felt I'd known her as long as I lived.*

"It seemed longer."

"Why?"

"Because she reminded me of myself.* Nonou was the younger version of me. She's what I would have been, if I had died on that bridge in the Wave Country, all those many missions ago.*

"Then it is fate that you shall fight Unchiku Nonou's killer this day."

And so it was.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMAN… ARE YOU READY?"

A roar, beyond the tunnel, behind the stone walls of Aoyama Chuunin Exam Stadium. The shouts of ten thousand voices.

It was time.

"I SAID, ARE YOU READY? FOR THE VERY FIRST MATCH IN THIS TOURNAMENT… BETWEEN THE TWO GREAT RIVAL ALLIANCES…

The arena gates swung open.

"THE UNITED COUNTRIES… REPRESENTED BY… HARUNO SAKURA OF KONOHA!"

Sakura walked out of the gates into the blinding afternoon sun, and the shadow of a boy.

"AND THE CONFEDERACY… REPRESENTED BY… ONIRA KAWAI OF TAKI!"

A boy made of slithering black tentacles.

*Onira Kawai.*

Sakura had a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach every time she looked at him. Kawai was the same person that had terrorized her friends, her comrades. Who'd killed the wave-nin Unchiku Nonou, leeching the life from her until she floated in a pool of her own blood. Who's tortured the jinchuriki Azuraki Han to death. Who'd murdered helpless little children in Kashima Village. Who'd profaned the sacred peace of Senso-ji Temple with a senseless slaughter. *Kawai poisoned Rock Lee in the Cathedral of Hearts.*

A monster.

The only surviving member of Team Dayu, but the most dangerous of them all.

All her training had led to this point. All those hours of training with Tsunade-sensei, with Temari, with Sosano, preparing together for the Third Trial. And before that, even, all her fights in the chuunin exam, all her studies in the Konoha Ninja Academy, all her missions with Team Kakashi. All for this. She knew in her bones that this afternoon two shinobi had entered the arena, but that only one would leave alive. *It's either him or me.* Sakura hefted her twin chakra-case kunai. "I'm
surprised you dared show yourself."

He grinned. "Oh?" The metal protector on his forehead gleamed in the bright sunlight: an arrow pointing down, the rushing power of a waterfall. His voice was alien and sinister. "Surely you did not think I was frightened… of you?"

"Of the light."

"Ah, you mistake me. That's your cockroach boyfriend; I am far more than a mere tool. I am immortality and justice. I am Death incarnate."

No. I have seen death, and you are not him. "You are a fool who thinks murder is power, and not a mirror to a depraved soul."

Kawai's laughter was rough as stones.

"Begin!" shouted Sougon Chegga, stepping away from the two combatants.

Sakura wasted no time. She stretched out her hand toward her opponent. "Fear!" she cried.

Kawai shrugged off Sakura's most powerful genjutsu like shrugging a leaf off his shoulder. "Really, Sakura, you must do better than that. I know the brain as well as you, It's just… I dislike using genjutsu. It's so… bloodless. So painless." The boy laughed, his white-and-black patched face twisting grotesquely. His Shokushu bloodline. Black Thread. Tentacles of black thread sprouted from his spine, slithering in the air above the Chuunin Exam Stadium arena, dripping smoking poison. "So boring."

He's a sadist, Sakura, thought. A psychopath, like Misain Sebi. But Kawai was not quite like Sebi either. Sebi was just a little boy drunk on power, a coward who begged pathetically for his life when that power was stripped away.

Onira Kawai was not like that.

Sakura did not know what Kawai feared.

Fear is a genjutsu unlike any other, the Hokage's voice whispered in her head. You must tap into the target's primal emotions, or it will not work. You must know what they fear above all else. Most people feared for their lives, or the lives of their loved ones. But not Onira Kawai. He was not afraid of death at all. What made Onira Kawai tick? What was his point of vulnerability?

"Shokushu: Black Spines!"

Spears of black tentacles shot out from the ground. Simultaneously, more tentacles descended on Sakura's position from above. She barely dodged in time. Tentacles upon tentacles, twisting after her as she ran. I can't let them touch me! One drop of poison and I'll be infected with Death and Decay. There was no known antidote. The only way to stop the process, once started, would be to amputate her own body. Sakura whirled her chakra-cast kunai around on a string, slicing tentacles in two left and right. In order to get away, she backflipped to the edge of the arena, as far away from Kawai as possible.

Kawai laughed at her flight. "You can run, Sakura, but you can't hide."

"I was just about to say the same to you."

"Why, I'm quite enjoying this fight. Far more enjoyable than the stupid Rock Lee. He never had a
chance against me. But with you… ah, it's far more interesting. Fighting you is like fighting a
mirror."

"We're nothing alike."

"Oh, but I think we are. We are both medic-nins, are we not? I would not disparage your
considerable abilities. From one practitioner to another… I'd hope you can appreciate mine."

"I use my medical jutsu to heal. You use yours to murder other people."

"And there is the paradox of the medic-nin. Our knowledge of the human body enables us to work
miracles of healing… and also to destroy that same body more cruelly than any other kind of shinobi.
Any medical jutsu can be used both defensively and offensively. A chakra scalpel can be used for
precise brain surgery. It can also be used to lobotomize an enemy. Mystical Palm can heal wounds or
it can rip them open again. Poison Extraction readily becomes Poison Injection. Oh, yes, medical
jutsu are capable of both life and death. But there is a crucial difference between our two opposing
philosophies. Do you know it, Sakura?"

Sakura backed against the wall, clutching her chakra-cast kunai close. "It is far easier to kill than to
heal."

"Exactly." The waterfall-nin boy laughed. His head was a dozen feet high in the air, extended on
black threads slithering from the rest of his body, tentacles spilling from his stitched lips. His limbs
had been detached in the same way, encircling Sakura from every direction. Kawai laughed. "Take
my Death and Decay jutsu for an example. It's really very easy to make my poison and infect my
enemies with it. All it requires is a single, fatal touch. But to counter it… why, even the Queen of
Torment herself is helpless to create an antidote. You have no chance at all. And that is why you
shall die very soon, Haruno Sakura, and why I shall continue to live."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that. Mirrored Clone!"

Sakura flashed a series of rapid hand seals and four mud clones rose from the ground around her.
When Kawai's detached arm tried to attack her, one of the clones leaped in its way and exploded.
The explosion of energy, equivalent to one of Sakura's own Chakra Enhanced punches, took out
both the arm and a mass of surrounding tentacles. Shredded black threads fluttered to the ground,
oozing black poison onto the stone floor.

Up in the stands, the gathered crowd roared in excitement. From their perspective, it seemed that
something was finally happening. But they were mistaken. Sakura's exploding Mirrored Clone had
done nothing except delay her own death. It took only seconds for Kawai to reattach his injured
limbs, black threads slithering together to stitch the point of rupture. Damnmit, he's immortal. There
seemed no way to hurt Kawai permanently. The waterfall-nin attacked again. Sakura could do
nothing but run. She covered her retreat with her clones, sacrificing them as she ran along the wall of
the arena to the other side. More tentacles converged on her location, assaulting her mercilessly.

"Earth Release: Diamond Wall!"

Her new jutsu was a barrier of reflective, diamond-like stone, making a shield around her body.
Kawai's black threads slammed into the Diamond Wall and were stopped by the incredibly hard
surface. Sakura had a moment's respite before Kawai drew his tentacles back and attacked again.
Again. Again. The Diamond Wall, her strongest defensive jutsu, began to crack under the pressure.
Kawai cackled loudly, taunting her.

"Attack him!" someone was shouting up in the crowd. "Attack, stop hiding!"
It was true. Sakura was afraid to get too close to him, lest she be ensnared in Kawai's tentacles. But from a distance all she could use was genjutsu, and her genjutsu did not work. If I open four Chakra Gates, then rush him... a suicidal attack, in all likelihood, with only a chance of delivering enough physical punishment to actually end Kawai's demented life. Sakura was not unwilling, if that was what it came down to. But it had to be a last resort.

What else could she do? She could hardly dodge Kawai forever. Soon rather than later, she'd run out of chakra, and then she would be helpless to save herself. Her blood was hot, her heart pounding in her chest. Sakura crouched beneath the crumbling protection of her Diamond Wall. She was breathing so hard her throat constricted; she felt the panic welling up.

"Are you afraid of me, little ape girl?" taunted Kawai.

One last assault and the Diamond Wall collapsed. It shattered into a dozen glittering pieces, skittering across the stone floor of the arena. Sakura emerged with her head high, her gloved hands curled into fists.

"Everyone is afraid of something," she replied.

"I fear nothing!" Kawai declared. "I am immortal! I cannot be hurt! I am Death itself, incarnate to bring pain and terror to the weaklings of this world!"

"Everyone is afraid of something," she repeated. "What are you afraid of, Onira Kawai? That's what I couldn't figure out. At first I thought maybe it was loneliness. But then Sebi and Rei died, and you didn't seem to care at all."

The waterfall-nin sneered. "The Misain brats? I respected Sebi's power, when he was sane enough to use it... no more than that." The black stitches across his pale white face making him look like a patched doll. "The Misain clan are no friends of mine. I never needed them."

"No, you never needed anyone. You take solace in your isolation. You armor yourself in hatred and disdain the world."

"I am strong."

*And there it is,* thought Sakura. There it was, just the hint of vulnerability that she expected. She pressed the boy to the end. "Then I thought maybe you were afraid of dying. That's why you turned yourself into such an inhuman freak. So you need never fear death."

"Wrong again, Sakura. Why would I fear what I am? I hold death in the palm of my hand like a toy."

"Yes, that's so. Death holds no terrors for you. But then I thought, if you are truly the master of death, why are your death-dealing methods so sadistic? Why did you develop Death and Decay? There are far more efficient ways of killing someone. Why did you have to make your victims suffer?"
"Death is a cruel god."

"Is it?" Sakura smiled, brandishing her fists. Then she attacked. Mirrored Clones flanking her sides, exploding, shielding her from Kawai's swarming tentacles. Flinging the genjutsu Binding repeatedly in rapid succession, slowing down Kawai's nervous system and forcing an opening between his defenses. "You're wrong, Kawai!" she shouted. "Death is not cruel. Death is just!" In a suicidal flurry Sakura had closed the distance between them. She was right in front of him, over him, close enough to reach out and embrace the boy with her arms. Black tentacles surrounded her on all sides —so dense she could scarcely see the walls of the stadium beyond. "And so justice comes even to such a monster as you!"

Her fist connected right with Kawai's chest.

The Chakra Enhanced blow sent him flying into the floor with such force that the stone beneath pulverized into dust. A huge crater radiated outward from the center of Sakura's punch, destroying most of the arena. Kawai lay broken in the bottom of the crater like a helpless puddle of boneless flesh, a morass of distended limbs and limp black thread. Sakura stood victorious over the fallen waterfall-nin, her face flushed in triumph.

Onira Kawai laughed. "I told you, Sakura. I can't die."

Tentacles erupted from his mouth, a spear straight for Sakura's heart.

There was no time to dodge. Instead Sakura grabbed the tentacles with her bare hands.

A collective gasp rose from the crowd. A single touch of those black threads is death. The tentacles tore through her leather gloves and wrapped itself around her bare arms, every centimeter of the slimy black flesh dripping fatal poison. Kawai's own blood. The mysterious black blood kept Kawai's own body alive, somehow, gave Kawai tremendous powers of immortality and regeneration, but in a normal human being it was death. Death and Decay. The end for her would be faster than for the others. Nonou had only received a scratch, and Lee had suffered a shallow cut on his ankle. In contrast, Sakura was being flooded with poison. There was so much poison that even if Sakura amputated both her arms right now it would've been too late. The Death and Decay soaked through her skin into her bloodstream, infecting her whole body with no way to extract it again. With the poison came the pain. Pain such as Sakura had never felt; an incredibly intense agony as her cells suddenly multiplied beyond control, red-black blood pouring out of every pore in her hands, barreling toward a premature death—

—Sakura screamed in pain—

"Die, you fool!" Kawai exulted. "Feel the pain! Feel your own death—"

"Fear," whispered Sakura.

The genjutsu hit Kawai point blank at the moment when he was least expecting it. Tearing past all his mental defenses, plunging deep right into the core of Kawai's central limbic system. His brain had been radically altered by the surgical experimentation of Shokushu, woven from end to end with black threads, but the very core of it was still there, still recognizable. Primal instinct. Emotion. Fear.

What do you fear, Onira Kawai?

She knew the answer.

She felt it.
"No!" shrieked Kawai. He tried to push her genjutsu away, protect himself from this horror of exposure. But it was too late. Sakura was inside his brain, inside even his memories, flooding his mind with a mix of truth and fantasy. The horrible medical experimentation that all users of the Shokushu bloodline had to endure in order to replace their normal bodies with black thread. The fear and helplessness of a little boy who suffered horribly for years, all for a cruel purpose that he did not understand, Misain Seve the Thrice-Damned turning him into a weapon, a tool for his own ends. The overwhelming pain. Sakura took all of it within herself and then channeled it out again. You were afraid of being hurt. You were afraid of pain. That's why you developed Death and Decay.

It was known that Kawai could not feel physical pain himself. The black threads had replaced every pain receptor in his whole body. Then why did he go to such lengths to cause such pain in others? Why did he build his fighting style around Death and Decay? The answer was simple. Kawai inflicted pain on his enemies because it was the one thing he was afraid of himself; even now, even those many years after his formative experiences. It was the one thing in all the world that a sadist feared.

"No!" the boy shrieked. "No, stop!"

Sakura did not stop. To stop for even a second would mean her own death. It was impossible to extract Death and Decay from her own body... by herself. But not with Kawai's help. She had taken control of the waterfall-nin's mind now, using genjutsu to manipulate Kawai's fear, trick him to do what she wanted. Any medical jutsu could be used both defensively and offensively. Kawai had infected her with poison, his own black blood. By the same principle, Kawai could also extract it. Take the poison back into himself... return the poison to the network of black threads. It was the only solution to Death and Decay.

With a sudden clarity Sakura perceived the essence of Shokushu. In a normal person Death and Decay rapidly aged the victim until they died. But why did the same effect not happen in Kawai's own body? She'd assumed that the poison didn't affect Kawai because of his Black Thread bloodline... but she had reversed the cause and effect. What if his black blood was making Kawai immortal in the first place?

Rapid cellular multiplication was what sustained a Shokushu body. Without it, the entire structure of the black threads would fall apart. That had to be the secret. Death and Decay, paradoxically, kept Onira Kawai alive. It kept him from feeling the pain that all ordinary organisms felt, the natural pain of wear and growth and change.

"All men must die," Sakura whispered.

The pain that Sakura pumped continuously into Kawai's mind did its work. Unable to distinguish reality from hallucination, the waterfall-nin imagined that the source of his pain was the Death and Decay poison in his own body. Desperately he tried to expel that poison from his body as quickly as possible. Black blood leaked out from Kawai's tentacles in streams... so much blood that it filled the crater in which he lay. Sakura dropped the limp tentacles wrapped around her hands and stepped away from the poison. Her hands were smoking, aged several years beyond their natural time, fingernails curling in on themselves in long loops. She had been badly hurt; but she would live.

Kawai was not so fortunate. The waterfall-nin's body began to disintegrate in the places where his blood was leaking out. The black threads could not maintain their structural integrity without the lubrication and support of Death and Decay. Soon, more quickly than even Sakura expected, the black tentacles had evaporated to nothing, and then there was nothing left of Onira Kawai except a few scattered parts of white flesh. Whatever remained of his original body, floating, shriveling,
withering in a pool of cold black blood.

It was over.

*For Lee,* she thought. *For Nonou, and Minbu, and Han, and for all the victims that you killed.*

She felt nothing.

A thunderous roar cascaded across the packed, standing room-only audience of Chuunin Exam Stadium. Applause and cheers, whoops and yells, for the epic battle they had just witnessed. Sakura and Kawai, the hero and the monster she had slain. It was an unlikely role, but the gathered crowd did not care. They'd come for blood, and they had gotten what they wanted. Sakura looked up into the dais, searching for the burned face of Misain Dayu, Kawai's terrifying sensei. She found Senju Tsunade instead. For an instant their eyes met. Then the Fifth Hokage nodded and turned away. All across the stadium the loudspeakers were blaring the announcement. "THE WINNER OF THE FINAL MATCH... IS... HARUNO SAKURA OF KONOHAN"
"He's dead," Sakura told Rock Lee.

The crippled boy nodded. Smiled wanly, opened his mouth to say something… then closed it again. Rock Lee was at a loss for words. When at last the boy spoke, he only said, "Did… did he hurt you, Sakura-chan?"

"Not as much as I hurt him."

Hyuuga Neji nodded in slow agreement. "The waterfall-nin Onira Kawai died in agonizing fear and pain. There could have been no better vengeance."

The cold judgment gave Lee no comfort. "I was so stupid," he whispered. Lee's voice was bitter and numb with regrets. "Sakura-chan warned me, she said not to let Kawai get close. I… I should have remembered. I… I thought the Will of Fire was enough…"

"It's not your fault," said Sakura.

"It's mine. I knew Kawai would poison you, and I sent you to fight him anyway. Even knowing what she did now, would she do it over again? It was the only way. From the beginning she'd calculated the odds that Rock Lee would not survive the battle in the Cathedral of Hearts. Only the possibility of Lee surviving without his legs had never occurred to her.

The door to the hospital room slid open.

To her surprise, Sakura saw it was the rain-nin Kyoroku Erima. The short, waif-like girl looked even paler than usual, her lips pursed, her dark purple eyes wide with tension and stress. Yet there was a strength there as well. She was not intimidated in the slightest by facing down Hyuuga Neji.

"What are you doing here?" asked Neji in a cold voice.

"To talk," she said.
"You mean, to beg."

"I never beg." The girl's eyes flashed. "Not anymore... but all the same, it will do you no harm to listen to my words."

"Neji... it's okay." Rock Lee's words were soft. "Erima... she's been visiting me. She pushes me around the courtyard in the morning."

Rock Lee had lately been allowed to use a wheelchair, but only under strict supervision. The doctors still feared that he might try to hurt himself again... himself, or others. Still, Lee showed signs of rapid psychological improvement. He'd stopped talking about wanting to kill himself, and at times even seemed his old cheerful self. Sakura had accompanied Lee several times around the hospital in his wheelchair. Sometimes she pushed him, sometimes he rolled himself along by turning the wheels. It is good for Lee to move about, instead of being chained to his own bed.

She hadn't known about Kyoroku Erima's visits, however.

"All right, Erima," said Sakura. "Tell us what you came to say."

"Only this. I do not speak for Aumono, nor Tosuken-sensei, nor my village. Only myself. Hyuuga Neji, I am sorry for what happened to your friend. Rock Lee is a brave shinobi. I am sorry for what happened to your sensei Maito Gai as well. There was no purpose to it. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth... some would call that justice. But punishing Maito Gai will not bring Mukai Mamoru back from the dead. That is not justice. Nor is what happened in Aoyama Stadium. It means nothing."

"I do not agree," said Neji. His voice was sharp as a blade's edge.

"I know you do not." Erima glanced at the downcast face of Rock Lee in his wheelchair. "We cannot change the past... what has already happened. I was born an orphan in the aftermath of the Third Ninja War. I never knew my parents. As near as I can discover, they were one of the many thousands of nameless faces caught in the crossfire of clashing armies. The last great battle of the war in Rain..."

"The Battle of the Beggars," said Sakura.

"I'm glad you know of it. Your own father, Haruno Arashi the Demonslayer, was the one who led the leaf-nin forces. He tried to push through Rain into the Earth Country, but he was repulsed by Sougon Sawar. He retreated to the refugee camps along the border, and Sawar attacked him there... the battle was an indiscriminate war of attrition which left scarcely a man standing afterwards, not even the innocent and helpless refugees. Even now, eighteen years later, we rain-kins speak of that time as the day of death. I grew up a feral child in the camps. I was always hungry, starving, begging for food just to survive. For a time, I became a child prostitute... you can scarcely imagine the horror. Then I was found by the Kyoroku clan, and my life changed.

"The Kyoroku clan is not a traditional family as you know it. We are all composed of orphans, every one. My sisters and brothers found me in the refugee camp. They rescued me, they fed me, and taught me how to read and write, and trained me in the techniques of the shinobi world. In time, I became a shinobi myself. At first, I was just grateful to be out of the hell of the camps, to have people who loved me and cared for my existence... Later I began to understand the true purpose behind my rescue. The reason for the existence of the Kyoroku clan. Justice. True justice. Not the justice of the sword, but the justice of conscience. With malice toward none, with charity for all. To bind up the wounds of our people. To end the civil war, to lift the Curse of Rain, to rebuild our society, to establish a just and lasting peace. We cannot change the past, but the future is what we make. That is
the future for which my sisters and brothers and I fight."

"Why are you telling us this?" asked Sakura.

"Because I want you to know… not everyone in the Rain Country is like Lord Hanzou the Reaper. Or like Aumono."

Neji stared at her, and did not speak.

Erima left after that. Sakura did not linger long, either. Leaving Neji alone with his crippled teammate, she went to buttonhole Erima in the hallway outside. The rain-nin turned, surprised to see Sakura's approach.

"Tell me, Erima," said Sakura. "How is Aumono?"

The other girl looked at her strangely. "Subdued. Humbled, I think. He did not expect to lose to Neji… especially in such a decisive fashion. Neji's Clawed Kaiten jutsu left a permanent scar across Aumono's face. The scars within his own heart run deeper… the scars, and the questions. You should go see him yourself."

"I will."

So the Third Trial continued.

Only eight ninjas remained in the tournament: the quarterfinals had begun. The first quarterfinal match was between Temari and Kozumi Saotome, the glacier-nin who had won over Geigin in such an unexpected fashion in the second round.

Kozumi Saotome was a most distinctive personage. It was not just his strange clothes—he wore the white and gray fur-lined suit of Hyogakure, even in the summer heat—nor his harsh, guttural tribal accent. He looks like an grandfather in a young man's body. The boy could not have been older than Sosano, yet he walked like an old man, hunched over, darting his head this way and that, rubbing his hands together in miserly irritation. Everything about him seemed ungainly; his long hooked nose, his dry peevish lips, his bulging, watery eyes—an amalgamation of ill-fitting parts. Strangest of all was the tattoo. It dominated the right side of the boy's face, black as pitch on his dark skin, a spiderweb that stretched down his neck to the tips of his fingers.

"Are all the glacier-nins so weird?" wondered Kankuro.

"I don't know," replied Orajuchi. "The Glacier Country is mostly ice and fishing villages. They keep to themselves, never bother anybody else, and expect the same of their neighbors. I can't remember ever seeing glacier-nins show up at a chuunin exam."

"Sounds like a promising candidate for the United Countries," joked Shinren.

The Glacier Country was located in one of the the most inhospitable environments on Earth: the far north of the Dreamstone Mountains, stretching over the heart of the Dreamstone Glacier itself. The land beyond the Scar, north and west of the Ice Spear. Sakura did not have especially fond memories of her time spent on the border of the country. It was a largely undeveloped society, governed by scattered tribal clans and revolved around fishing and hunting as the primary form of sustenance. With the exception of Whitewarren, a trading port on the Bitter Sea along its northern coast, the Glacier Country did not even have a single city.

Hyogakure, the tiny hidden village of Glacier, reflected the society in which it was based. The whole village was a single, interrelated collection of three ninja clans. Proud of their self-sufficiency and
lack of contact with the outside world, the glacier-nins had not participated in either the First and Third Ninja Wars; they also remained neutral between the United Countries and the Confederacy. Even Saotome's forehead protector told the tale: three irregular sloping triangles that bisected in the middle, like the jagged surface of a slow-moving glacier.

"Sabaku Temari, well met!" exclaimed Saotome in an excited voice. "I most admired your match against Satetsu. Everything is all so terribly exciting to me, you understand. A city like Iwagakure... magnificent beyond comparison! I've never seen so many books in one place! You know, originally I didn't even want to come... it's just Aunt Youko dragged me along by the nape of my neck. Have you possibly made her acquaintance by chance? A most lovely woman, I must say, though a little tart. Her fish stick recipe is simply divine. Anyway, I'm not exactly—well, the most typical of ninjas. Never expected I'd make it this far. We of the Kozumi clan have quite bookish and tender sensibilities, in general, and, in my personal example, several formative childhood experiences have led me to strictly follow the sadly neglected philosophies of Hotaru Eshidae. Really, it goes back to the great sculptural controversies in the glory days of the Birthright Empire. Aunt Youko says—"

"—the match started," interrupted Temari.

"Oh, right." The glacier-nin boy coughed. "I do rather go on sometimes, I'm afraid. It's just you seem like such a nice girl to talk to. Not like that nasty fellow in the second round, the one who looks like a long-necked spider. He told me to shut up, so I put him in a box. Oh, it was terribly mean of me... I'm afraid my temper got the upper hand. I was feeling rather under the weather that day, you see—I don't think Aunt Youko made my ginseng tea quite right. I hope you understand. Our match today ought to be splendid! Good luck to you, my lady!"

On the sidelines, Sakura looked around at her friends. Kankuro's mouth was hanging open, Shinren was giggling, and Raiki blinked several times in a row. Orajuchi shrugged and twitched his ears.

*How did this guy ever get to the Third Trial of the 54th Iwa Chuunin Exam?*

And to the quarterfinals, no less.

"Ready?" Temari unfurled her Giant War Fan, crouching into battle stance. "Wind Release: Great Wind Scythe!"

Saotome waved his right arm; the black tattoo seal on his lower forearm glowing with crackling energy. "Hypnotic Scroll: Seal Air!"

A burst of cleaving wind burst from Temari's fan, swirling across the arena toward Saotome... and stopped. Some kind of strange, razor-thin, translucent barrier had formed between them two of them. The Great Wind Scythe hit the barrier and dissipated instantly. The barrier appeared to stretch all around Saotome to a distance of twenty meters, like a semi-opaque black bubble.

"He did it again," said Kankuro. "That Hypnotic Scroll thing."

Sakura nodded. "Sosa was right... it's a space-time fuinjutsu. Look, that bubble around Saotome is two-dimensional, do you see it? It's only visible to us because it's curved and we're looking at it from an angle. The black surface is the place where Saotome sealed the air."

"But... what does that do?"

"The seal is a vacuum. Nothing that travels through the air can get through it."

"You mean wind jutsu won't work."
"Right."

"So Temari should just go through the bubble. From inside she can kick Saotome's ass!"

"Nope. The seal is two-dimensional, remember. It doesn't work like ordinary space… if Temari tries to run through it, she'll just get sucked in. Like Geigin did."

"So how can Temari attack him?"

Sakura stared at the two combatants down in the arena. "I don't know." Genjutsu would work, she thought. Or space-time ninjutsu. But Temari had neither. She relied on taijutsu and wind elemental jutsu to bully her opponents… both types of which were completely blocked by Saotome's black barrier. So what could Temari do, except wait for Saotome to make the next move? Perhaps his Hypnotic Scroll techniques had a weakness that they didn't know about yet.

"An impressive technique," called out Temari. "Is it your secret clan jutsu?"

"Oh, not at all!" said Saotome. From within the bubble, his accented voice sounded a little distorted. "The Kozumi clan is known for its mastery of sword and shuriken, actually. But I was never much good around sharp objects—Aunt Youko says that even as a baby I'd start crying near a pair of scissors. And well, you see… I can't stand the sight of blood. It makes me sick."

Temari raised one eyebrow. "An odd trait for a shinobi."

"Actually, I'm a pacifist. I have taken a strict vow never to harm another life, human or animal. Hotaru Eshidae the Seer says that there many causes worth dying for, but there are none worth killing for. You see."

There was a chattering murmur as the crowd in the stadium absorbed the implications of this statement of enlightened philosophy. They did not seem to like it very much. Of course not, they came to see blood and death. That's why they paid all that money for tickets. Boos and vulgar jeers rained down on the poor glacier-nin.

"A doddering, hypochondriac, pacifist ninja," marveled Kankuro. He sounded a little bit awed.

"The boy is certifiably psychotic," agreed Raiki.

"The ninjas of Glacier are known for their defensive fighting style," said Orajuchi. "But this is taking it a little too far…"

Temari folded up her War Fan and stowed it on her back. "I see. So you developed your Hypnotic Scroll jutsu in order to fight without killing. You can seal the air as a barrier to protect yourself, and then seal the ground to temporarily trap your opponent. No one ever has to get hurt."

"Exactly! I'm glad that we understand each other!"

"Is there anything that you can't seal?"

"My Hypnotic Scrolls allow me to seal any part of the environment I'm in. Providing I'm in a Hypnotic State, of course. And providing I have the appropriate Hypnotic Scroll tattooed into my body. The scrolls are consumed each time they are used, you understand—it's a most intricate and delicate process, from beginning to end. Why, I spent years meditating in an igloo just to conceive of the idea—"

"—fascinating." Temari cut him off again. "Why don't you show me?"
"Oh, right." Saotome waved his left hand; the web-like black scrollwork began to glow. "Hypnotic Scroll: Seal Ground!"

It was the same jutsu the glacier-nin had used on Geigin in the second round. Temari was ready for it, however; she leaped quickly away before the hole had materialized. A two meter by two black square appeared in the spot where she'd been standing.

Just as before, the Hypnotic Scroll tattoo that Saotome had used to activate his seal vanished. His left hand and right forearm were now both barren of any scrollwork. *Yes, that's one of Saotome's weaknesses. He can only use his seals so many times before he runs out of scrolls.* It was a style that lent itself poorly to a protracted battle of stamina... especially so if facing a large field of opponents.

Against one person, however, it was probably more than enough.

"Hypnotic Scroll: Seal Light!" Salome shouted. This time a large black sphere appeared over the eastern side of the arena... and swallowed Temari up inside it. For a moment Sakura thought Temari had been successfully trapped. But then the sand-nin barreled through the walls of the barrier into open light. The black sphere was not a two-dimensional prison, Sakura realized. It was simply the absence of light. Saotome had created a pocket of complete darkness using Hypnotic Scroll.

Sakura was not sure what the purpose of using Seal Light was. Certainly it could not incapacitate Temari, or really affect her in any meaningful way. The glacier-nin seemed simply to be showing off the range of his abilities. His next attack was in a similar vein. "Hypnotic Scroll: Seal Body!" At first Sakura did not see anything happen, but then Temari jerked suddenly, as if struck in the gut. She lunged to one side... and in the space where she had been standing before, there was a long, black, translucent shadow. The shadow was still as a statue; it traced exactly the position that Temari had been standing in before she had moved.

Temari's right arm was still caught in the shadow.

"Damnit," she said. "You got me."

"What happened?" demanded Kankuro.

Sakura shook her head. "Saotome tried to seal Temari's body. Trap her in a kind of space-time limbo. It's... I guess it's a little like what the Third Hokage did to Orochimaru. Temari dodged most of it, but her right arm got caught. She can't use it anymore."

"Forever?" The sand-nin boy was quite concerned.

"No, just until Saotome undoes the seal."

Temari slowly pulled her arm of the shadow. Everything from her shoulder down was completely black, and stiff as stone. Temari smiled ruefully. "A unique jutsu. I don't feel anything—it's like my arm doesn't exist at all. Well, that makes this next part more difficult." With her one good arm Temari performed a quick hand seal. "Wind Release: Vortex!"

A miniature tornado appeared around Temari. Usually, Temari would send the spinning Vortex at an opponent, using it to block attacks or control space. But this time was different. All the Vortex did was get larger and larger. In moments it had enveloped the entire stadium arena. At this size the Vortex was not very fast at all... nothing more than a fierce wind, swirling particles of dust around the stadium. The Vortex winds continuously buffeted Saotome's barrier of black sealed air.

"Ah," said Sakura. "That's good."
"What are you talking about?" asked Kankuro.

"Temari's Vortex. It might win her the whole match."

The river-nin Higeru Shinren frowned. "But Vortex is a wind jutsu, and you said air can't pass through Saotome's barrier. So why would it work?"

Because Saotome likes to hear himself talk too much, thought Sakura. She shrugged. "Just wait... and see."

Kozumi Saotome didn't pay any attention to Temari's attack. The boy was babbling on about his family history of neurotic behavior, about the philosophies of Hotaru Eshidae the Seer, about his many unremarkable adventures in the chuunin exam, about how Temari was such a lovely girl to talk to, and about Aunt Youko's fish stick recipe. He hardly ever spoke of his Hypnotic Scroll techniques, and when he did it was like a history lesson and no one could bear to listen to him.

Then Saotome's seals disappeared.

Every single one, all at once. The translucent barrier of sealed air. The sphere of sealed light. The seal on the ground. The seal on Temari's arm.

"Oh, my!" the glacier-nin exclaimed. He wrung his hands, rubbed his long hooked nose, and coughed. "What ever happened?"

Temari pointed. "Look at your body."

Saotome stared at his arms for a while. Then he laughed. "Ah, I see! Your Vortex jutsu... you must have added invisible particles of tiny chakra into the dust. They got inside the barrier, stuck to my skin, and disrupted my Hypnotic Scroll tattoos. Every Hypnotic Scroll is a very delicate construction of chakra, of course. I have to clean the seals before they work again." Saotome hunched his shoulders, rubbing his hands together in a washing motion. "Well, I concede. Well fought, Sabaku Temari! On second thought, I might have finished the fight when I had the chance."

"Probably."

There was a smattered of light applause as Director Sougon Chegga called the fight. Confusion and muttered perplexity predominated. What the hell did I just watch? everyone seemed to be asking each other. It was by far the strangest, most absurd fight in the Third Trial.

"I don't get it," said Shinren. "How did Temari's chakra get inside Saotome's barrier in the first place?"

"Because there were holes in the barrier," Sakura said.

"How did you know?"

"There had to be. Sound travels through air, not a vacuum. If the barrier was really sealed on all sides, we shouldn't have been able to hear Saotome from inside at all. But we could hear his voice. That meant there must've been air holes in the barrier somewhere. Temari wasn't sure exactly where, so she used Vortex to whip up a dust storm. She seeded the storm with her chakra, knowing it would get through the barrier eventually."

"I told you it was a trick," declared Raiki.

Kankuro sighed dramatically. "You guys are way too smart for your own good."
"Temari inherited the family brains, you see," explained Sakura.

"Ah, well, brains aren't going to help you against that guy." Kankuro pointed to the giant scoreboard hung above the VIP section which showed the tournament bracket and the order of matches. "You're up next, Sakura."

*Sakura versus Jibachi.*
The two young shinobi, leaf-nin and stone-nin, strode into the stone arena from opposite ends of the stadium.

They were not friends.

Sakura swallowed, staring at her opponent for this quarterfinal match.

Chuzuru Jibachi.

The last time Sakura had fought him had been in the Second Trial, in the Battle of the Jewel Islands. First Jibachi had ambushed her in the middle of the night. Then he'd chased her into another ambush. Then he'd dropped enough bombs on her head to destroy Iwagakure five times over. It was quite a nasty and aggressive series of attempts on her life. Mystifying, really. She hadn't done anything to him personally.

She'd only killed his best friend, that's all.

"I'm sorry," she told him. "I know Noatari Chusei was your friend. I didn't want to kill him. We told you to stand aside beneath the Catacombs of Iwa, and you didn't listen to us. You attacked us anyway, and I had to defend myself."

Jibachi laughed loudly. "What a waste of breath."

"Why won't—"

"Because it doesn't matter. That's right, you told us to stand aside. You know why we attacked? Because we wanted to. We were trying to kill you, you stupid dumb bitch. I wanted to kill you even before you killed Chusei."

"Why?"

The skinny stone-nin boy grinned, leering at her with his mismatched eyes. He ran a long thick tongue along the edge of his lips. The other two tongues growing in his outstretched palms flicked
out to taste the air, making wet smacking noises, as if getting to ready to eat a delicious meal. Sakura suspected that she was on the menu.

"Because we're ninjas," he told her. "It's what we do."

The loudspeakers boomed out the countdown.

"BEGIN!"

Sakura stretched out her hand at Jibachi. "Fear!"

Her strongest genjutsu was quite effective… for a moment. Unfortunately, Jibachi was ready for her genjutsu assault. He had cycled a tremendous amount of chakra into his brain, making it hard for Sakura to fully penetrate it with a genjutsu attack. He also generated clay bombs from within his mouths and threw them at Sakura to disrupt her concentration. While she dodged the little animated clay figurines, Jibachi put both of his hands together and created a large flying dragon.

Shit! Jibachi was going to try to take to the air, she knew. Down in the arena he was vulnerable, but in the air, with Sakura's lack of long-range jutsu, the stone-nin could do whatever he wanted. Sakura's whole strategy was to keep him grounded. Quickly charging forward, she curled her leather glove into a fist and punched at Jibachi's dragon with all her strength.

She missed.

Jibachi's dragon flapped its wings, rising suddenly into the air. Sakura's Chakra Enhanced punch passed it by and instead slammed into the ground. The shockwave was powerful enough to pulverize the center of the stone arena into a smoking crater.

"Haha!" the stone-nin shouted down from high above. He was riding his clay dragon, circling around the upper stands of the stadium—at least ten stories up. "Do you like my Dragon of Brief Transience?"

The red clay dragon was altogether not transient enough. In fact, Jibachi could probably drop bombs on Sakura from the sky all day. "You coward!" she called up, shaking her fist. "Come back down and fight me like a man!"

"Oh, but the view from up here is so much better. Poor Kawai, he stayed on the ground and you blew him into bits. I suppose… I must avenge him as well!" Jibachi licked the tongues in his palms together; they looked like two red slimy worms fucking. "Haha! Deathgiving Hands!"

A kamikaze swarm of clay bombs started to drop down on Sakura's head. They were all sorts of shapes and sizes, animals and people, rocks and machines, even abstract symbols. An oversized one hundred ryō note fluttered down to the ground at Sakura's feet and exploded. Sakura zigzagged around the arena like a chicken with its head cut off, desperately trying to dodge the bombs.

"You're wrong, Jibachi!" she shouted, trying to distract him. "Ninjas do more than kill. If we do our jobs right, we don't have to. We're supposed to use our powers to make the world a safe and lawful place. Don't you see, that's the difference between a shinobi and a murderer?"

"You apes make everything so complicated. Kill the enemy. Protect the village. Complete the mission. Never untie a knot when you could slash it in two with your sword, my father always said. Blowing the knot into smithereens with a bomb is even better!"

This is bad, she thought. The flying Jibachi was far out of her fighting range. Her genjutsu could not touch him at such a distance, much less taijutsu. Perhaps ninjutsu was worth a try… "Earth Release:
Sinister Spikes!" she shouted.

This was her earth elemental jutsu with the furthest range. Instead of sending multiple spikes outward in a piercing line, as was typical, Sakura concentrated all the chakra into one, very large spike. The spike burst from the ground at her feet and shot upwards, up and up…

… but not quite ten stories up.

Jibachi laughed in triumphant glee. "Really, Sakura, what an ugly jutsu! No sense of proportion at all. You know, I always believed that the perfect jutsu should be beautiful as well as deadly. You might even call me an aspiring artist. I want to show you one of my beautiful creations before you die." A gigantic bomb puffed into existence before his hands. The clay bomb was the size of a house and looked exactly like Jibachi himself, right down to his mismatched eyes and grinning leer. "I call this… the Self Portrait of the Artist's Immortal Smile."

"I already saw that one."

"Ah, I suppose you did. Well, a second viewing never hurt anybody! Or was it the other way around?"

The Self Portrait of the Artist's Immortal Smile plunged down toward the ground. When it exploded, it would destroy the entire arena. There was nowhere to run.

Okay, time for Plan B.

Sakura bit her thumb to draw blood and pressed it into her other palm. "Summoning Technique!"

There was a cloud of white smoke, and from within the cloud a giant white slug appeared. Katsuyu, the Queen of the Scar. Sakura had summoned as much of Katsuyu as she could—she only hoped it would be enough.

Jibachi's bomb exploded.

The explosion was so large and intense that it literally filled the entire stadium all the way into the sky. The Chakra Barrier around the edge of the arena flickered and crackled, straining to keep the energy of the explosion contained within the zone of combat.

Sakura survived, of course, by hiding underneath Katsuyu. The giant slug had tough slimy skin and a unique, liquified molecular structure that allowed her to survive almost any kind of blast. Even so, a good part of Katsuyu's hide had been vaporized. Sakura scrambled up onto the slug's back. "Katsuyu!" she shouted. "Launch me up!"

The slug reared up, waving her long eyestalks, rumbling in booming tones. "Sakura-chan! Good luck!" Sakura ran up Katsuyu's blue-striped crown and along her eyestalk to the extended tip, already several stories above the ground. Then she leaped with all her might. With the running start Sakura rocketed into the air, rising up several more stories…

… all the way to Jibachi's level. The stone-nin boy was right in front of her, circling above the stadium, crouched on his flapping clay dragon.

"Really?" asked Jibachi.

He shifted his body weight, and the dragon veered sharply to the right. That was their difference between their two methods of locomotion. The leaping Sakura was on a stationary, parabolic trajectory, like a cannon fired into the air. But Jibachi was actually flying, with complete freedom of
movement in any direction. By simply flapping to the right, he could easily get out of Sakura's way. There was nothing that she could do to get closer.

Or so he thought.

Sakura's leap missed Jibachi, sending her careening past him...

... until she stepped on the air.

It was a new trick she had learned in her training with the Hokage. By blasting chakra out of the tenketsu in her feet with sufficient rotation and power, Sakura was able to create an Advanced Chakra Field in front of her so dense that it was like a solid wall. The principle was exactly the same as the one that governed Walking With Water, the same as water surface walking. The Advanced Chakra Field was just stronger—much stronger. It was so strong that Sakura could press her whole weight against it, without anything underneath, and then repel herself off it with propulsive force.

Like she was walking on the air itself.

Sakura was slightly above and to the left of Jibachi. Nearly upside down, she crouched against the Advanced Chakra Field she'd made in the air and pushed herself back off. Essentially, Sakura had changed directions in midair, bringing her back on a collision course with Jibachi's dragon.

Jibachi whipped his head around in disbelief. The stone-nin had let his guard down, and now he could only stare as Sakura landed on his clay dragon—from the opposite direction. Sakura barreled forward into Jibachi's personal space, fists raised.

"I've got you!"

There was a chakra-cast kunai in her right fist, the mirrored edge glittering sharp. It would cut right through Jibachi's throat like a knife through melted butter. In her left fist she charged a great quantity of earth chakra-flow. This Chakra Enhanced punch would disable but not kill Jibachi. But which one to use? She had the power to decide. Sakura was judge, jury, and executioner.

Jibachi's life was in her hands.

He deserves to die, she thought. Jibachi was a twisted, sadistic, unhinged purveyor of wanton destruction. Was he any better than Onira Kawai? She would be doing a service to humanity by killing him. Just like she killed Kawai, just like she killed Noatari Chusei...

"Stop," the boy had gasped. Little fragments of granite ran down Chusei's crumbling face, like stone tears. "Stop, you're killing me..." But Sakura had listened to Chusei's pleas no more than Neji had listened to Aumono, then Jibachi had listened to Jun, then Sosano had listened to Misain Sebi. Gaara's words echoed in her mind. It's not hatred, but kindness that can defeat loneliness. And Sosano's. All men must die. When would it end, this cycle of revenge and hatred and blood debt?

Fate goes ever as fate must. Everyone was watching, she knew. Waiting. Would she, the representative of the United Countries, kill an enemy shinobi of the Confederacy? Or spare him?

She had only a split second to decide.

Sakura screamed in rage. Then she punched Chuzuru Jibachi in the stomach.

The blow sent Jibachi right through his clay dragon and smashed him ten stories down to the arena floor below. Katsuyu caught the stone-nin boy before he hit the ground and shattered all his bones; using her soft slimy bulk to absorb the impact of his fall. Partially liquefying her body, Katsuyu then
sucked the boy's limbs inside herself, trapping Jibachi in shackles of tough white skin. It scarcely mattered. Jibachi was out cold.

The fight was over, and Sakura had won.

Afterwards, after the countdown and the congratulations, the medical checkups and the lessons and the meetings, she somehow found herself in Sougon Sosano's arms. She had not meant to—she did not want to hear what she knew he would say. It was the quiet of the night, warm and sultry, and she lay naked in his bed, her young, slim body curled against his.

"You should have killed him," said Sosano.

"There was no need."

"Not today. But tomorrow? Jibachi will be back, with more reasons to hate you than ever."

"And others will have less reason to hate me."

"Ah... so it was a political calculation. A little bit of propaganda for the United Countries." Sosano smiled, dark eyes glittering. "Very well, in the interests of propaganda, I will make a similar commitment to you. I vow that, during our match tomorrow, I shall not kill Hyuuga Neji."

"If you even could."

"Oh, I can. Neji is strong, but I am even stronger. I will win the match, do you doubt me?"

"And you'll spare his life, just for me?"

"That's right."

"Maybe Tsunade-sensei's wrong," Sakura teased. "Maybe I was wrong not to trust you."

Sosano laughed like the joke was funnier than it was. His naked body after sex had a musky, strangely fresh scent, like grass after a rain. His regal face was teasing, playful. But his voice was deadly serious as he whispered into her ear, then, as if whispering a secret.

"For such an intelligent woman, Sakura, you are remarkably slow to learn. Distrusting me was the wisest thing you've done since you tried to steal my sword."
The Third Trial: Quarterfinals (3)

ROUND ONE ================= ROUND TWO =============== QUARTERFINAL
============== SEMIFINAL ============= FINAL

SAKURA vs. Shinren ... ... ... ... Kawai vs. SAKURA .. ... ... ... Jibachi vs. SAKURA ...
... ... ... Sakura vs. * ... ... ... ... * vs. *
... ... ... JIBACHI vs. Jun

SOSANO vs. Ryua ... ... ... ... Yukari vs. SOSANO ... ... ... ... Sosano vs. Neji
... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... NEJI vs. Aumono

... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... Geigin vs. SAOTOME ... ... ... ... Saotome vs. TEMARI ...
... ... ... Temari vs. Raiki
... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... TEMARI vs. Satetsu

... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... RAIKI vs. Mazu ... ... ... ... Raiki vs. [N/A]
... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... Makera vs. JOUDA

Sakura and Temari woke before the crack of dawn to train.

It was the seventh day of the Third Trial, and the last day of the quarterfinals. Since both kunoichi had already advanced to the semifinal round, they'd the day off to prepare themselves for the matches ahead. It was in the semifinals that they would face their most formidable opponents. Temari would fight Raiki, and Sakura would fight either Sosano or Neji. 

"We are the five strongest that remain.

Even strong as they were, however, they did not venture out into the training fields of the Zoo unaccompanied. The Zoo was not the safest place to travel these days. How could it be? Hundreds of genin from all over the world were crowded together into a single walled, gated compound. Like enemies locked together in a cage. Tensions between the United Countries and the Confederacy had run high from the beginning. And the Shadow War had worsened matters to the point of life-threatening danger.

The chuunin examiners kept a lid on the level of violence, of course. Nobody had died... yet. Still, not a few genin had been seriously injured in one scuffle or another. Gangs of UC or Confederacy genin roamed the dusty streets of the Zoo, challenging any passerby from the other side. The larger the group, the more protection you had. Sakura had no less than the Sand Siblings, Shinren, and Team Ranka beside her.

So she was surprised to see a single, solitary figure waiting for them in the street. 

Orajuchi.

The stone-nin boy stood in shadow by the side of the road, his dark features blending into the twilight dawn. He must have been standing there for some time. When he saw them, the boy's long, pointed ears twitched—as if in excitement, or fear. His eyes were as huge and black as two inky orbs.

"Orajuchi." Temari's voice was soft. "What's this about?"

"It's about Sosa."
The boy’s ears twitched again as he nodded to Temari and Sakura, asking to talk to them alone. The others moved aside as the three unlikely friends gathered in the silence of the empty street.

*This is no idle visit,* Sakura knew. Bakura Orajuchi was far more politically important than his youth and outward appearance indicated. Not only was he the sole surviving shinobi of the ancient Bakura clan, he also stood at a crossroads straddling the two factions that still divided Iwagakure. The war faction, led by his sensei and foster father Sougon Sawar. And the peace faction, led by the disgraced prisoner Haghira Doi. Despite his close personal connections to Sawar, Orajuchi was a known sympathizer of Doi's peace agenda; in that, as in so much else, he had proved the opposite of his teammate Geigin. *Has Orajuchi come to betray his sensei?*

Instead he asked, "Tell me, Sakura. Do you love him?"

The question threw her. "As much as you."

It was the wrong thing to say. "Do you think I love Sosa? Once, I thought I did… then I failed him when he needed me most. I could not do what he asked of me. And now he has turned to you." Orajuchi’s voice was bitter. "Seven years ago I could have ended it all. It was not love that stayed my hand then, but cowardice. How far will you honor your love, Sakura? How far are you prepared to go?"

Sakura's mouth was dry. "As far as necessary."

"Do you promise?"

"Yes." *Don't make promises you can't keep.* "I promise."

"Then let me give you a warning— a warning to the entire United Countries. Sosano is close… close to completing the mission Sawar-sensei gave him from the moment the UC Embassy entered Iwa. The secret mission he's been pursuing all this time."

Temari glanced at Sakura. "The assassination of Senju Tsunade."

"I think… I think Sosa figured out where Tsunade's real body is. Or at least he strongly suspects."

"How can you know this?"

"I'm his best friend. We grew up together. Sosa—he's waited a long time for this. You know what I'm talking about, Sakura, don't you? When he met you, I thought maybe, for a moment… but the chance for that has passed. *The end is here,* Sakura. I can see it in his eyes. I can hear it in his voice, in the way he walks. Sosano has made his choice, and he will live or die with it."

A long pause.

"Thank you for coming to us, Orajuchi," said Sakura at last. "I will warn the Hokage."

"I didn't do it for your Hokage." The bat-boy shook his head. "Before he was arrested, I pledged my loyalty to Doi Dragonsight. Where he leads, I shall follow. As will many shinobi in Iwagakure."

"But not most," said Temari.

"No. Not most."

Bakura Orajuchi turned to go. The sun was dawning in the east, veiling the empty streets of the Zoo in shimmering curtains of cobalt blue. "Orajuchi!" Sakura called out to the stone-nin boy as he left—
asking one last question. "Why are you helping us? For Sosa?"

"For him, yes." Orajuchi pulled back his lips, baring a mouthful of sharp teeth. His voice was sharp as a razor's edge. "And for my family."

The last quarterfinal match of the Third Trial took place that afternoon.

Aoyama Chuunin Exam Stadium was absolutely packed from top to bottom—standing room only. An extraordinary, pregnant tension ran through the gathered crowds—a palpably electric current. Even down in the genin section they could feel it: genin shifting from foot to foot, pushing their way towards the arena edge, boasting in voices that were too loud. Sakura had not quite felt anything like it.

She knew why. The Third Trial of the 54th Iwa Chuunin Exam was the greatest spectacle in the world; and now its greatest act was about to appear.

The anticipation was not for the cloud-nin Kirazu Raiki, alas. He had automatically advanced to the semifinals. Both of Raiki's possible opponents had already been eliminated, killing each other in a gruesome end of blood, guts, and sacrifice. When the time came for his match to be fought, Raiki instead kneeled down on both eyes in the middle of the arena for a moment of silence. He was not a religious man, Sakura suspected—if anything, it was the exact opposite—but the cloud-nin kneeled nonetheless, and bowed his head, and prayed. *Jouda is dead.* The little pygmy had sacrificed himself to take down the demented sadist Makera. She would not forget.

Instead, there was only one match that remained to be fought in the quarterfinals.

The loudspeaker blared the names of the fighters. "LADIES AND GENTLEMEN… I PRESENT TO YOU… THE EXTRAORDINARY PRODIGY OF HIS FAMED CLAN… THE VANQUISHER OF RAIN… THE CLAWING WHIRLWIND… GIVE IT UP FOR… HYUUGA NEJI OF KONOHA!"

A great roar went up from the audience as Neji entered the arena. Neji had become a great crowd favorite after his fight against Aumono.

"… VERSUS…"

An even greater roar.

"OUR VERY OWN… THE ONE AND ONLY… THE MASTER OF FIRE AND ICE… THE CHILD OF SUN AND SHADOW… GIVE IT UP FOR… THE PRINCE OF DAWN HIMSELF… SOUGON SOSANO OF IWA!"

Absolute pandemonium.

Sosano emerged all in gray, his kimono robes shorn of all decoration besides the golden Sougon clan crest stitched on its back. It did not matter. A surge of applause bedecked him like some kind of religious prophet, or perhaps even God himself. The adulation was breathtaking. Wave after wave of cheers—the stone-nins rooting for their young hero, the fangirls screaming for their handsome prince, and everyone generally shouting in anticipation of the coming battle.

Who would not be excited? This was the most awaited fight of the entire Third Trial, with the single exception of one—the match in the next semifinal that also involved Sosano. A duel between United Countries versus the Confederacy. Konoha versus Iwa. The prodigy of the Hyuuga clan versus the scion of the Sougon. The Byakugan versus the Enshogan.
"Who do you think will win?" asked Temari.

"I don't know."

Sakura would fight whoever was the victor of this battle. For the first time, she ventured no prediction as to who it would be. Aumono was one of the strongest genin in the chuunin exam, yet Neji had thoroughly dominated him in the second round. *Sosano is the strongest genin in the world.*

The two young shinobi stared at each other across the stone arena.

Sosano was smirking. "Hyouga Neji. I see you."

"Me too." Neji stared at him with his white eyes, the bulging veins of an activated Byakugan. "I see right through you, Sougon… to the shadow of your father behind your every smile."

"You wound me, sir. I fight for myself."

The chuunin examiner Sougon Charasu stepped to the center of the arena. "Begin!"

And so it did.

Sosano opened with taijutsu, unsheathing his katana to use Fire and Ice. Neji did likewise—crouching in the stance of the Gentle Fist fighting style. The two ran at each other in a storm of chakra and burning heat. The force of their blows caused shockwaves through the stadium.

"Evenly matched!" exclaimed the Sarutobi twins.

It was true. Neither seemed faster than the other, nor stronger. And both had the same fighting style—taijutsu enhanced by their unique eye powers. *It will come down to who has the strongest doujutsu.* Sosano had Bakudan, the explosive onslaught famed the world over as the "Absolute Attack"… but Neji had Kaiten, the equally famous "Absolute Defense."

"Clawing Kaiten!" shouted Neji as he went into a whirlwind spin, chakra claws tearing up everything around him.

Sosano fell back before the aggressive assault, using his Enshogan to chill the air between them, slowing Neji's movement. His Enshogan eyes were burning gold. "Blast Wave!"

An enormous wave of rippling heat billowed outwards from Sosano's body. In an instant the entire arena was afire, the Blast Wave stopped only by the chakra barrier around the walls. No living thing could survive the intense Blast Wave shockwave… except someone with the power to generate an unbreakable shield at any time.

Neji emerged from the fiery inferno with not even a stain on his spotless white robes.

The crowd cheered loudly.

"A flashy attack," said Neji, "but pointless. Like you, I think. All flash and no substance."

"Are you sure about that?"

Sakura realized that the Blast Wave was not going away. *It's lingering in the air.* Sosano could not
repeatedly create a full scale Blast Wave without running out of chakra, of course, but he could use his Enshogan to maintain a constant level of heat in a wide area. *He's gradually raising the temperature of the entire arena.*

"What's he doing?" asked the dust-nin Ashuju Ryua.

Bakura Orajuchi answered. "He's trying to cook Hyuuga Neji alive. Hyuuga cannot keep up Kaiten forever… as soon as he stops spinning he'll be done for."

As Sakura watched, the air in the area began to ripple with heat, then smoke, and finally began to steam, as the water vapor in the air began to boil. It had to be over eighty degrees in the arena… ninety… a hundred.

"How should Neji counter?" asked Sarutobi Hiraru.

"Go underground," said Sakura. "There's nowhere else for him to hide. But Sosano knows that, too —"

Sosano attacked. With a single slice of his katana he cut Neji in two from head to toe. Yet, as Sakura had anticipated, the bisected Neji only proved to be a mud clone, melting into steaming dirt. The real Neji was hiding deep below the surface. More mud clones rose from the stone arena floor, surrounding Sosano.

"Bakudan!" said Sosano.

Neji clones exploded one after the other, like a chain of firecrackers. The crowd roared at the pyrotechnic display. Sosano then turned his Enshogan eyes to the arena floor itself. A muffled explosion came from deep beneath, shaking the ground. Sosano was using Bakudan to try to smoke Neji out. Even far below the surface, he could still see the heat of Neji's body.

*And Neji can see him, too.*

A beam of white light lanced out of the ground. Sosano stepped deftly to the side just before the searing beam of chakra immolated his spine. More beams followed upon the first, forcing Sosano to dodge. He continued to use Enshogan explosions to pressure Neji, but Neji's Vacuum Palm jutsu matched his Bakudan blow for blow. The stone floor of the arena was quickly developing more holes than a cheese grater.

"I have you!" said Sosano suddenly, plunging his white-hot sword down into the ground…

… only for the point of the katana to be turned aside by the shell of a large red tortoise.

The tortoise burst out of the ground with a roar and a gout of burning flame that gushed from its throat. Sosano took the ball of fire right in the face, engulfing the entire north wall of the arena. "Sosa!" Sakura almost shouted, running to the edge of the arena. The name was still on her lips when the ball of fire froze into solid ice. The ice fell to the stone floor and shattered in a thousand glittering fragments. Sosano emerged from the wreckage unscathed.

A deafening cheer from the audience.

"A taste of my own medicine?" asked Sosano in an amused voice.

"No," said Hyuuga Neji. He stood on the back of the great red tortoise, white eyes cold and blank. "A demonstration of the power of the Byakugan. Ningame, now!"
The summoned tortoise spit out another oversized fireball. Sosano turned that one into ice, as well, but Ningame did not stop. He tossed flames around the arena indiscriminately—faster than Sosano could put them out. Soon Sakura could not see either Neji or Ningame amid the wall of roaring flames.

"What's he doing?" asked the dust-nin Ryua. "You can't attack a Sougon with fire."

Orajuchi shook his head. "Hyuuga's not attacking. He's defending."

Sakura knew the bat-boy was right. *Sosano is blind.* An activated Enshogan could see heat, a huge advantage against any living target… unless there were other, stronger heat sources in the way. The fire was like an opaque wall, blocking Sosano's line of sight in all directions. *He can't see Neji, but Neji can see him.* There was nothing that could stop the piercing sight of the Byakugan, not even solid objects.

A barrage of Vacuum Palm beams sliced through the flames, targeting Sosano's vital organs with deadly accuracy. "Earth Release: Diamond Wall!" shouted Sosano. Walls of diamond-hard earth sprung around him, gleaming like a thousand incandescent mirrors. The Vacuum Palms bounced off the Diamond Wall and flew up into the sky. In the next moment Sosano struck back, lashing out blindly. Sinister Spikes, Earthquake, Fangs of Wrath, a onslaught of destructive jutsu, turning the arena into smoldering ruins. Yet still he could not hit Neji. A kunai charged with earth chakra whistled into Sosano's Diamond Wall and blew a gaping hole in it, followed by more Vacuum Palms.

The crowd cheered.

The fight was turning into an all-out brawl. Everything the paying audience could have hoped for. Two shinobi prodigies attacking each other with everything they had—no holding back. "Blast Wave!" Sosano screamed. The Blast Wave erupted outward in all directions, destroying his own Diamond Wall and devouring Neji's fireballs. Clearing the arena at last.

Neji was above Sosano, striking from the sky. "Guardian Lattice!" he shouted. An intricate net of thin chakra blades swarmed around him, rebuffing the Blast Wave and plunging down to attack Sosano. Using his palms to control the Guardian Lattice with precision accuracy, Neji swept the net of deadly chakra down at the stone-nin, too fast for Sosano to dodge in time.

Sosano's Enshogan burned brighter than Sakura had ever seen before. "Absolute Zero!"

Absolute Zero was Sougon Shirasu's signature jutsu. An upgrade of Kinetic Transfer, creating a wall of zero kinetic energy in a given location—an impassable dead zone upon which anything that entered was instantly frozen. Sosano's version was not quite as impressive as his late uncle's, but it was still enough to stop Neji's Guardian Lattice from slicing him into a thousand bloody pieces. Neji used his control over Guardian Lattice to rebound off the Absolute Zero wall and roll into a fighting stance on the other side of Aoyama Stadium.

There was a pregnant silence as the two shinobi faced each other across the arena.

Just like at the beginning of the fight; only this time it was obviously the end. Both Neji and Sosano had run out of chakra. *The fight will be decided in the next exchange.*

And it was.

"CLAWING KAITEN!" shouted Neji.

"FIRE AND ICE!" shouted Sosano.
The two ninjas collided in the very center of the arena. Neji's chakra claws like a brutal whirlwind, Sosano's katana with its great billowing curtains of flame and ice. For an impossibly long moment the two attacks were evenly matched, neither giving way to the other…

… and then the Clawing Kaiten dissipated slightly.

A tiny little crack in the Kaiten shield, but it was just enough. Sosano thrust his sword through the opening and brought the edge to Neji's throat.

The battle was over.

"Well done," said Sosano.

"Likewise," replied Neji.

The chuunin examiner Sougon Charasu came running over. "The winner of the final quarterfinal match… is Sougon Sosano of Iwa!"

The crowd roared. Jumping on their feet, a standing ovation. Applause thundered down over Aoyama Stadium. Sosano sheathed his sword and deactivated his Enshogan so as to bow to the onlookers, which only made them cheer the louder. Sakura realized that she had been holding her breath. When she looked up at the VIP box, she saw that all the kages were on their feet as well. Anayama Chiyo's wrinkled face was flushed with excitement. Terumi Mei, the Fifth Mizukage, crossed her arms and smiled wryly. Sougon Sawar stared at his son; a look of triumph flashing across his dark slitted eyes. And the Hokage turned away to whisper into the ear of Hyuuga Hiashi, her lips curled in frozen irritation.

Sosano had won, though neither fighter had so much as a bloody scratch. A hundred death jutsu, and both of them look as if they had just woken up out of bed. The utter lack of injury demonstrated just what an extraordinary fight it had been. They had been so closely matched that neither could hurt the other, and in the end it had come down to a single blow. A battle worthy of the Third Trial of the greatest chuunin exam in history.

And now there were only four.

Sougon Sosano grinned wickedly as he strolled back into the genin section. "Congratulations, Sosa," she said.

"I won… just like I told you." The stone-nin boy grinned wickedly. "Sakura, my love. You're next."
"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN… THIS… IS …IT!"

The roar was deafening.

"THE SEMIFINALS… OF THE GREATEST CHUUNIN EXAM IN HISTORY… HAVE BEGUN!"

Sakura and Sosano stepped into the arena from opposite gates. He was wearing a bold, cocky smile on his face, his right hand resting lightly on the hilt of his katana. Sakura swallowed, all nervous energy, though she was not sure why. Perhaps it was the announcer’s increasingly grandiloquent pronouncements. This fight is what the crowd has come to see. It’s what they’ve been waiting for all this time. The United Countries against the Confederacy. Tsunade’s champion against Sawar’s. Lover against lover.

She was sorry to disappoint them.

"Begin!" shouted Sougon Charasu.

Both ninjas made their moves without hesitation.

Sosano drew his sword and attacked in a spinning splash, Enshogan eyes burning. "Fire and Ice!"

At the same time, Sakura bit her thumb to draw blood and pressed her palm to the ground.

"Summoning Technique!"

A giant white slug appeared between them in a puff of smoke. Katsuyu, the Queen of the Scar. "Katsuyu, now!" called Sakura.

The giant slug knew exactly what to do, since Sakura had told her beforehand. Katsuyu split immediately into dozens of small slugs, each of them spitting acid at Sosano. This was the one offensive attack in Sakura's arsenal that could not be easily countered by Sosano's Kinetic Transfer.
jutsu. Sosano dodged around the acid attacks, his Fire and Ice taijutsu a blur of blazing speed. Curtains of heat and cold whirled around him like a storm, slashing through Katsuyu's little slug bodies, making a clear path through the middle of the arena. He meant to ignore Katsuyu and go right for Sakura.

Sakura ran away.

Sosano followed her as if she were a homing beacon. She ran around the edge of the arena, weaving between Katsuyu's many dividing bodies. The slugs tried to slow Sosano down, getting in his way and spitting acid at him. Where the acid missed, it sizzled loudly against the stone floor, eating away at the arena itself. But none of it managed to touch him. Soon enough he was gaining on her, using Fire and Ice to corral her towards the main arena gate, where the VIP section was.

Sakura was backed up against a wall. In an eyeblink Sosano had closed the distance, and then he placed his glowing sword against her neck.

"I concede," said Sakura.

There was a stunned silence. As the audience realized the fight was over, they began to boo.

It had not even lasted thirty seconds.

Sosano sheathed his sword as Sougon Charasu came running over to call the fight. There was a wicked smile on his face. "Sakura. Are you all right?"

She shrugged. "Could be worse."

The loudspeaker boomed: "SOUGON SOSANO OF IWA… ADVANCES TO THE FINAL!"

The raucous crowd in Aoyama Stadium jeered at them even louder. Some drunken patrons in the first rows even started to throw trash into the arena. "That sucked!" one fat man in an expensive suit chanted, jumping up and down in his seat. "I want my money back!" Sosano smiled, and bowed at him.

Sakura paid the booing no mind. "Thanks, Katsuyu," she said, touching the head of the white-and-blue-slug. "I might need you again soon." The slug nodded, eyestalks waving, then unsummoned herself in a puff of smoke.

She looked toward the VIP section, at all the great lords arrayed in their finest splendor. Sougon Sawar the Sun Breaker had a scowl on his face; but Senju Tsunade only stared. For an instant their eyes met. Then the Hokage nodded.

"What the hell was that?" Kankuro protested when they walked back to the genin section.

Yukari laughed. "That was called saving time."

"But you didn't even try. You only used one jutsu!"

Sakura said, "My best one, against the Enshogan."

"There was no reason to go all out," agreed Sosano. "I know Sakura's fighting style too well, and she mine. Most of our jutsu would have canceled each other out... and we both would have ended up with no chakra. It would have come down to the same thing, in the end. My Fire and Ice taijutsu versus her Katsuyu summon. And you saw the result."
"But Sakura didn't open any Chakra Gates," said Kankuro.

*I know.* "The Chakra Gates are a dangerous kinjutsu," said Sakura, "why would I use them during a showmatch? The chuunin exam judges will understand."

"But not the paying audience!" The sand-nin boy threw up his hands. "To think, I got out of bed for this! I've could've been tinkering with improvements to Sanshouo…"

"Tinkering with Tonton, you mean," teased Sakura. "You spend so much time with my pig you smell like a barn."

"I admit, I am fond of Tonton. Maybe I'll turn her into my next puppet."

They all had a good chuckle at that. Sakura and Sosano laughed along with the rest, making idle conversation. Yet, as soon as the others had drifted away, Sosano turned on her with an accusing glare.

His voice was strained.

"You held back during our fight on purpose," said the stone-nin boy. "You didn't want to tip your hand."

She did not deny it. "Neither did you."

"Do you mean to fight me, Sakura? For real?"

"That depends." The tension between them was so thick she could cut it with a knife. Sakura wanted to go to him, to hold him, to let him kiss her on the lips and whisper sweet nothings in her ear. But if she did, would Sosano slip a kunai across her throat? "Are you with the United Countries… or with your father?"

He did not answer for a long moment. "I don't know."

*That is what he believes,* she knew. Sosano had not yet made his final decision. It was as if his mind was balanced on a knife's edge of conflicting loyalties. To help her would be to betray his father; and vice versa. He had not yet made up his mind. *That is what Sosa tells himself.*

But was it the truth?

"Sosano is crumbling under the pressure," she reported to the Fifth Hokage later.

"Yes."

"He—he thinks everything rests on him. The whole conflict between the UC and the Confederacy… between you and the Tsuchikage. The weight of the world. He thinks he has the power to decide the outcome."

"The boy is not wrong." The Hokage steepled her fingers, leaning back in her leather office chair. "Sosano has more than enough influence to overthrow his father. If he breaks with the Tsuchikage, most of Iwa will follow him. Doi Dragonsight and his peace faction, certainly. But also the common people. They love their dashing Prince of Dawn—as they loved his mother, Seurin Shadowstar, and as they never loved his father. Sougon Sawar knows this as well as I do. Yet he has no choice but to trust his son. If Sosano remains loyal, the Confederacy shall hold. The boy is the tinder that shall spark the flame."
"Open battle."

"The time has finally come. ROOT is banished, Akatsuki exposed, the Annihilation Device operational. All the pieces of the chessboard are in place. There is no reason for us to wait any longer. As for Sawar the Sun Breaker… he was always waiting for only one thing."

*Your assassination*, thought Sakura.

"Sosa thinks he knows where your real body is."

The Hokage paused. "He might."

"But… if you know that he knows—"

"—I can do nothing. Not now. The boy is too clever by half. If I tried to alter my plans, he would surely sniff me out, ruin all. Fate goes as fate must. Either Sougon Sosano truly knows where my body is, or he doesn't. Either he'll choose to kill me, or he won't. I do not know. If I meet my death by his hand… then perhaps I have already lived too long. And perhaps it is fate that it is Seurin's son who does the deed."

Sakura left the Hokage's office deeply troubled.

*Tsunade-sensei thinks she is going to die.* Or at least she was not feeling especially confident about her chances. Sakura had not thought that the Hokage would be so vulnerable. Senju Tsunade had not lived through three world wars by being easy to kill. Even in Iwa, her Advanced Transformation Jutsu allowed her to disguise herself as any person in the entire village. There were literally tens of thousands of possible suspects. Could Sosano really have discovered the Hokage's true hiding place?

*Sakura had tried to figure out the secret herself, after all. She'd failed. ANBU ROOT had failed as well. There was no doubt that Tsunade was somewhere in Iwa. The endless succession of mud clones she made and controlled proved that. Yet Tsunade had left few other clues. If I were her, I'd transform into a stray cat roaming the rice paddies of Onden, and nobody would ever be able to find me.*

She wondered if ROOT's theory could be true. Morino Ibiki had theorized to Sosano that Tsunade had planted herself somewhere else entirely: not on the outskirts of the village, but in Sougon Castle itself. There were certain obvious advantages to doing so. By infiltrating Sougon Castle, Tsunade would be uniquely positioned to spy on the plans of the Sun Breaker, including crucial intelligence on the Annihilation Device.

But there was also a clear danger. By hiding in Sougon Castle, Tsunade was putting herself in close proximity to the Sougon clan—the very people who were trying to assassinate her. One wrong move, one unlucky mistake, and she could be killed.

Could that be why the Hokage was worried Sosano might find her? The thought send a chill down Sakura's spine. Sosano knew his own family far better than Sakura did. If Tsunade had truly impersonated someone in the Sougon clan… Sakura would never be able to detect the subtle differences that would give Tsunade's disguise away. *But he would.*

Another piece of evidence seemed to argue in favor of this theory. That was the matter of the Enshogan eye. Somehow, ANBU ROOT had obtained a mysterious Enshogan eye in a glass box. Where had it come from? As far as Sakura knew, nobody in the Sougon clan had lost an eye recently. But if Tsunade had somehow abducted and impersonated a member of the Sougon clan…
well, nobody would even suspect the eye had been stolen. Her Advanced Transformation Jutsu would conceal all.

Who had Tsunade impersonated? Surely not the Tsuchikage, or Sosano. Any high-level shinobi was an unlikely target for the kind of silent abduction that would be required. Yet the target had to be strong enough to have at least awakened his Enshogan eye. There were dozens of members of the Sougon clan. Who was the perfect target? Sakura did not know enough about the inner working of the Sougon clan to reach a determination.

Unless…

She was still puzzling over the mystery when she returned to the Zoo.

Kankuro, surprisingly, was not in their small dormitory room overlooking the main courtyard. Instead she found Temari, her pet pig Tonton…

… and one unexpected guest.

"This is Kozumi Saotome," introduced Temari, grinning. "You remember him?"

"Ah, well met!" The glacier-nin bowed to Sakura vigorously, though he declined to shake her hand. "You mustn't think me rude, my dear. It's just that human hands are awfully nasty. All that sweat, and bacteria… well, to be perfectly frank, I don't understand why everyone doesn't wash their hands ten times a day like I do. Aunt Youko always says, cleanliness is the first virtue of a proper civilization."

"Your Aunt Youko is wise," replied Sakura with her most charming smile. "I wash my pig every chance I get."

Tonton squealed pleasantly from the corner, waddling across the stone floor to rub against Sakura's legs. Sakura laughed and picked the pig up in her arms, hugging Tonton's fat pink bulk tightly to her chest. *Tonton really could use a wash*. Lately their room was starting to smell rather more pig like than like monkey. For his part Kozumi Saotome stepped back, wrinkling his nose. The entrance of Tonton was his cue to leave, it seemed. He bowed and left after exchanging several more pleasantries with the two kunoichi.

The door closed behind him.

Sakura looked at Temari and raised one eyebrow.

"The Glacier Country is joining the United Countries," Temari explained. "In no small part due to the efforts of Saotome to sway his Aunt Youko to our side."

"I thought Saotome was a pacifist."

"Exactly. And the United Countries is the last, best, hope for peace on earth, you see. It is a perfect fit."

"I think he has a crush on you, Temari."

The sand-nin girl laughed out loud, giggling together with Sakura. Her bright teal eyes were full of mirth… and sadness. *Shikamaru*, Sakura knew. Temari had not forgotten him, nor put Shikamaru out of her heart. Sakura did not mention the subject again. Instead, she moved the topic of their conversation onto the chuunin exam. Wishing Temari the best of luck in her battle tomorrow against the cloud-nin Kirazu Raiki.
"Thank you." Her eyes gleamed. "You did well today, Sakura. You were right not to fight Sougon Sosano with your full strength."

"Half the audience tried to return their tickets for a refund, I heard."

"And did not get it. Sougon Sawar would rather turn his firstborn into a suicidal psychopath than break a lawful contract. Come to think of it, that's exactly what he did."

Sakura did not want to argue with her friend. "I was just being… careful."

"Careful, yes. That's one way to describe your actions today. I might call them delay. Delay is a valid strategy… but only up to a point. The gathering storm descends upon us. The real fight is yet to come… and when it does, I pray, you remember well the words of my sensei."

"Baki-sama?"

Sabaku Temari only stared at her. "I told you before, Sakura. Blood is the seal of our devotion… and our sacrifice. All shinobi must bleed. And so shall you."
"WIND RELEASE: GREAT WIND SCYTHE!"

"LIGHTNING RELEASE: BLACK LIGHTNING!"

The second semifinal match started with a bang.

The fierce barrage of clashing elements crashed together in the center of the arena. Mass devastation jutsu both, but evenly matched. Black lightning and swirling white wind raged around the arena walls, shaking Aoyama Chuunin Exam Stadium to its foundations.

"Not bad," said Kirazu Raiki.

"I'm just get started," Temari replied.

She wasn't lying. Unlike every other match in the Third Trial thus far, both Raiki and Temari relied on highly visible, highly destructive elemental jutsu as the key component of their fighting styles. Wind versus lightning, pressure versus magnetism. The clash of elements made for an exciting pyrotechnic display—bringing the rowdy stadium crowd to their feet, cheering for their favorites.

Most of the cheers seemed to be for Raiki. Or at least his fans were the loudest—the same set of teenage girls so enamored with Sosano. They jumped and down along the sidelines, holding up giant fan posters of Raiki and shrieking his name. Raiki acknowledged the adoration with a magnanimous smile, flashing his black painted teeth—the latest fashion in the Lightning Country. The beautiful albino cloud-nin wore barely any clothes at all. Translucent robes of white silk exposed a lithe, graceful body glamorous enough to set any girl's heart aflutter. Blood-red eyes glittered beneath flowing locks of hair pale as snow.

Kankuro elbowed Kazuno, Raiki's teammate and homosexual lover. "Hey, don't they know he's taken?"

The stiff, dignified cloud-nin sighed. "Please do not tell them. Or they will come after me next."

Raiki and Temari continued to throw destructive elemental jutsu at each other. Great Wind Scythe,
Vortex, Wind Cutter, Sonic Pulse. Black Lightning, Air Static Charge, Electromagnetic Murder, Rail Gun. And more, one after the other, chained together, an onslaught of multicolor death powerful enough to annihilate an entire enemy army. Within minutes they'd destroyed the entire arena. The stone floor was a smoldering ruin, the walls crumbling into rubble, the air dusty with vaporized rock. Only the Chakra Barrier around the arena had prevented the entire stadium from being engulfed in the wreckage.

Raiki was breathing hard. "Wow. I'm kind of exhausted."

Temari shrugged. "Let's take a break."

Neither of them seemed much the worse for wear. *They're too evenly matched*, Sakura thought, just like Sosano and Neji. Both were complete fighters, skilled in both ninjutsu and taijutsu. Both preferred to fight from range but could also brawl up close, if needed. Both had the same strengths and weaknesses. It wasn't anything like Temari's last match against Saotome.

"Okay," laughed Raiki.

The cloud-nin's body began to glow with electromagnetic power. That was his bloodline, *Human Battery*—one of the most powerful bloodlines in the world. Bolts of electricity flashed through, over, and into the boy's slender body. The overall effect was like looking at a continuous slide show of X-ray photographs—Raiki's bones showing through his pale white skin.

Raiki pulled out several copper shuriken threaded with wire. The he flung them at Temari. "Human Battery: Magnetic Charge!"

The shuriken flew past Temari and stuck harmlessly into the far wall.

"He missed?"

"You missed," said Temari.

Raiki licked his lips. "Ah, I meant to magnetize them to your body. So… you treated your War Fan and all your equipment with a non-magnetic coating, neh? Clever."

"I saw what you did to poor Makoto Mazu."

"Unfortunately for you… the human brain itself generates a weak magnetic field. All I have to do is increase my Magnetic Charge, and my weapons will still be able to lock onto you."

The sand-nin smiled sweetly. "Why don't you try it?"

"I never could deny a woman anything."

Raiki's fingers curled around one of the copper chakrams at his waist. The circular, bladed chakram crackled with electrical energy—infused with lightning chakra-flow. Then he threw it directly at Temari's head. The copper chakram screamed through the air with incredible speed. Temari dodged to the side…

…and the magnetized copper chakram followed, spinning in an arc through the air. No matter where Temari went, the chakram chased her like she was a homing beacon. Raiki produced more lightning-charged copper shuriken and threw them at Temari also. Even when she struck them down with her War Fan, the spinning weapons just bounced right back up, inescapably attracted to the magnetic fields generated by Temari's body.
"Wind Release: Vortex!"

Miniature tornadoes appeared around Temari. Each tornado was a mobile vortex of spinning air pressure, which she maneuvered into the path of Raiki's onrushing copper weapons. A large Vortex caught the flying chakram, smaller vortexes caught the flying shuriken. Lightning screamed and churned in the middle of the spinning vortexes.

"Oh, very good." Kirazu Raiki's red eyes radiated with threat, his breathy lisp charged with mock derision. "But how long can you keep that up for, neh?"

The cloud-nin boy dug out yet another fistful of shuriken to throw at Temari. But Temari did not intend to let Raiki continue his assault without repercussion. She threw a dozen wind chakra-flow shuriken at Raiki herself. First Raiki tried to repel the shuriken with his own Human Battery electromagnetic field; as all the shuriken were coated in non-magnetic film, this effort failed miserably. Then he dodged to the side…

… and the shuriken followed him.

On the sidelines, the cloud-nin Fukunaga Kazuno frowned. "How is Temari-kun doing that? She has no ability to manipulate metal."

"No," said Sakura, "but she can manipulate air. There's a small, mini-Vortex around each of her shuriken, do you see it? She's using the Vortexes to propel the shuriken in any direction that she wants."

Now it was Raiki who was the one running around the arena in panicked desperation. "Okay, I didn't see that one coming!" complained the boy as he dodged or parried a cloud of chasing shuriken. Charging up his Human Battery bloodline, he blasted several of them out the sky with a lightning bolt, ripping the metal weaponry into smithereens.

"Didn't your mother tell you?" laughed Temari. "What comes around goes around." Sakura could see that the sand-nin girl was at her limit, however. Controlling even one Vortex, a jutsu which required precise wind manipulation, was challenging enough. Controlling so many different Vortexes at once was simply insane.

Raiki ended the shuriken stalemate by rushing Temari directly. "Human Battery: Magnetic Disruption!" he shouted. A charge of electromagnetic energy built up inside his body and then exploded outward. The concentrated pulse of blistering energy disrupted the electrochemical bonds of everything around him, destroying their molecular cohesion. Both Raiki and Temari's shuriken vaporized, leaving behind only puddles of smoking goo. There was a deafening explosion, and amid the smoke a jarring clash of weaponry—Raiki's twin Copper Chakrams against Temari's Giant War Fan.

The stadium audience roared in excitement, applauding the tension and drama of the high-level fight. Tens of thousands of shouting voices, looking for blood. It was a good finish to the semifinals of the Third Trial.

"That's a tough little fan," said Raiki. "It even absorbed my Magnetic Disruption jutsu."

"I'm disappointed, Raiki. Your bloodline is quite overrated."

"Ah… your mistake. Lightning makes no sound until it strikes."

Suddenly Raiki raised his hands and bombarded Temari with a storm of lightning. Sakura gripped the edges of the railing in astonishment. His Human Battery bloodline! She had never seen anything
like it. Raiki was generating a colossal amount of lightning chakra from inside his body. It seemed to be nearly infinite. More power than a dozen electrical turbines—more power than used by an entire city. And he was directing all of that energy right at Temari.

"Agh!"

Temari fell back behind her Giant War Fan. She tried to use the unfolded metal fan as a shield against Raiki's attack, perhaps hoping to weather the storm, but found herself trapped instead. The sheer power of Raiki's bombardment pushed Temari backwards to the edge of the arena, crushing her against the stone wall in a barrage of roaring lightning. She was caught off guard by Raiki's sudden attack. Unlike a typical elemental jutsu, which ended after a few seconds, the electrical assault went on and on, replenished by Raiki's bloodline. Lightning blasted against her Giant War Fan and twisted around the edges, burning Temari's skin, scorching the exposed parts of her body. The Giant War Fan began to smoke, then warp in shape, then melt...

"Sister!" shouted Kankuro.

"Feel the power of my Living Battery!" shrieked Raiki. "No holding back!" The boy's entire body glowed so brightly that it was hard even to look at him. Electricity exploded continuously from his fingertips, shooting across the arena to rip ruthlessly into Temari's Giant War Fan. The worst thing was that the fan could block most of the lightning, but not all of it. Temari shrieked in pain as electrical burns spiderwebbed across her arms and legs and face. The sand-nin girl was helpless before the staggering assault. She could do nothing except crouch behind her quickly disintegrating metal fan. She could not run, she could not use another jutsu—

Raiki screamed in ecstatic triumph, drawing on all his power. The blinding current between them had grown to the size of a crackling, elephant, dwarfing the two combatants—

Temari's Giant War Fan shattered.

Lightning exploded through Temari's body and into the wall behind her. An explosion of blue-white energy blew out nearly a quarter of the already destroyed arena, dust and current and steaming, vaporized rock surging outward from the point of attack. There was a shrieking roar as the arena wall crumbled and collapsed.

"Temari!" Kankuro screamed, almost vaulting over the edge of the arena to run to his sister's side. Sakura held him back.

It took a moment for all the dust and energy to settle. When it did, the sight they beheld was gruesome indeed. Temari was in bad shape. The sand-nin girl lay crumpled and limp against the blasted arena wall, curled up into a ball, her hands folded around her stomach. Her nylon uniform was torn into rags, melted and slagged and blasted apart, exposing the mesh underneath. Her exposed skin was covered in nasty stripes of third-degree burns, the clear white skin on her face a bruise of welts and seared flesh—her straw-blond hair smoking and undone. Even Temari's metal forehead protector was a piece of melted slag—the hourglass symbol of Suna an unreadable mess. Her eyes were closed, and she did not move.

The fight's over, Sakura thought with a sickening feeling. Temari lost.

Evidently Kirazu Raiki thought the same thing. The albino cloud-nin staggered forward toward his fallen opponent. He sucked in deep, desperate breaths, obviously at the limit of his stamina. He must have expended nearly all of his chakra on that one attack. He was so exhausted that the electrical bolts which naturally shot through his body were faded; the light barely bright enough to pierce through his pale, albino skin. The Human Battery is finally drained.
"Shit," he said in a hoarse voice. "I might have overdone that. Shouldn't have used so much chakra."

A movement.

It was Temari. Somehow, even lying broken and crumpled against the wall, she was still conscious, still fighting. Temari's dark eyes glinted as she raised her head to face the victorious cloud-nin boy. "You should have… finished it when you had the chance."

The boy laughed, not believing, confident in his triumph. Then Temari unfolded her arms, and he saw what was hidden beneath there. All the crowd saw it.

Sakura gasped.

Her right arm…

… was a puppet arm.

Raiki tried to step back, but it was too late.

"Puppet Implant Secret Technique: Red Rock Barrage!"

A fusillade of red shrapnel came blasting out of the palm and the sides of Temari's puppet arm. The shrapnel was made of bits of stone—the famous rusted red sandstone of Red Rock Cliff—and specially infused with deadly wind chakra-flow, sharpening each side of the variously shaped and sized rocks to a razor's edge. Sakura had seen the technique once before. Baki, she thought. That's Baki's arm.

The Rock Rock Barrage slammed into Kirazu Raiki at point blank range and launched him clear across the arena to the far wall on the other side, just below the VIP section. The cloud-nin tumbled to the ground in a heap. Raiki was bleeding profusely from pretty much everywhere—the barrage of shrapnel had tore through his delicate skin and lodged themselves in his body. A large, sharp piece of shrapnel had impaled Raiki through the gut like a spear, and the rest of him was bruised and battered into a very unpleasant state.

"Fuck…" he moaned.

"Fuck me!" shouted Kankuro. "Did you know Temari replaced her arm with a puppet implant?"

Sakura shook her head. No, but… I understand why she did it. Baki was dead, assassinated in cold blood. Temari had cut off her own arm to honor the memory of her sensei. She was just the kind of person who would put her family before herself in that way. The hidden arm was certainly a dramatic flourish to unveil in the charged, cutthroat atmosphere of the Third Trial. Baki's famous Puppet Implants had made him one of the strongest jounin in Sunagakure. With such an upgrade to her own body, Temari had increased her fighting strength perhaps beyond even Raiki's. That was how she managed to weather Raiki's lightning attack in the first place. She used her puppet arm to make a Chakra Shield around her vital organs.

Next to her, Raiki's boyfriend Fukunaga Kazuno was shaking his head vigorously. "Oh, my. This is even less pleasant to watch than Jouda-kun's fight against Makera."

The viewing audience was positively up in arms. A number of Raiki's fans, his hardcore fanbase of teenage girls among them, shrieked at the damage done to their beautiful albino prince. The rest were just excited. The fight between Temari and Raiki was shaping up to be one of the best fights in the entire Third Trial… maybe even the best. More equal than Neji versus Aumono. More bloody than Sosano versus Neji. More entertaining than Makera versus Jouda.
Temari staggered to her feet. She looked terrible; blood dripped to the ground with every step she took. The false skin had been stripped from her right hand and forearm, showing the metal puppet plates underneath. With mechanical fingers she picked up the shattered remnants of her Giant War Fan. The biggest piece that survived was a jagged burned shard with a single purple eye in its center.

"So it's come to this," she said.

Raiki laughed. "It always does, neh?" The cloud-nin pulled out the piece of shrapnel stuck in his gut with a scream. Blood gushed from the wound, streaming down his torn silk robes. He stood up slowly; looking less like a beautiful boy than like a terminally ill hunchback. "You ruined my hair. And my fingernails. Look at what you've done!"

"You ruined my War Fan."

"It was in the way."

"Baki-sensei always said I relied on my weapon too much." Temari raised the metal shard of the fan in her hand. "I never knew how right he was until he was gone. Akasun Baki of Two Faces was one of the great shinobi of all time. And I swore a holy vow... never to bring shame onto my sensei's memory! Kirazu Raiki, genin of Kumogakure! Behold... my final jutsu!"

A giant gust of wind came billowing out from the metal shard, from Temari's hand. The wind screamed, whirled through the air, and then coalesced into a glittering chakra flow fan—a Giant War Fan made out of wind. Baki's jutsu, Sakura remembered. Temari had taken her sensei's signature technique and made it her own.

"WIND RELEASE: BLADE OF WIND!"

"You go, Temari!" shouted Kankuro, whooping. "Kick his albino ass!"

Raiki smiled. "That looks fearsome." He raised his twin Copper Chakrams, one in each hand, stretching them apart to left and right. The magnetized copper weapons started to crackle, to spark, and then between them exploded a raging current of Black Lightning, blinding just to look at. It was a deadly lash of flexible, numbing electricity. "Fortunately... I've got a final jutsu, too. LIGHTNING RELEASE: BLACK LIGHTNING WHIP!"

The crowd roared.

It was the final confrontation, the final climax. All knew it. The two semifinalists had nothing else left. All their chakra was expended, their badly injured bodies on the point of failure. The only thing left to do was to beat each other to a pulp.

They met in the center of the arena, genin against genin, Suna against Kumo, wind against lightning. It was a vicious, savage, almost primitive affair. Temari and Raiki hardly even tried to dodge at all. Temari swept her Blade of Wind in a circle, flinging slashes of stabbing air at the cloud-nin. Raiki lashed out with his Black Lightning Whip, burning electric current snaking this way and that. The two elemental jutsu reacted like fire and water, sizzling and seething against each other. Temari screamed in pain as Raiki wrapped his Black Lightning Whip around her chest, falling to her knees. In the next instant her Blade of Wind slammed Raiki in the head and sent him crashing through the air. On and on it went. It seemed less a contest of skill than a race to see which of them could inflict the most punishment. Sakura could not believe they were still standing. A dozen times she thought the fight was finished, but Temari and Raiki somehow always stumbled back to their feet again. It was like they were two avenging angels, beyond life and death.
But all things must come to an end.

"You won't give up, will you?" asked Kirazu Raiki. One of his eyes was swollen shut, several of his black painted teeth knocked out. He spat out the teeth in a puddle of blood and vomit. "How ironic. I never cared about the chuunin exam before. When Darui-sensei told us about Iwa… I thought it just a game, neh? Just a way to test my strength. But then Dee was raped. Then Jouda died. And I shall never… ever… forget their sacrifices. Sabaku Temari, hear me! I shall win the Third Trial in their name!"

Temari shifted into a final fighting stance. "For Baki-sensei. For Shikamaru. For my father." She charged. "And for all those who lost their lives in Red Rock Cliff!"

The two young ninjas ran at each for the last time. They collided in a furious storm—a single frozen moment of time, the entire viewing audience holding their collective breaths. Temari's Blade of Wind swirling with cutting force, Raiki's Black Lightning Whip crackling with electric power. They gave all they had. One final attack, one final duel, one final exchange…

… and Kirazu Raiki fell.

He fell to the ground, and did not move.

Temari stood alone, exhausted and bloody and burned and victorious. The countdown from ten gave her the official victory. For the first time she looked back at Sakura and Kankuro; then up at the VIP section, where the Hokage and Tsuchikage were watching. Her smile was radiant. It had been a dramatic end to an extraordinary fight.

The loudspeaker boomed: "SABAKU TEMARI OF SUNA… ADVANCES TO THE FINAL!"

Raiki lay on the ground where he'd fallen. "I lost."

"You did." Temari offered Raiki her hand. "And you fought bravely. Jouda and Dee would have been proud." Raiki took the offered hand, and Temari pulled him to his feet with a groan, letting Raiki lean on her shoulder. The crowd roared at the display of sportsmanship. Cheering, whooping, throwing flowers at their feet.

The celebration was quite a lengthy one.

First Kankuro mobbed the two fighters. Then Kazuno. Then the loveably odd glacier-nin, Kozumi Saotome. Then all the genin of the United Countries, and all the cloud-nins… and not a few other shinobi besides. The doctors and nurses had to fight through the jubilant, half-mad crowds just to reach Temari and Raiki and put them on stretchers.

Sougon Sosano stood aloof from it all.

Sakura went to him, laughing. "Grouchy, Sosa? Looks like Temari stole your thunder."

He did not respond to the joke—only drew her close, wrapping his strong arms around her. Kissing her lightly on the lips, running his firm, calloused hands down her back to the small of her waist. His voice was deadly soft.

"Sakura… will you walk with me tonight?"

"Of course."

"Will you run away with me?"
She frowned. "What?"

"Tonight. Let's run away. Away from Iwa… away from Konoha. To some place they can never find us again. There is a ship to Genoa which leaves from Far Harbor on the turn on the month. It is said that the mountain lakes of Genoa's Noroisen Forest are the most idyllic and peaceful in the world. There is no United Countries there… no Confederacy. No shinobi. Only the two of us. I'll start a little noodle shop like I always dreamed. You can be a village doctor, healing the sick, caring for the dying. Let's grow old together, Sakura. Run away with me… leave all this behind. And never come back."

Sakura did not know what to say. "You can't be serious."

"But if I was… would you say yes?"

"No."

She blurted out the truth without thinking. How odd—that was so unlike her. But in that moment all Haruno Sakura could remember was that it felt good. It was a mistake that would haunt her for every day of the rest of her life. Even then, Sakura knew. Even then, she knew she could never take her words back. Too much truth. Sosano's eyes were as dark as the night woods; his face cold as a winter frost.

"So be it." In her arms he seemed to tremble and shake. He looked past her, staring at something she could not see. "The Sagewood is beautiful tonight… the forest lit from above by the setting sun, by the full pale moon. The end of summer approaches at last. In the Cathedral of Faces, the granite ghosts of a lost world rise again to contemplate the path of fate. Long is the night to I who am awake. Will you walk with me, Sakura? One last time?"

"Yes."

He smiled.
The Third Trial: Finals

ROUND ONE =========== ROUND TWO =========== QUARTERFINAL ===========
SEMIFINAL =========== FINAL ===========

SAKURA vs. Shinren ... ... ... Kawai vs. SAKURA ... ... ... SAKURA vs. Jibachi ... ... ... ... ... Sakura vs. SOSANO ... ... ... Sosano vs. Temari
 ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... JIBACHI vs. Jun

SOSANO vs. Ryua ... ... ... Yukari vs. SOSANO ... ... ... SOSANO vs. Neji
 ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... NEJI vs. Aumono

 ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... Geigin vs. SAOTOME ... ... ... Saotome vs. TEMARI ... ... ... TEMARI vs. Raiki
 ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... TEMARI vs. Satetsu

 ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... RAIKI vs. Mazu ... ... ... ... ... ... Raiki vs. [N/A]
 ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... Makera vs. JOUDA

The attendance for the final match of the Third Trial of the 54th Iwa Chuunin Exam was terrible.

Temari had not exactly recovered from her all-out fight against Raiki the day before. Medical science was advanced indeed, in this day and age, but not enough to heal all of Temari's wounds in less than twenty-four hours. She was still heavily bandaged from her burns, and completely exhausted to boot. Her shattered Giant War Fan was also still in the process of being repaired by Kankuro.

Sougou Sosano, on the other hand, hadn't even been touched once in a single fight. Not against the dust-nin Ashuju Ryua, not against the mist-nin Touin Yukari, not against the leaf-nin Hyuuga Neji... and not against Sakura. Some of the strongest genin in the whole world, and he had come out completely victorious—completely unharmed—at the full height of his powers.

It was a foregone conclusion that Sosano would win.

Temari didn't even want to show up for the finals, in fact. "I'd rather go out the way I did, against Raiki, and not in some embarrassing and inept fashion against Sakura's psychotic boyfriend. Leave me be, I say."

It was the Fifth Hokage who had personally convinced Temari to attend. It was the Hokage's words that won the day after all of Sakura and Kankuro's arguments had failed—sophisticated entreaties about United Countries politics, and the fickle nature of mercenary contracts, and the honor of the Sabaku clan. The Hokage's pearls of wisdom were not nearly as complex.

"We must let them have their show," she said, and that was all.

It was an odd thing for the Hokage to say, Sakura thought. Especially on today, of all the days of the year. "Don't you know what today is?" Sakura asked Kankuro afterward.

"August 29th?"

"It's Peace Day."
Peace Day commemorated the end of the Third Ninja War. In Konoha, citizens marched in a parade to Uchiha Military Cemetery to pour libations of plum sake on the graves of their fallen dead. With the war still so fresh in people's memories, it was perhaps the most celebrated holiday of them all—more important even than Founder's Day. Sakura remembered kneeling with her father in front of the tombstone of a fallen comrade, the smoke billowing out of a pyre of incense until her eyes stung with the tears.

She remembered a slab of white marble on a mountain lake, as well. Peace Day was also the anniversary of the Battle of Deathtrap Mountain. *For the Last Battle of the Last War.*

It was the day that Seurin Shadowstar had died.

Kankuro rubbed his head sheepishly. "Oh, right, I forgot. When did the war end, twenty years ago?"

"Not twenty. Seventeen."

"Before we were born, anyway."

*But not before Tsunade-sensei was born.* The Third Ninja War was the defining event of the Hokage's life. During the course of the war she had first lost her little brother Nawaki, then she'd lost her fiancé Dan, and finally she'd killed her best friend, Seurin Shadowstar, after betraying her promise to fight with Seurin on the other side. The decisions she'd made then had altered not just her own life but the course of the entire Postwar Period, leading directly to the present crisis. For Senju Tsunade, Peace Day was a holiday fraught with meaning in every moment and ritual.

Sakura had expected to find her sensei in a melancholy mood.

She was not disappointed.

"Sakura," said the Hokage softly. "Two months ago, on Deathtrap Mountain, you made me a promise. Do you remember?"

"I remember."

*I promise that I'll never be like you. You called me a fool."

"And was I right or wrong?"

Sakura paused before answering. "I've changed," she admitted. "I'm not the girl I was. I... I'm stronger."

"Change is the essential process of all existence. You could not have conquered the trials of the chuunin exam without becoming stronger in the process. And as you have gotten stronger, so have you been tested in different ways. It is something that Seurin Shadowstar told me once, during the weeks leading up to the beginning of the Third Ninja War. She said, power corrupts, but not always. What power always does is reveal."

"Reveal what?"

"Reveal the truth of your own heart." The Hokage raised her head to stare at Sakura with hard eyes—eyes like vivid dark stones. "Answer me, girl. Did Sougon Sosano ask you to run away with him?"

Sakura frowned. "How did you know?"

"I know the boy's mind intimately."
You've barely ever talked to him, thought Sakura for a moment, confused. You don't know Sosa at all. But then she realized she was wrong. Tsunade had planted a secret chakra bug in Sakura's head from the beginning of the UC Embassy until the end of the Second Trial. She'd heard every conversation that Sakura had ever had with Sosano in that span of time. Tsunade-sensei was there when I had sex with Sosa for the first time.

Sakura shook her head. "I don't think Sosa meant it. He wouldn't really have run away. He—"

"He was testing you."

"Yes."

"And did you pass?"

"I am a kunoichi of Konoha."

"Ah, but that is the question, is it not? What do you want, Sakura? What are you fighting for?" The Hokage's voice was very soft. "Three times before you came to me, begging to be a ninja, and three times I asked you the question. And three times you lied. The first time, when I took you on as my apprentice, you said you wanted to get strong to protect the people you love. Then, after I took away your forehead protector, you said you wanted redemption—a chance to make up for what you'd done. The third time was on Deathtrap Mountain. You said you needed to be a ninja because you didn't want to be alone. You needed a home, a purpose, and there was no place else for you to go. Three times I asked you, and three times you lied."

Sakura swallowed. "I didn't lie."

"Oh, but you did."

You did, a dark voice echoed in her mind. Twice you lied, and twice more. Don't you get it? Don't you get it?

Sakura shook her head fiercely. "It's... it's not that simple. I want all of those things. They're all important." She groped for the right words. "And I want... I want to be strong because of the vows I've sworn. I'm not fighting for myself. Not even for Konoha—not blindly like ROOT, anyway. It's about what you said in your speech, Tsunade-sensei. The United Countries is the last, best hope for peace in our time. It's my duty as a shinobi to fight for a better world."

"Your duty? It is." Senju Tsunade shook her head. "But that is not enough."

"Enough for what?"

"I told you before. Only if you know the true desires in your own heart will you have the strength to endure... the strength to face Sougon Sosano."

"I am strong enough."

"No." The Hokage spoke in a voice that fell and trickled like drops of icy water. "And that is four times you lied."

Then it was time.

At last, the finale of the chuunin exam.

It was no accident that the final match of the 54th Iwa Chuunin Exam had been scheduled to take
place on Peace Day—the seventeenth anniversary of the end of the Third Ninja War. In more ways than one, the events of the Battle of Deathtrap Mountain had led directly to the present political crisis. The death of Seurin Shadowstar at Tsunade's hand. The capture but not destruction of the Annihilation Device. And the rise to power of Sougon Sawar the Sun Breaker.

The irony escaped no one, least of all the two finalists.

Sabaku Temari and Sougon Sosano walked into the stone arena of Aoyama Chuunin Exam Stadium to polite but sustained applause.

"I did not expect to fight you in the finals." Sosano bowed to his opponent. "Sabaku Temari, I congratulate you. You have gotten further than any oddsmaker would expect. It is an honor to match strength with such a fearless representative of the United Countries."

"Spare me your worthless words." Temari stood with a limp, much of her burned skin still wrapped in bandages. Her injuries from the duel with Raiki the day before had not yet fully healed. Even her Giant War Fan was a piecemeal patchwork of stitches and weldings, sewn together like a ragged old dress. "You can't sweet talk me, Sougon. Let's just get this over with."

"If you insist." Sosano's dark eyes gleamed. Then they became golden flames, bright as burning stars.

The chuunin examiner, Sougon Charasu, walked to his place between the two finalists. His arm was raised to signal the start of match; the final match of the Iwa Chuunin Exam. Charasu opened his mouth to shout the command.

"Begi—"

But Charasu never finished. Instead Sosano whipped his head to the side—

—and Sougon Charasu exploded.

BOOM!

Sakura was so shocked that for a moment she could not quite grasp what had happened. The entire stadium was in an uproar. People shouting, screaming, leaping from their seats, drawing weapons. All was utter chaos and confusion. Sakura tried to look for Sosano, to make sense of his astonishing attack on his own uncle, but there was only a golden haze that occupied the space where he had been. Sougon Charasu's body was sprawled on the ground—

No.

It was not Charasu's body.

It was the body of a woman.

That was when she knew.

She knew, and still Sakura felt herself shake her head in denial. Still she felt herself vault over the railings down into the arena, running toward the bloody corpse. The corpse that was not a mud clone, not an illusion of chakra, but a dead woman of blood and flesh. Still she heard herself shriek.

"Tsunade-sensei!"

No—it can't be—
"TSUNADE-SENSEI!"
"TSUNADE-SENSEI!"

Sakura couldn't believe her eyes. The Fifth Hokage lay sprawled in the center of the stone arena, her entire upper body exploded like a ripe melon, blood and guts everywhere. The transformation technique which had disguised her as Sougon Charasu was gone. Only the corpse of an old woman remained. No, she thought, no, this can't be her real body. It's just a mud clone, just like the last one. But it wasn't. It was not mud that came out of her sensei's body, but blood. Red blood that gushed over Sakura's kneeling form, thick hot blood that sprayed all over her arms and body and face.

She could not believe it, but she had no choice. The truth tore out of her breast in a wrenching, anguished sob, in a shuddering fit that shook her entire body, and in the hot desperate tears that ran down her bloody cheeks.

Senju Tsunade the Queen of Torment was dead.

Sosano had killed her.

Sakura looked up.

There he was, standing before her—not very far away at all, so close it almost seemed that she could reach out her fingers and touch the hem of his robes. There he was. The murderer of her sensei. The destroyer of the United Countries, the breaker of their trust. The right hand man of his father. The betrayer. The beautiful, tormented, impossibly vulnerable boy she loved.

"Sosano!" she shrieked.

"Sosano, you—you…"

"Sakura." His voice was so soft she could not hear it in the chaos. She could only read his lips: his beautiful lips, his handsome, elegant face. That look she knew she well… you knew, the look said. You always knew, you knew it was going to end this way. Three words only he said, three pregnant whispers. "Sakura. I'll be waiting."

Then he was gone.

Disappeared, slipping away in the confusion of bodies, of jutsu and screams and roaring chaos. Sakura could no longer see him. For the first time, wrenching her eyes away from the Hokage's corpse, she noticed all that had happened in the few seconds since the attack. The fighting had already started. Of course, it was planned. All coordinated, just like they'd feared—a wholesale preemptive assault on the United Countries. Squads of masked Iwa ANBU were swarming into the stadium. Crowds running for the exits, screaming. The United Countries and the Confederacy, fighting, dying. Death and destruction everywhere. She had a horrible flashback to the events of the Konoha Chuunin Exam, to December 7th. Another battle—another—

Tsunade-sensei had returned on December 7th to save the village.

But now she was dead.

And they were not in Konoha at all.

We're all going to die, just like the Sun Breaker said. The United Countries is finished.
"Sakura!" Rough hands were on her shoulders, shaking her. "Sakura, snap out of it!" She looked up through dazed tears at the girl accosting her. It was Temari. "Sakura! We have to move, now!"

Densuke Tosuken the Chameleon was there as well, appearing suddenly in a flash of thin air with his three students: Aumono, Erima, Tenshe. A stone-nin ANBU ran at their position, and he crushed the man's skull with his huge bare hand. "It's started," Tosuken said grimly.

One entire wall of Aoyama Chuunin Stadium had already collapsed, taking thousands of civilian lives with it down in the wreckage. It is just the beginning. Through the massive, ten-story smoking hole rode a fearsome sight: the stone-nin Chuzuru Kazan on a giant buzzing yellow wasp. The wasp was fighting with an equally large pink crane—Hyuuga Hiashi's summon. Over in the VIP section of the stadium, Sougon Sawar was at the center of a raging storm of fire and ice, the glittering white sword Masamune in his hand. The Tsuchikage pointed the tip of the sword at Sakura, his eyes glowing. The resulting Bakudan explosion would have completely blown Sakura into smithereens if Temari had not leaped away with her at the last moment. The explosion of gold and flame was so huge it consumed much of the arena floor—the Hokage's corpse disappearing entirely into the explosive heat. "Tsunade-sensei!" Sakura screamed.

"She's dead!" Temari slapped her—hard. The stinging rebuke sent Sakura's head spinning. "Tsunade's dead, your boyfriend killed her, and now we must fight for our lives! Do you understand?"

Sakura nodded numbly, though she did not understand at all. How can we fight, if Tsunade-sensei is gone? It's over.

"Let's get out of here!" shouted Aumono at his sensei's side, bloody senbon needles in his hands. "The Confederacy is overrunning the stadium."

"Jump aboard!" boomed a husky female voice. It was the fiery-haired Sarutobi Ranka, Asuma's cousin, and her genin team—the Sarutobi twins, Kanetsu and Hiraru, and Hatsutori Yashi. They were riding a giant red-assed gorilla. Ranma, Sakura remembered.

They leaped onto the gorilla as it barreled past them. Temari holding Sakura against her, pressing Sakura's face into Ranma's tangled, smelly gray fur. Neji followed, and so did several other UC ninjas, including Kankuro, UC Field Commander Sarutobi Inishu, and the wave-nin Unchiku Narumi. Hyuuga Hiashi the Whirlwind stayed behind, going into a Clawing Kaiten to keep the Confederacy from following. The sand-nin leader, Anayama Chiyo, delivered death to their enemies with a hundred puppets. In seconds Ranma had crashed through the stone arena wall and leaped off the side of the stadium, running south, toward the Yellow River.

They made for Sakaicho Prison.

"The Fifth foresaw this!" shouted Field Commander Inishu. "We must go to Sakaicho Prison and break out Doi Dragonsight. He and his supporters will ally with the United Countries against Sawar. It's our only chance!"

"Tsunade was a fool," said Tosuken. "She waited too long, and now she's dead."

"What are you talking about?" shouted Sakura, roused to indignation at last.

"The Fifth should have attacked the Confederacy on the night of Sougon Shirasu's murder. Utatane the Sleeper was right. We would've had the element of surprise, the upper hand in the battle. But Tsunade could not bring herself to do it. She refused to strike first… and now it's Sawar that strikes us with all the advantages of the aggressor. You know I speak the truth. Tsunade's weakness
destroyed her… and perhaps doomed us all."

Sakura said nothing.

"There's no point in debating this!" said Inishu. "Get ready!"

They had reached the Bat Bridge, the main way across the Yellow River to Iwa's Sakaicho district. The bridge was guarded heavily. Ranma, however, simply jumped over the village wall, landed on the water, and kept on running across the Yellow River. When Sakura looked back, Iwagakure had started to burn. Clouds of black smoke rose not only from the stadium, but from all over the village. Onden Barrier, the Zoo, Tsukai Gardens, the Street of Beggars, Uzaemo Square, even the Iwa Ninja Academy. Chaos was consuming everything. *The Overlook*, she thought. *Everyone is going to try to get to the Overlook, that's where the battle will be won or lost.*

Temari was crouched next to Sakura. "Sakura. Can you fight?"

She nodded slowly. "Yeah. I… I think so."

The sand-nin's voice softened. "I know how you feel… I felt the same way when Baki-sensei was assassinated. Take that anger and confusion and loss and channel it. We need you. Tsunade made you her apprentice, the leader of the UC in the chuunin exam, for a reason. Don't let her down. Don't let *me* down, damnit."

Sakura took her twin chakra-cast kunai out from her belt. Felt the weight and the power of the weapons in her hands. She had never wanted to use them so much. "I won't."

"Good. Then let's go kick some roach ass!"

By now they'd passed the Sakaicho Ninja Training Grounds. The large open-air training area skirted the slums that encrusted the banks of the river, occupying the space between the slums to the east and the Dreamstone Mountains to the west.

Sakaicho Prison loomed above them.

The maximum security facility was dug underground into the side of the Dreamstone Mountains. Buried directly into the bowels of the earth, its thick metal walls reinforced by powerful seals, heavily defended by thousands of guards, Sakaicho Prison was no easy target. *It's the most infamous prison in the world.* A prison to hold shinobi was a formidable institution indeed. It was not much wide as deep. Kilometers of tunnels, vaults, and cells stretched beneath the earth. Only the first level of the prison was visible above ground.

The fighting had already started.

"A prison riot?" asked Aumono.

"Haghira Doi has friends in Sakaicho Prison, it seems," said Inishu, smiling. "Now, look, there are ten levels! Doi is being held on the deepest level, Level Ten. We'll have to go in through the front entrance to the prison—there's no other way in. After the gates are breached, our mission is to find Doi and bring him to the Overlook, and then rally all Iwa rebel forces to topple Sougon Sawar."

"So how do we break in?"

"They'll take care of that."

A massive white tree exploded from the bare ground in front of them, shooting toward the great gates
of Sakaicho Prison. Sakura recognized the tree as the creation of the ANBU Captain Yamato, leader of Squad 1. The tree rapidly grew hundreds of branches that themselves began to branch, each as hard and white as polished bone. The sheer bulk of the growing banyan tree crushed all in its path; the prison guards could only shout and jump out of the way. Teams of Konoha ANBU emerged from within the tree's central trunk.

The gates were ripped apart.

"Let's go!" shouted Tosuken.

They ran into a large steel cavern, the first floor of Sakaicho Prison. The inside of the prison was dark and hazy, a change from the bright afternoon light outside; the power must have been cut. Red emergency lights shrieked with cruel fury. Bodies flashed through the smoke, men in orange prison uniforms. *A prison riot*, Sakura thought. Everywhere she could hear the clash of unrestrained battle. Everywhere, ninjas fighting and killing and dying. Hundreds of them, teeming and swarming, attacking each other in waves, like two tides breaking on each other, and each time the water that tossed and sloshed was human blood.

Like the Asylum, thought Sakura. Like Red Rock Cliff, and like December 7th…

… like the Battle of Deathtrap Mountain, seventeen years ago to the very day.

*For the last battle of the last war.*

A team of masked Iwa ANBU attacked Sakura and her team. "Binding!" she shouted, arresting their movements. At the same time Temari attacked the paralyzed stone-nins with her Blade of Wind, her Giant War Fan sharpened by the wind into a giant cutting blade so sharp it sliced through the stone-nin's bones. Kankuro cleaned up the survivors, the ANBU screaming as they were stabbed by the serrated blades of Kankuro's whirling, dancing puppets. One ANBU's mask slipped off as the ninja hit the floor with a thud, and Sakura discovered that it was a Sougon—Sougon Razu, she recognized, Shirasu's daughter and one of Sosano's many cousins. The young woman's eyes were black and cold and wide; she had not even had the chance to use her Enshogan. Instead Temari had sliced open the back of Razu's head. *Good*, she thought, remembering the Hokage's shattered head, like a splattered watermelon. The whole thing had taken less than five seconds. Blood pooled at their feet.

"Team Tsunade kicking ass!" shouted Kankuro, whooping.

*Yes*, thought Sakura. *We are Team Tsunade*. They had became a true team over the course of the chuunin exam. A convenience of political alliance, at the beginning. But that had changed as they'd gotten to know one another; as they'd fought for each other, and bled for each other. Temari and her shining Kiyome faith, her love for her family and her fierce loyalty toward her friends, her sense of moral compassion and justice for the weak. Kankuro and his sparkling curiosity, his mechanical genius, the gentle and vulnerable heart that lay underneath all his cynical armor. Sakura could scarcely even remember the time when she had been afraid of the Sand Siblings—when they had been enemies. She trusted them with her life, and they her. *We will make you proud this night, Tsunade-sensei.*

They were a true team in another way as well. They knew how to fight together now… how to blend their strengths into one greater whole. *Know each as if you were one mind*, the voice of Akasun Baki whispered from beyond the grave. *One heart, one soul*. Kankuro's puppets and Sakura's Chakra Sensing gave them the ability to detect any enemy from a distance. Then Sakura used genjutsu to disrupt the enemy formation. Temari used her mass destruction wind elemental jutsu to break bones and smash bodies. And Kankuro executed the final blow with puppets, poison, and a
tangle of weaponry. If needed, all three of them could defend, and Sakura could heal her teammate's injuries as they appeared. Team Tsunade mowed through the defenders of Sakaicho Prison like a scythe through a ripe harvest field, blood splattering all around them.

The fields quickly became a tangle of brambles, however. The invaders had struck an unexpected first blow, but now the defenders were rallying. Sakaicho Prison was a maze of twisting tunnels in the earth, with walls and gates at every chokepoint. The design made it hard for prisoners to escape… and also for would-be liberators to break in. Sarutobi Inishu and Densuke Tosuken were calling on the invaders to rally deeper into the prison. Team Tsunade charged forward at the vanguard. Yet it was not clear which way to go. The three of them closed into a triangle, backs to each other, surrounded by fighting and smoke and screaming sirens.

"Which way?" Kankuro shouted. "I can't see anything!"

Sakura could not see much of anything either. But she could sense it—feel the people and the action around her with Chakra Sensing. "Down!" she said. "Follow me!"

Just on cue, the roof above them exploded in shards of twisted metal. It was Captain Yamato's great white banyan tree—his White Creation Rebirth jutsu. The main trunk of the Captain's great white banyan tree descended from above, growing down through the center of the floor like a drill.

Drilling down to the bottom of Sakaicho Prison.

Sakura jumped after the tree through the hole it had made in the floor. "Ride the tree!" she shouted. The hard white trunk was growing fast, perhaps half a meter every second, even through the steel floor and the granite stone. They entered Level Two…

Level Three…

Level Four…

Ninjas were fighting furiously upon the tree now. Sakura dodged one waterfall-nin's spear and punched him in the gut with her Chakra Enhanced Strength, blowing him all the way down the tunnel. Unfortunately, much stronger enemies were appearing as they reached the lower levels of the prison. A squadron of stone-nins guarded Level Four with grim determination. Leading the stone-nins was a jounin that Sakura recognized.

Heian Jidaei. He was the jounin sensei of Chusei and Jibachi, and one of the Tsuchikage's most fervent supporters. Jidaei's entire body was made of rock-hard granite—the famous jutsu called Stone Form. The rest of his squadron had also entered Stone Form. The stone-nins made of stone were not so easy to defeat. A couple of them even got under Yamato's banyan tree and arrested its downward progress—holding the drill at bay with an improbably colossal strength. Jidaei traded indecisive blows with Kankuro, then Temari, then Sakura.

Then a lightning bolt killed him.

The bolt of Black Lightning went clear through Jidaei's granite chest and out the other side. More lightning bolts followed, raining death down upon the hapless stone-nins. In seconds all of Level Four was clear, the defenders slain in the sudden electrical storm.

Kankuro laughed. "Look who it is."

It was Team Darui of Kumogakure. Kasuga Darui of the Black Cloud, a S-rank shinobi, and his students Raiki and Kazuno. Bolts of Black Lightning crackled in Darui and Raiki’s hands.
"Good of you to join the United Countries," said Temari.

Raiki's red albino eyes glittered in the red emergency lights. "Whoever said anything about joining, neh? I'm here to help my friends."

"We owe you a debt," said Kazuno. "We shall repay it as shinobi of honor!"

Kasuga Darui grinned, showing his black painted teeth. "Well met, Team Tsunade. Prepare yourselves… they're waiting for us."

The drilling tree had penetrated into Level Five.

Amidst the billowing smoke, the sirens and the screams and the ripping metal, dozens of dark shadows emerged into the tunnel. *Mist-nins*. A whole squadron of them. And at their head were two familiar faces… one very familiar. When Sakura felt their black, sinister chakra, she trembled.

"Uh-oh," said Kankuro.

It was Keel the Annihilator, his pale, plastic mouth twisted in a sick grin. And Hachiko the Hound, his vicious and brutal lapdog.

Two of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist.
"Water Release: Weeping Golem!"

The pitched battle on Level Five of Sakaicho Prison began with a bang. First Hiroshi Keel created a massive golem of water, the water pouring from his hands to congeal into a giant, towering shape, taller than the ceiling of the Level itself. The Weeping Golem was considered a kinjutsu—proscribed because the golem did not distinguish friend or free, even to the point of attacking the user himself. Evidently Keel the Annihilator did not care—he meant to cause as much as destruction as possible. The golem roared and slammed its fists at Sakura's party, creating a tidal wave of force.

"Earth Release: Living Clay!" shouted the cloud-nin Kasuga Darui.

Darui was a man who had mastered two different chakra elements. His second, earth, allowed him to create a shifting, spinning sphere of malleable yet extremely tough clay around himself. The cloud-nin controlled the sphere of clay with precision accuracy, extending it outward to meet the attacks of the Weeping Golem. The two Mass Devastation jutsu collided in the middle of the Level… evenly matched.

Meanwhile, Keel the Annihilator himself attacked, wielding a massive black, scarred two-handed greatsword. He launched himself right at Kankuro.

"Get back!" Sakura shouted. "He's going to blow himself up—"

Kankuro dodged to no avail. Keel simply swung his sword in Kankuro's direction. Intricate nets of explosive tags coated one side of the Blast Sword's double-edged surface, allowing the sword to blast apart anything it came into contact with. So it proved, as the sword detonated itself in a wide arc, destroying the wall behind Kankuro. At the last second, Kankuro used his reconstructed puppet Sanshouo to tank the explosion. The puppet's iron frill cracked—barely holding.

"Fuck!" Kankuro shouted.

Keel laughed. The S-rank mist-nin had been caught in the explosion of his own Blast Sword, but it didn't matter. Keel's bloodline, Ultimate Rebirth, allowed his body to regenerate rapidly from any wound. Within seconds his whole self had been reconstituted. He raised his Blast Sword for another assault.

*Sheathing the Sword.* Keel's entire fighting style revolved around aggressive, outright suicidal attacks, Sakura knew. Sakura had encountered this kind of style before, during her fight with Keel's student and nephew Hiroshi Fue in the Second Trial. Keel was a taller, older, and far stronger version of Fue.

And his famous sword was a perfect complement to his bloodline.

"Blood!" Hiroshi Keel screamed in the chaos. "Vengeance! Death for Death!"

There were dozens of ninjas fighting in the subterranean tunnels of Level Five, but the two Swordsmen of the Mist seemed to have a single-minded focus on only two of the invading teams. *On her.* Sakura had personally killed two of Keel's students, and Team Darui had killed the last. Obviously, Keel was out to get them. Now he came for Sakura, a blur of speed and strength. Sakura dodged around the arrested tip of Captain Yamato's White Banyan Tree. Keel's Blast Sword slammed into the side of the drill—exploding, shattering it into a thousand flying pieces of white pulp. Sakura stumbled backwards, her face and skin bloody, badly scratched by the shrapnel.
Nowhere to run.

Fortunately, Darui was there. The S-rank cloud-nin blocked Keel's next attack with a blade of his own—a glittering dreamsteel greatsword of equal size, crackling with powerful lightning and earth energy. "You zombie bastard, pick on someone your own size, neh?"

"Fatality!" shrieked Keel.

"Lightning Release: Black Lightning!"

Keel the Annihilator turned his own body into a living weapon. He exploded from inside, spraying explosive tags and reams of sharp weaponry out at Darui. But Darui used the dense cloud of his Black Lightning to deflect the attack. The two S-rank ninjas were evenly matched. A storm of deadly jutsu dominated the middle of Level 5 as they fought. At Darui's side, his students Kazuno and Raiki—still banged up—fought with him, using their powerful lightning and long-range attacks to mow down enemy mist-nins.

Sakura did not have time to focus on the cloud-nins. The second Swordsman of the Mist, Hachiko the Hound, was attacking her from the other side.

Hachiko was nothing more than Keel's vicious lapdog—which meant he was extremely dangerous. He wielded the Thunderfangs, a pair of slender double-edged katanas imbued with lightning chakra. The Thunderfangs were said to be the sharpest swords in the world…

… a truth Sakura proved when she tried to block Hachiko's thrust with her chakra-cast kunai, and the katana nearly split the kunai in half before she scrambled backward. There was a crack that ran all along the edge of one kunai. Even when she flowed earth chakra-flow through the weapon, the Thunderfangs were still sharp enough to pierce the dense chakra lattice.

"Sakura!" called Temari. "Box him in!"

Temari swept her War Fan at Hachiko, summoning a great gust of barbed wind to push Hachiko back. But her advice was easier said than taken. The mist-nin swordsman used the Thunderfangs to cut through the very wind itself, like slicing a curtain. He leaped through the gap, katanas whirling as he advanced, forcing Sakura and Temari back against the tunnel wall.

Hachiko the Hound grinned. "The great Team Tsunade." Shaking his head from side to side like the rabid mutt he was. "But the Queen Bitch is dead. And so are you."

He raised the Thunderfangs above his head—

Sakura opened four Chakra Gates.

She remembered well why the Chakra Gates were a kinjutsu—why they were considered so dangerous. She had tried to limit the use of the Chakra Gates during the chuunin exam, to conserve her stamina and health for later battles. But this was no chuunin exam, and she doubted very much she would even be alive by the time the sun rose. There was only one reason to conserve herself… only one reason not to go to her absolute maximum. Sakura, I'll be waiting, a voice whispered in her head.

Even four Chakra Gates was approaching her limit. The sudden wave of pure glowing energy was like a tidal wave of chakra, coursing through Sakura's entire body. Power overwhelming, power ultimate—and a sharp gasping pain as well. Too much chakra at once, overloading her circulatory system, damaging her muscles and her organs irreparably at the cellular level. But there was no time to think about the pain. There was only time for action.
"Binding!" Sakura shouted.

The genjutsu, multiplied in effect by the Chakra Gates, seized Hachiko in mid-strike, paralyzing his somatic nervous system, freezing his muscles. Not for long—much less than a second. Yet Temari did not let the opportunity slip her grasp. She dove forward, making a Vortex to unbalance Hachiko and sweep him off his feet. Her War Fan cracked the mist-nin in the head and sent him sprawling to the floor.

Hachiko roared in anger. Sakura tried the same trick again, flinging genjutsu at him indiscriminately. Yet the mist-nin adjusted quickly. Hachiko was one of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist—the strongest shinobi in all of Kirigakure. He could be caught off guard once, but not twice. Soon Sakura found she could only slow Hachiko down—slightly reduce his reaction speed instead of outright paralyzing him. His whirling Thunderfangs were a crackling, dazzling tornado of power. Even with the greatly enhanced speed from her Chakra Gates, Sakura could only hope to dodge their cutting attacks.

A katana cut suddenly sliced down her thigh, biting deep. Sakura screamed in pain, falling over. She couldn't help it; her entire body was numb. *Shit!* The Thunderfangs were imbued with a special form of lightning chakra. A single cut would cause the victim to be temporarily paralyzed.

"Too bad." Hachiko the Hound laughed. "Sougon Sawar wanted to kill you personally. I suppose I'll just have to bring him your head."

"Sougon Sawar is a traitor!" yelled Sakura. "Doi Dragonsight will overthrow him!"

"Is that so?" Hachiko's mouth twisted. "You know nothing, little girl. Haghira Doi is already dead."

The answer chilled Sakura to the bone. Had the mist-nins already reached Level 10 and killed Doi? Or had the Tsuchikage murdered Doi simultaneously with his attack on Tsunade? If Doi Dragonsight was dead… if so, the United Countries was completely isolated in Iwagakure. They could not count on the Iwa resistance to help them. Then what chance did they have?

Or was it just a lie?

Hachiko raised his Thunderfangs—

—and then he stopped.

At first Sakura did not know what had happened.

Then she saw the thread. A single, extremely thin wire string, glittering faintly in the red emergency lights. It ran in a taut line across the length of the tunnel and pierced right into Hachiko's heart. Hachiko the Hound opened his mouth, made a soft gurgling sound, and then crumpled headfirst to the floor.

He was dead.

From the mist-nin's back, where the thread had pierced through, emerged a single, bloody needle.

A Red Needle.

Sakura turned to behold a woman standing in the distance behind her. The woman's face was shrouded by the darkness and the gloom, but the emergency lights gave off just enough light for Sakura to make out a familiar shape—a familiar outfit. A flamboyant, shrunken woman in an absurd frilly gown and a conical wizard hat. A woman who held a sewing thread casually in her hand, like
she was doing embroidery.

"Kikuko-sama!" exclaimed Sakura.

Nobunaga Kikuko the Spinster walked toward her. Smoldering fires threw her bony, wrinkled features in sharp relief. The legendary kunoichi was the only female member of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist… and the strongest one in her prime, all agreed, though that time was long past. Kikuko had once been an S-rank ninja on the caliber of Tsunade and Sougon Sawar. Even now, decrepit and aged, she still had the power to kill her fellow Swordsman, Hachiko the Hound, with a single flick of her needle.

The old hag cackled, exhibiting a grin full of rotten teeth. "Why, hello, dear. That's a nasty cut you have there. Best buck up, I say. A prison is no place for pretty young girls."

"As if!" protested a loud voice next to Kikuko. It was Touin Yukari, Kikuko's granddaughter and student. The other two girls on Team Kikuko, Tsunaga Kuina and Unchiku Onome, flanked them on either side. "We're gonna bust this joint down!"

"Traitors!" roared Hiroshi Keel.

The Annihilator was hard pressed by Team Darui, but that did not stop him from wheeling to face this new threat—perhaps even more dangerous than Darui. He leaped past Darui's Living Clay jutsu and swung his Blast Sword down on Kikuko. The old woman was surprisingly agile. Not only did she avoid the explosive attack, she flicked her wrist to counter with Red Needle. Razor wire sliced through Hachiko's limp corpse and coiled outward in the air, her Red Needle a glittering point at the thread's end. In a single second the needle had gone through the skulls of several nearby mist-nins, stitching their bodies together, and then the whole thing was flung into Keel's path. His Blast Sword deflected off the human shields while Red Needle itself continued on, slicing off Keel's arm at the shoulder.

Sakura watched in awe. The long, thin sewing needle was one of the most infamous weapons in shinobi history. It was deadly even in the hands of an amateur. In Kikuko's masterful hands, Red Needle was unstoppable. The red stains on its surface came from all the blood of the enemies that it had killed.

"Treason?" Kikuko laughed. "You should try it sometime, Keel. It's such fun."

"Mizukage-sama should have hanged you and your dyke whelps years ago."

"The Mizukage respects her elders. It's the only thing I ever liked about her."

Kikuko attacked with Red Needle again. The needle swung back toward Keel in a blistering arc, so fast and small that Sakura could not follow its path. It sliced Keel in two at the waist…

…and Keel exploded.

It was his Fatality jutsu, again. The explosion forced Kikuko back on her heels for a moment. Hiroshi Keel emerged from the ruins of his own body, regenerating almost immediately from the self-inflicted wounds.

But not to fight. He was running away, deeper into the recesses of Level 5. Team Darui tried to catch him, but the mist-nin sacrificed his body again to his Blast Sword, using the explosive destruction to cover his retreat. Evidently Keel the Annihilator was running for his life—understandably so, since two S-rank ninjas were ganging up on him. "Fuck!" shouted Raiki. "He's escaping!"
Keel had almost disappeared down the corridor—

"GRAVITY WAVE!"

The attack caught Keel completely by surprise. As it did Sakura. A space-time ripple suddenly descended upon Keel, like a crashing wave, and slammed him down into the ground. The Gravity Wave was so concentrated and intense that it literally crushed Keel's bones into powder on the spot. She had never seen anything like it. The effective gravitational weight of Keel's body must have been increased by a thousandfold, or more.

In a single instant the S-rank shinobi was flattened into a puddle of goo.

Dead, Sakura knew. Perhaps Keel's Ultimate Rebirth bloodline powers could resurrect him even from such a state… but not for long. The amount of chakra required would be extraordinary, and Keel's chakra would be drained from the strain in seconds. The Gravity Wave would be just as effective as a volcanic eruption in destroying another member of the Hiroshi clan.

But who had killed him?

A thin, spindly man emerged from the hazy darkness beyond the corridor. Hiroshi Keel the Annihilator had literally run right into him. A man with a face like a mask of skeletal iron.

Doi Dragonsight.

Apparently he was in less need of rescue than they thought. Haghira Doi walked into Level 5 of Sakaicho Prison like he owned the damn place—a warden, not a prisoner. Entire squadrons of stone-nins flanked Doi on either side. To the right, Iranki Okita the Fearless, Doi's closest ally on the Iwa High Council. To the right, Noatari Ran, the fearsome head of one of Iwa's Six Sacred Clans. And Bakura Orajuchi of Team Sawar, Sosano's best friend. Orajuchi had sided with Doi over his own teammate and foster father.

The sight of them brightened Sakura's heart. So the resistance is still alive. With such powerful and influential stone-nins as allies, the fight against Sougon Sawar was not lost yet. After all, they'd come to Sakaicho Prison to find Doi in the first place.

Now he had come, and in greater strength than they'd dared hope.

Nobunaga Kikuko laughed. "Doi! You crafty old spider, so you already freed yourself without us. I might have stayed on my houseboat and stitched a new hat."

"On the contrary. You saved me the trouble of finding you."

The Battle of Sakaicho Prison was over. The United Countries had fought their way in from the top, while Doi had fought his way out from the bottom—meeting them halfway in the middle of Level 5. There had been many casualties. Bodies littered the ruined steel corridors, the concrete tunnels, filling the air with the suffocating scents of blood and smoke.

They'd won.

"Tsunade is dead," said Kasuga Darui.

"Yes." Haghira Doi's voice was sad. "Murdered by Sougon Sawar and his son. Murdered in cold blood even as she worked for a better and brighter world." He raised his voice to a crescendo, gesturing to the gathered shinobi. "I was Tsunade's friend! I was her ally! Fight with me, and I promise you, I will avenge the Fifth Hokage, and carry on her dream for a lasting peace between our
The cheers were deafening.

"To the Overlook," said the Konoha ANBU Captain Yamato, descending on a branch of his white banyan tree. "There is no time to waste. Sawar is already gathering at Sougon Castle with all his forces. We must break his position before the night is over, or it will be too late."

"A siege," said Iranki Okita.

"Exactly."

"All or nothing."

Haghira Doi the Dragonsight nodded. Sakura caught his eye as he turned to confront his fate—caught the glint of grim determination. "I've faced worse odds."

*And so have I,* thought Sakura. It was almost not a lie.
For the Last Battle, Part 3

They ran across the burning rooftops of Iwa, heading west.

Toward the Overlook.

Even from this distance, having just crossed the Yellow River back to the main island, Sakura could see that the situation did not look good. Sougon Castle atop the Overlook swarmed with men, with defensive material and with deadly fortifications. They were not UC men. It was just like Captain Yamato had told: Sougon Sawar had gathered his forces there in strength, ringing the Overlook with the great bulk of the Confederacy. *He's waiting for us. He knows we must come.*

Come, or be slaughtered with the dawn.

Neither the United Countries nor Doi's rebels could hope to prevail in a war of attrition against Iwagakure. Only an immediate, decisive strike against Sougon Sawar himself could win the battle. It was their only chance.

Temari saw the same thing. "The sand in the hourglass is running out," she whispered, intoning the ancient prayer of the Wind Country.

It was already dusk. They'd spent hours breaking into Sakaicho Prison, and by the time they got out it was if they had exited from one nightmare to another. The sky was blood red, and hazy with smoke, with clouds of choking cinders. It seemed that all of Iwa was on fire. Sakaicho, Aoyama, Shitamachi, Oden, and especially Kuramae—they were all the sites of pitched conflict. Not a district was spared. Screaming, anguished voices filled the night sky—the screams growing louder as they got closer to the Overlook. A full moon was clearly visible above Sougon Castle, its surface tinged red by the light of the burning flames below.

"My god," said the mist-nin girl Unchiku Onome. "The whole village…"

"—is being torn apart," said Nobunaga Kikuko. "That is war, girl. You'd do best to never forget it. The senseless violence. The destruction of entire societies. And the innocents who suffer when the great lords play their game of thrones." Onome's sensei talked as much to herself as to her students. "It is well that war is so terrible, or we should grow too fond of it… Sawar the Sun Breaker knows the truth of that. As do I."

Sakura could not resist asking the question. "Then why are you helping us?"

"Why?" The old hag cackled. "Because I like you better than that slanted-eye bastard, I suppose."

"The Tsuchikage is little loved."

"The Tsuchikage? No. I meant Sougon Sosano." Kikuko eyed her with a hard, penetrating stare. "And to think, I had such high hopes for the boy. A world historical figure… a leader to inspire a new era of perpetual peace. But I was wrong. Sosano was weak… he did not have his mother's strength. Men so rarely do."

_The stone keeps to its path._

"Ahead!" shouted Captain Yamato. "Brace yourselves!"

They had reached the Overlook.
The great white dreamstone promontory rose high above the churning waters of the Dreamstone River, soaring into the darkening, blood-red sky. Around it spread all the great buildings of Iwa's central Kuramae district—the beating heart of the village. The Iwa High Council Chambers. Katsu-ji Temple. Sougon Castle. The vast, red-tiled Uzaemo Square.

And Kindness Hospital. The walls of the renowned hospital guarded the approach to the Overlook from the south. That meant it was an important strategic target; and heavily guarded. As Sakura watched a wall on the upper floors of the hospital blew out in an explosion of flame and screaming, shrieking ninjas, crashing to their deaths on the streets below. Not even an sanctuary for injured patients was spared from the battle's wanton destruction.

Rock Lee, thought Sakura. Lee was still in Kindness Hospital—helpless, legless, confined to a wheelchair. Was he still alive? The thought of Rock Lee being butchered by some nameless Confederacy henchman sickened her. Could Sakura somehow try to rescue him? But how? The mission had to take priority. They had to stop Sougon Sawar, they had to secure the Annihilation Device and defeat the Confederacy tonight. The future of humanity was at stake. There was no time to waste on inconsequential trivialities. That was the principle of triage. Kill the girl, and let the woman be born. What was one life, against the fate of the entire world?

A sudden barrage of jutsu blasted out from all across the Overlook.

The Confederacy defenders. They'd held their fire until the last moment, and now they unleashed their full assault on the UC and rebel invaders. A thousand cataclysmic jutsu from all the five elements—fire, water, wind, lightning, earth—sliced through the sky like kaleidoscopic scythes, mowing down the first wave of attackers like blades of grass.

"Scatter!" shouted Haghira Doi above the screams. "Spread out, don't let them pick us off! Make your way to Uzaemo Square by any means necessary!"

He turned north, trying to approach the Overlook from the direction of the Iwa High Council Chambers, as did Kikuko and Darui. The ANBU Captain Yamato and his forces split west, trying to come around Sougon Castle from the back. Sakura and the Sand Siblings followed Yamato. But just then another barrage of jutsu erupted from the Confederacy's defensive positions. A tidal wave of fire came howling suddenly from the rooftop of Kindness Hospital. "Akatsuki!" shouted Kankuro, spotting the distinctive black and red cloaks of the terrorist group.

The wave of fire was colossal, over five stories tall—undoubtedly a S-rank ninjutsu. Sakura recognized it as Tidal Inferno, one of the most powerful fire jutsu in existence. If it hit them, it would wipe out most of their attacking force. Destroy their siege even before it began.

We have to stop it.

"Now!" shouted Temari.

Sakura pressed her hands together, flashing the seals. As did Kankuro. As did Temari. As one, all three remaining members of Team Tsunade unleashed their full might.

"Earth Release: Diamond Wall!"

"Wind Release: Storm Shield!"

"Puppet Secret Technique: Ultimate Chakra Shield!"

Sakura powered her Diamond Wall with the lingering burst of chakra from opening her Chakra Gates in Sakaicho Prison. Temari aided the defense with the whirlwind funnel of her impenetrable
Storm Shield. And Kankuro projected a powerful, spinning shield of solid chakra from his three puppets Karasu, Kuroari, and Sanshouo, using them like the vertices of a guardian triangle. Three A-rank defensive jutsu, each stacked on top of the other.

The Tidal Inferno collided with their defensive wall—
—-and then everything went to hell.

BOOM!

Team Tsunade's wall barely held against the main force of the Tidal Inferno. Yet the wave of fire surged over the edges and through the cracks, overrunning the barricades, buffeting them in a storm of fire. The destructive power of the jutsu was explosive. Sakura herself was caught in the fiery bombardment as the building underneath her exploded. She cried out as the Tidal Inferno knocked her back, flinging her like a rag doll through the night air.

She came down hard on the nearby Kindness Hospital, crashing through a glass window on one of the lower stories and then tumbling head over heel down the corridor. Sakura groaned in pain, stumbling slowly to her feet. Her uniform was slick with blood, scalded with smoking burns. Her head was spinning. Red worms crawled across her vision, and the nasty wound in her leg throbed afresh, bleeding out across the clean hospital tiles.

Where were Temari and Kankuro? Where was everyone? They must have been knocked back by the blast of fire in different directions. Sakura had landed in Kindness Hospital, separating her from the rest of her team. It was not the most optimistic situation. She'd been bloodied and hurt in the Battle of Sakaicho Prison, and the use of multiple Chakra Gates had left her remaining reserves dangerously low as well. How long could she fight on her own? Inside, the hospital was pitch black—even the emergency lights shut off. The hallways seemed to be completely deserted... though Sakura knew that was not the case. Beyond the backdrop of constant battle outside the windows, there was an eerie, pregnant silence.

A movement.

There was another ninja in the hallway, crouched in the shadows. It was a kunoichi, to judge by the ninja's size and shape, though in the darkness Sakura could not see her face clearly. Yet when the other ninja stood up, Sakura saw her forehead protector—saw the familiar symbol: a rock carved against a rock. "Get away, leave us alone, you fucking ape!" the stone-nin kunoichi cried, and rushed Sakura with tiny balled fists.

Sakura slit her throat.

It was the easiest kill she had ever made. The other girl was even younger than Sakura was. Barely even a genin, Sakura thought... a little girl fresh from the Iwa Ninja Academy. Sougon Sawar was so desperate he had been reduced to using weak, half-trained children in his war of vengeance. You're a genin, too, whispered a voice in Sakura's mind. It was a small voice. Sakura had gone through the greatest chuunin exam in history—and she had survived. She had been tested. And she was no longer weak. The poor stone-nin girl never stood a chance.

The other kills were harder. A ragged team of swamp-nins. A waterfall-nin special jounin who wielded a giant cleaver. Even an Iwa ANBU, his mask painted in the image of a howling lion. In the end Sakura dispatched them all. Her blood was singing with exultation, with the thrill of glorious battle. She stalked through the dark corridors of Kindness Hospital like some kind of angel of death, her twin chakra-cast kunai glittering faintly in her bloody fists. Sakura scarcely even noticed the piles of bodies she stepped over. Innocent patients in hospital gowns, slaughtered indiscriminately in the
crossfire between Confederacy and UC. I'll kill them all, she thought. All my enemies, and then I'll kill you too, Sosa.

"Sakura!"

The voice was familiar. Sakura turned to see two Konoha jounin running toward her, along with a squadron of other leaf-nin troops. Ino and Chouji's dads. Yamanaka Inoichi was the Intelligence Chief of the United Countries Embassy. Akimichi Chouza was the leader of the Akimichi clan, and Inoichi's best friend.

They were the two members of Team Yanagi still in Iwa. The third member, Commander Nara Shikaku, had left to nurse his son in Konoha and not returned. Inoichi had returned during the Third Trial, however. And just in time to participate in the Battle of the Overlook.

"What's happening?" Sakura demanded. "Where is everyone?"

"Fighting." Chief Inoichi shrugged, his suspicious eyes ever-roving across the dark corridors. "Dying. The fighting was quite thick around Kindness Hospital for the past while. The battle seems to have moved on to Uzaemo Square, however. We should round up the survivors and head there next."

For the first time Sakura noticed where they were. We're in the South Patient Ward. She had not even realized that was where she had been heading. But of course it was. The south patient ward was where the hospital kept its long-term patients: the damaged cripples that needed constant supervision and support. The ones on suicide watch, who might never leave its confines again. Rock Lee.

A door opened on a creaking hinge.

For a moment she thought it was Lee, and her heart leaped.

But it was not.

Instead it was an old, white-haired doctor in a bloody lab coat. Honjo Micho. The kindly doctor was Konoha's Chief of Medicine and a member of the Konoha High Council. Tsunade's most trusted advisor. Sakura's mentor and treasured friend. Micho had retired from active shinobi duty years ago… giving up killing in order to save lives instead. Sakura was sad to see how their desperate circumstances had forced Micho back into the field. Chakra scalpels glowed in his hands, their sharp bladed surfaces covered in fresh blood. His weathered, craggy face was draped in shadows.

"Dr. Micho!" greeted Chouza with a grinning salute.

"Micho-sama, it's good to see you again. We lost you in the fighting." Inoichi smiled. "Did you manage to get those Akatsuki bastards?"

"No."

"Too bad. Next time we'll—"

Suddenly Inoichi and Chouza collapsed to the floor. Blood squirted out of their chests, erupting in a sickening black gush. It happened so fast that Sakura could not follow it. She could not understand what was happening. In a single instant all the other leaf-nins around her were dead, cut down in a blur of flashing death. They had died so quickly they had not even uttered a sound. Sakura looked on in shock and disbelief, unable to react. It was not just the horrible deaths of her comrades that caused her to freeze up.
It was the man who pulled his twin chakra scalpels out of Inoichi's heart without even flinching.

It was Honjo Micho.

"Micho-sama!" Sakura shouted. "You… what are you doing?" Her mind reeled. *How was this possible? It must be… "You… the spores. Zetsu's spores got you."

"No," Micho said softly. "No, I'm afraid not."
Sakura stumbled back. Her whole body was numb. _Micho... a traitor?_ 

Yamanaka Inoichi and Akimichi Chouza lay on the cold hospital floor in pools of blood. They were dead. This was no illusion. They had been stabbed in the back by their own ally, without warning. They hadn't even been able to make a sound. 

The old grey-haired doctor stood in his lab coat with blood dripping from his chakra scalpels, calm as a statue. 

"Run away, Sakura," Micho said softly. His deep, grandfatherly voice now held an undertone of violence. "I don't want to kill you."

Sakura clutched the two chakra-cast kunai in her hands. She was in shock. If Micho was really a traitor... he was one of the strongest shinobi in Konoha... an S-rank ninja... 

... only she didn't understand. 

"Why?" she gasped. "Why..."

"I warned you, Sakura. I told you to go to Ashwarren, become a civilian doctor... get away from the horror and madness of the shinobi world. Why did you have to stay? What is here for you? Dying like trash... never-ending hatred... the pain that never heals... war... that is all that which exists in this world. The system... the system of militarism and nationalism and sectarianism that controls the world, making monsters of everyone in it. Only if the system is destroyed can there ever be any chance for true peace. Only Akatsuki! The New Dawn! Only Akatsuki can give us peace!"

"That's what Tsunade-sensei fought for her whole life!" Sakura shouted.

"Tsunade was a deluded fool. She believed she could save a crumbling, rotting system from the inside. And now she's dead."

Slowly, unbelievingly, finally... Sakura understood. "You're the Akatsuki spy. You were always the spy. Tsunade-sensei trusted you. You were in her inner council... privy to all her plans. You were the one! From the very beginning... the theft of the Annihilation Heart from Konoha... the attack on the Asylum... infecting Asuma with neuro-spores... the tampering with the Third Lock. Even... even the assassination of Sougon Shirasu! The bombing of Tsukai Gardens. Framing both Doi and ROOT during the Shadow War to deflect suspicion. It was all you, wasn't it? You... you sabotaged everything!"

"Yes," said Honjo Micho.

"Why? Everything you told me before... about how evil Akatsuki was..."

"I could hardly blow my cover, could I? During my mission to the Rain Country ten years ago, I worked with Akatsuki hand to hand, shoulder to shoulder. I became close with Yahiko, with Nagato, with Konan. The scales fell from my eyes and I saw the truth."

"You betrayed Konoha."

"I love Konoha with all my heart. All I'm doing is saving Konoha by destroying it!"
"You're insane," said Sakura. "You're crazy and you don't even know it!"

Micho almost smiled, one of his faint smiles that Sakura had seen so many times. "Maybe I am. After everything I've been through... all I've seen... and done... how could I not be? Is there anyone in this whole damned fucking monstrous ninja world who has more than two brain-cells left of sanity?" Suddenly he laughed, threw back his head and laughed. The sound echoed down the long hall. "No more!" he cried. "No more. The ninja world... the way of the shinobi... must be destroyed at all cost. Don't you understand that?"

Sakura didn't answer him. There wasn't anything to say. She stared, hands white around her chakra-cast kunai. She felt like throwing up.

The old doctor stared at her. "I can't let you through here," he said at last. "Probably what you'll do doesn't matter... but even the smallest chance that you'll stop the bomb from going off... I can't allow that."

*The bomb? "The Annihilation Device... it's activated?"

"Of course."

"What did you do?"

"It's supposed to be a failsafe, in case the battle goes badly. Sougon Sawar would rather destroy the whole village than let it fall into the clutches of Tsunade the Betrayer. But I made sure to activate it anyway, regardless of the outcome." Micho laughed crazily, unbalanced. "Everyone thought the Annihilation Device would be used in a terrorist attack. They were right... they just never imagined *it would be in Iwa!*"

"You bastard!" Sakura screamed. "Micho, you—you can't do this!"

"The timer's already ticking down... before the night is over Iwa and everyone in it will be gone in a cloud of atomic ash. If you run now, you'll be able to escape. Go, Sakura. Please. Too much life has already been lost today."

Sakura was trembling all over. It was not just the shock of betrayal. It was the fear. For the first time in a long time, true, total fear washed through Sakura. Her confidence... her belief in herself... it was all gone, vanished before Micho's unfathomable betrayal. Before the magnitude of his dark vision.

*The stone keeps to its path.*

"Never," she whispered. "I'll stop you, no matter—"

Micho's first attack cut her hamstring. It was so fast that Sakura did not even notice it until she was falling to the ground, blood spilling down her right leg. She was still on the knees when the traitorous doctor attacked again. Micho's second attack sliced through her collarbone and across her shoulder and bit deep down the middle of her breasts, knocked her backwards, against the wall of the hospital corridor. "Ah!" Sakura cried out in pain, stunned, blood pooling in a red stream beneath her. Something slipped out from her uniform. My chuunin exam key. The silver key on its broken silver necklace, tumbling to the ground, skittering across the floor to the hole and disappearing into the darkness.

"I knew you wouldn't give up," Dr. Micho's voice was sad. "I knew you'd try to fight me. Sakura... you're just a little girl. You have no chance against my Silent Slash. I'm so sorry."

Micho had hardly seemed to move at all. He held his chakra scalpels up. The sharp blue-white blades
shimmered around his hands, stained with Sakura's blood. *Micho of the Silent Slash*, Sakura thought. *Micho the Manslayer*. No wonder they called him that. Silent Slash was a fighting style based on extremely subtle cutting attacks. Micho moved as little as possible, then struck at his enemies before they were even aware of what is happening. His slash was so fast it didn't even make a sound.

Sakura tried to stumble to her feet, but her right leg was numb, the hamstring that connected the muscles cut in two. Severed… Micho was severing all her muscles. *He's going to cut all my tendons, then he's going to kill me.* She was even more right than she knew. Micho's next attack sliced apart the muscle tissues in her right arm. Right under the guard of her chakra-cast kunai, dodging her defenses in a whirlwind of speed, the scalpel plunging through her shoulder joint. Sakura screamed. Her kunai dropped to the ground, her fingers limp.

Micho was too fast. Too fast to see, to hear, to block. In seconds Sakura had been reduced to the use of only one side of her body. The only reason she was still alive was that Micho was trying not to kill her. *I've got to... there's no other choice—*

He came for her, like a black slash through the shadows of Kindness Hospital—

"FIVE GATES!" Sakura screamed.

She'd already opened four Chakra Gates, in Sakaicho Prison, but this was nothing like that. Each Gate was exponentially more powerful than the one before… if four Chakra Gates open was a fire hose of power, then five Chakra Gates opened was like a tsunami. A tidal wave of pure glowing chakra flooded through Sakura's entire body. Exponentially faster speed, strength, stamina. They were the most Gates she had ever opened in her life. The most power that she had ever felt… and the most pain as well. Irreparably damaging her cells, leaving scars inside her body that would never heal. Sakura shrieked in the agony and the ecstasy of it.

It was enough.

Enough to keep up with Micho. Enough to see him move, to dodge his slashing chakra scalpsels, and to strike back. With her good arm she delivered a punch at Micho's head. He ducked the blow, and Sakura's punch ended up slamming into the wall behind him. The entire corridor blew up, raining stone and steel and cement and tiles down on them. She only hoped that wing of the hospital had already been evacuated. Sakura spun around to face the Akatsuki traitor. She did not even feel her wounds—the power of the Chakra Gates allowed her to temporarily overcome them. She blitzed Micho, trying to pummel him, but he dodged them all. All she managed to do was punch more holes in Kindness Hospital. For some reason she still could not hit him.

"Chakra Gates, is it?" asked Micho. "Looks like you opened five… impressive. But it doesn't matter. My Silent Slash cannot be stopped!"

Sakura punched at Micho again. The doctor slid to one side and used his chakra scalpel to cut the tendons in her wrist. She staggered in pain—her left arm disabled now—only for Micho to attack her again. This time his chakra scalpel pierced directly into her chest. All the way through, through her lung and out the other side of her back, impaling her on the glowing white blade. Blood came pouring out of Sakura's mouth as she writhed helplessly.

Micho flung Sakura out a nearby window. She crashed into one of the inner courtyards of Kindness Hospital. Falling into the abandoned courtyard fountain, stunned and limp. When Sakura tried to get up, she discovered she couldn't. Most of the chakra she'd gained from opening five Chakra Gates was gone… drained by Micho's brutal attacks on her body. Her hamstring, her shoulder, her wrist, her lung… she couldn't even crawl out of the fountain. She could not breathe without blood bubbling
from her throat. The fountain water was turning black with her blood. Strange lights, strange sounds were coming from the sky all around her. *The Overlook*, she thought. *They're killing everybody.* Was this how it all ended?

A dark shadow loomed over her. The kindly doctor: his gruff face, his disheveled shock of white hair. Dr. Honjo Micho, Konoha Chief of Medicine. The Fifth's most trusted advisor. It had all been a lie. "Sakura. Have you reconsidered your stubborn, meaningless obstinacy? Go. Tsunade is dead, but her student can yet live. Go and live, like you once promised me. Go back to your family, go back to your mother and your sister. Go away, go far from this place, from this depraved world. Sakura. I'm giving you one last chance."

Sakura raised her left palm at Micho. "Fear!" she shouted. Micho shrugged it off easily, the genjutsu doing nothing… but it was only meant to be a distraction. Her left leg, her one good leg, swept upwards… and she made a chakra scalpel from her foot, the blade shooting upwards. The unexpected extension of the length of her foot caught Micho off guard. The chakra scalpel stabbed into his side, deep into the flesh. Micho roared, hurt for the first time. In the next motion the old doctor had caught Sakura's leg against his side and twisted it viciously.

She shrieked as her leg broke, the bones of her thigh and calves snapping. Red pain lanced up her leg and her spine and into her chest, into the gaping wound. Blood ran down her face and down the rest of her body like a red waterfall. It bubbled out of her lips with every breath she took. She lay in the courtyard fountain like a broken doll.

Micho was shaking his head mournfully. "So you made your choice. Very well, Sakura. I'll finish it. I'll finish it like you always wanted someone to finish it. Oh, yes, Sakura. I know you better than you know yourself." Abruptly, for no reason, Micho cackled. He threw back his head and cackled as if he'd just heard the funniest joke in the world. "You're just like Tsunade. Pain is the only thing you understand."

"Fuck you," she gasped. "You traitor…"

She brought her palms together for a hand seal—

But Micho interrupted it. "Lightning Release: Electromagnetic Murder!"

The traitorous doctor's jutsu hit her at point blank range. Sakura shrieked in agony as the blinding bolts of electrical current burned through her body. A storm of lightning that seared across her ravaged flesh. She collapsed to the ground again, stunned and numb. Yet somehow she was still conscious. The lingering chakra flood from her Chakra Gates, perhaps. Her fingers scrabbled at the tiled ground. It was not over, she still had strength left—

"Lightning Release: Electromagnetic Murder!"

Micho's brutal storm of lightning hit her again and ended all her fantasies of resistance. Searing pain lanced through every part and limb and organ and cell of her body, throwing her around in the air like a rag doll. When it was over… when it was over, Sakura lay motionless in the fountain, completely limp. Smoke billowed from her seared and charred uniform, from her burned skin. Her ravaged body was completely numb from head to toe. *I can't move,* she thought. All the fight had left her. She was finished.

Micho kicked her out of the fountain, turning her over on her back. Sakura's vision was hazy, but it seemed that he was holding his chakra scalpels above her. The blades to end her life. Her short, brutish, nasty life.
"Tsunade-sensei," she whispered for some reason. What was it? Did she really believe that the Hokage could still hear her? Or was it just a final prayer for those she'd lost? "Tsunade-sensei…"

Micho's kindly gray eyes were full of tears. "I told you once, Sakura. A coward can be as brave as any man, when there is nothing to fear. And we all do our duty, when there is no cost to it. Yet soon or late in every man's life comes a day when it is not easy… a day when he must choose. And I… I chose. Don't you understand, Sakura? The New Dawn! Peace in our time, peace forever! I had to sacrifice all for the cause. Don't you see? Kill the boy, and let the man be born. What is one life, against a thousand? What is one life, against the fate of the entire world?"

"That is the way of the shinobi," whispered Sakura.

"So it is," said Dr. Honjo Micho, and raised his chakra scalpels for the killing blow.

There was a sound.

A creaking, soft sound. From the shadows of the hospital, the corridor that led to the hospital's south patient ward. The sound of a figure emerging slowly from the shadows. It was…

Rock Lee.

Rock Lee was in a wheelchair. He rolled into the courtyard by pushing the wheels of the chair with his arms, his torso covered in thick white bandages. The boy was wearing his iconic green jumpsuit, for some reason. The legs of the jumpsuit had been cut off. Utterly helpless, utterly disabled. Yet his round, plain face was seamed with determination; his thick fuzzy eyebrows furrowed in a righteous stare.

"Dr. Micho!" Rock Lee shouted at the top of his lungs. "Get away from Sakura-chan! I, Rock Lee, the Handsome Green Flash of Konoha, will bring you to justice!"

The old doctor turned in puzzled surprise. "Have you gone mad, boy?"

"Lee…" Sakura gasped.

"Sakura-chan, don't you remember?" The boy grinned, and then gave her a thumbs up. "I will always appear when you are in trouble!"

Micho shook his head in disbelief. "This is not a game, boy. You already lost two limbs, Lee, do you want to lose the other two? Get out of here before I kill you."

"I never run. That's my Ninja Way!"

"Don't be absurd. You're a cripple, not a ninja. Cripples can't be ninjas."

"That's what I used to think, too. I… I forgot myself, for a while. I was going to… to kill myself. I thought I could never be a ninja again. I thought my dream of being a shinobi was over." In his wheelchair, under the shadows of the abandoned hospital, beneath a blood-red sky, the legless, crippled boy called Rock Lee stared down one of the most dangerous men who had ever lived. Tears were flowing down Lee's face, but his eyes shined with an inner light that Sakura had never seen before. The light of truth. "But then Hokage-sama came to me. And she asked… if I had forgotten what Gai-sensei had taught me. She asked… if I had forgotten what being a ninja really means. It's not how fast or smart you are… or your bloodline… or the number of jutsu you know… or even whether you have legs. That's not what it takes… for a man to be called a shinobi. That's not the most important thing. The most important thing… is a spirit… which never… ever… GIVES UP!"
"Then die, you damn fool!" cried Dr. Micho.

He attacked, closing in with his deadly chakra scalpels. But even as he did so, Lee put his two hands together, and with blinding speed made a series of hand seals.

"Advanced Transformation Technique!" Lee shouted.

There was a gigantic crack and a flash of light and smoke. And suddenly Honjo Micho the Manslayer had been blown backwards, punched into a hole in the far wall, crashing right through the north wing of Kindness Hospital. Sakura looked at the sight, stunned. The smoke dissipated, and then in the haze of smoke she saw him.

Rock Lee stood.

He stood on two legs. His body, whole and complete.

Sakura was stunned.

She could not believe her eyes. Ninjutsu. Rock Lee had used ninjutsu. The boy who had always been too stupid to learn it. The boy who had failed so miserably at every attempt to mold chakra with hand seals that he had needed a special waiver just to pass the academy graduation test. She could not believe it. This jutsu... what was it? What kind of transformation technique allowed a person to regrow legs? No, not to regrow them. To generate temporary legs with pure chakra.

"Lee..." Sakura whispered.

"The Sublime Green Flash of Konoha walks again!" the boy exclaimed happily. He did an absolutely ridiculous pose and grinned. "The Lotus of the Leaf blooms twice!"

A roar of frustration and anger came from behind her. Dr. Honjo Micho climbed out of the smoking hole Rock Lee had made in the hospital's courtyard wall. His clothes were all in disarray, his lab coat torn, his glasses shattered and hair even more disheveled than usual. "I'll be damned. So Tsunade taught you her Advanced Transformation jutsu, did she? It doesn't matter. Sakura couldn't beat me, and neither can you. You won't—"

"MORNING PEACOCK!"

The attack caught Micho utterly by surprise. Sakura had never seen anything like it. Rock Lee leaped into the air and then descended on Micho in a halo of blazing fire, his outstretched fists a wreath of flames. The sheer power and speed of Lee's punches literally set the air on fire, creating a peacock-like fan of flames around Micho's body. Six Chakra Gates! Sakura sensed. Lee had opened six Chakra Gates to use his Morning Peacock attack. It was the most powerful pure taijutsu attack that Sakura had ever seen.

It was over in seconds. Where the center of the hospital courtyard had been, where the fountain had been, there was only a smoking hole. Still lying paralyzed on her side, Sakura could not tell how deep the hole was—but she suspected it was very deep. Honjo Micho had disappeared down into the crater, smashed to the bottom by Lee's brutal assault.

"Sakura-chan!" Lee shouted, running to her side, cradling her in his arms. His body was still glowing with pure power, his hand on her cheek burning hot. She'd never been more grateful for such an embrace in her life.

"Lee... you saved me..."
The leaf-nin boy grinned, his dumb happy grin. The grin she'd missed so much. "Sakura-chan, I told you. I will always appear to protect the people I love!"

"Lightning Release: Rail Gun!"

The sudden, surprise attack lanced up from the ground—a piercing beam of concentrated lightning that cut through everything it touched. The Rail Gun seared right through Rock Lee's legs and cut them off at the knee. Lee toppled to the floor with a grunt.

Dr. Micho was climbing out of the smoking crater on his hands and knees. "Damn… I missed…" he gasped.

Sakura did not quite understand what the mad doctor was talking about. He'd cut off Lee's legs, hadn't he? Dark red blood came gushing out of the stumps…

_No_, Sakura thought, _no, but the blood isn't real. _Rock Lee's legs were only chakra constructions… they weren't real at all. It was only an Transformation Technique. How could there be blood when the transformation was nothing more than chakra? _No, she thought, it's an Advanced Transformation Technique. _The Hokage's own personal ninjutsu of cosmetic disguise. Tsunade had taught it to Lee herself. Did the Advanced Transformation not only add to the durability of the disguise, but also make that disguise itself a physical reality? Something was nagging at Sakura in the back of her mind. Something that she had missed… her head hurt so much.

Even as Sakura watched the wound in Lee's leg closed, the chakra reforming itself into flesh and bone. Lee simply remade his Advanced Transformation Jutsu again and leaped to his feet again. He hadn't felt any pain, because his legs weren't real in the first place. All it took to maintain the transformation was a constant expenditure of chakra. A constant drain.

"You survived my Morning Peacock attack!" exclaimed Rock Lee. "Dr. Micho, I salute you as a powerful shinobi! It's too bad that you are a traitor!"

The old doctor chuckled dryly. "You really are as dumb as Gai." He staggered to his feet and wiped the blood from his face. Most of Micho's clothes had been burned off by the force of Lee's flaming punches, leaving his chest bare. It was covered with old scars…and with gruesomely fresh wounds. The doctor was in very bad shape, many of his bones broken, scarcely able to stand. "You and Sakura both… two little blithering children, spouting slogans with no understanding of the corrupt reality beneath us all. Once I was like you. Once I was young… full of hope and idealism and potential. Full of passionate dreams. You even make me think…" Honjo Micho trailed off for a moment, then shrugged. "No… no, but it's far too late for that. The New Dawn begins tonight! I cannot turn back!"

"Neither can we," said Sakura softly.

"So be it." Micho crouched into a battle stance. On the opposite side of the courtyard, Lee did the same. Scalpels of glowing chakra erupted from the old grizzled doctor's hands. "You almost finished me with Morning Peacock…. but not quite. I know you can't use it again. My Silent Slash will cut your throat!"

Micho was right, Sakura saw at once. Lee had used up most of the chakra he'd gained from opening Six Gates, and he could not use Morning Peacock again. That meant Micho, injured as he was, was both faster and stronger. He had the advantage in a taijutsu battle against Lee once again. But he was wrong as well. Because Rock Lee was not alone. _You should have killed me when you had the chance, Micho-sama. You were prepared to destroy the world to save it, but you were too soft and gentle and good to kill a helpless little girl._
It was a fatal mistake.

The fight ended in a single exchange. Micho running forward with his slashing blades. Lee leaping into a flying kick. The grizzled old man versus the young soldier, Silent Slash versus Strong Fist, subtle technique versus raw power. It all came down to a single moment—a single heartbeat.

"For the New Dawn!" screamed Micho.

"For Hokage-sama! For Gai-sensei!" shouted Rock Lee.

At the same time, Sakura focused all her attention on Micho's head. Combined Genjutsu! she thought. She threw all she had left into the intricate mental attack. She had never been very good at it, but desperation and adrenaline pushed her skill to greater heights. Six separate genjutsu combined into one greater attack, blended into one. Sleep. Blackout. Mirage. Whiteout. Binding. Amnesia. One combined genjutsu far more complex than its constituent parts, far more difficult to counter. It struck Honjo Micho just as the two fighters reached each other. Micho froze in the middle of his strike, his entire nervous system under assault.

"SUPER DYNAMIC ENTRY!"

The very air cracked with the supersonic speed of Lee's kick, a shockwave of power. And then Lee's kick connected with Micho's unprotected, unprepared head. The traitorous old doctor's neck snapped in a single blow. His body tumbled backwards like a rag doll, skidding on the rubble, coming to a motionless rest in the shadows of Kindness Hospital.

Dr. Honjo Micho, Konoha Chief of Medicine and Akatsuki spy, was dead.

Afterwards—after Sakura had managed to recover feeling in her numb body, and staunched the flow of blood and fluid through her punctured lung, and started to stitch the rest of herself back together again—afterward, Rock Lee helped her to her feet. "Sakura-chan," he whispered in a babble. "Sakura-chan, are you all right? Sakura-chan, what happened? I—heard rumors… about Hokage-sama… all this fighting. Sakura-chan, what do we do?"

All she wanted to do was go to sleep. But Sakura looked toward the sky, and the sky was filled with explosions and fire and screams and battle. Then she looked at Rock Lee. Then she looked at Lee's abandoned wheelchair, still sitting on its wheels in the middle of the hospital courtyard.

"Let's put it this way, Lee. You won't be needing that anymore tonight."
For the Last Battle, Part 5

Badly injured and exhausted, but alive, Sakura and Lee made their way toward the center of the Overlook.

It was all in chaos. There was fire everywhere, shouts and smoke. The central Kuramae district of Iwa was up in flames beneath a blood-red full moon. Uzaemo Square and all the great buildings around it were under siege—the Iwa High Council Chambers, Katsu-ji Temple, Kindness Hospital, Sougon Castle. It was hard to tell exactly what was happening, but the Tsuchikage and his loyalist forces seemed to be in charge of Sougon Castle and most of Uzaemo Square. They were under furious assault by Doi Dragonsight's rebels and the United Countries. Even as Sakura watched, one of the bridges that led from the Overlook across the White River collapsed. The whole thing simply went down in a giant cloud of dust and smoke, crashing into the river below. Someone had dropped a bomb on it—a man in Akatsuki robes high in the sky, riding a giant clay dragon.

"Sakura-chan!" shouted Lee. "What—what do we do?"

Rock Lee was utterly drained from opening Six Chakra Gates and using Morning Peacock on Dr. Micho. Lee had only half of his original stamina in the first place. His Advanced Transformation gave him the appearance of legs, but those legs were actually only chakra constructs. That meant only the upper half of Lee's body could actually generate chakra. He'd also broken both his hands with the force of his flaming punches. Sakura was doing even worse. She'd taken a brutal, nearly fatal beating at the hands of Micho, and now she was completely out of chakra. Sakura could not even heal a paper cut if she wanted to.

But what to do? Sakura was not sure. They would all be there, at the Overlook, Sougon Sawar, Haghira Doi and his rebels, the United Countries, Temari and Kankuro… and someone else. A boy with eyes dark and bright as fate. He's waiting for me.

"We can't give up," Sakura told him. "We've got to fight. We beat Micho, and we'll beat Sougon Sawar too."

Lee gave her a thumbs up. "Of course!"

There was a loudspeaker somewhere, blaring some kind of recorded announcement over and over again. An announcement all across Uzaemo Square, across the Overlook. "THIS IS SOUGON SAWAR, YOUR RIGHTFUL TSUCHIKAGE! TRAITORS ARE TRYING TO OVERTHROW IWA! RALLY TO ME, RALLY TO THE OVERLOOK! DESTROY THE REBEL TRAITORS! DESTROY THE ENEMY APES! REPEAT, RALLY TO THE OVERLOOK!"

"We've got to find Doi!" shouted Sakura. "That's where everyone else is…"

Another bomb dropped from the sky, blowing up the office building next to them. Sakura led Rock Lee stumbling through the rubble and the smoke. The red tiles beneath their feet trembled—not from the bomb, but from something else. A tremor. She'd felt such a tremor before… just before the earthquake that had destroyed the Weeping Caverns during the First Trial. The Annihilation Device. Dr. Micho had not lied: the atomic bomb beneath Sougon Castle was activated, the timer counting down. When it exploded, the Annihilation Device would destroy all of Iwagakure.

If they even survived that long.

Sakura and Lee skirted the edges of Uzaemo Square, avoiding the heaviest pockets of fighting. That
was for the best. Friendly forces spotted them and helped guide them to the main rebel encampment. Doi Dragonsight had made his field HQ on the north side of the Overlook, inside a large building that was blasted through with so many holes it looked like a piece of cork. Sakura almost did not recognize it as the Iwa High Council Chambers.

The Sand Siblings were there to greet her.

"What's the situation?" shouted Sakura.

"Bad!" Temari shouted back. "Extremely bad!"

Sakura surveyed the rebels' positions around Uzaemo Square. "We seem to be holding the line."

"Which isn't good enough—we need to get into Sougon Castle and bring it down. That means we're losing! And the worst thing is, Sougon Sawar hasn't used his trump card yet!"

"What do you mean?"

"He hasn't used—"

Hyuuga Hiashi spoke too soon. A roaring light came from the center of Uzaemo Square—a blinding golden flash, as if a sun had been set down to earth. Sakura had to look away due to the sheer radiance. When she looked back, there had suddenly appeared, in the middle of Uzaemo Square…

… Sougon Sawar.

A giant Sougon Sawar.

"What the hell!" shouted Rock Lee.

The Tsuchikage must have been at least one hundred meters tall. He was riding an equally giant deer—the matriarch Tajima, mother of the white-tailed deer of the Valley of Spears. In his right hand he held the pure white blade of the Masamune, also scaled up to his size. Sakura finally understood the Tsuchikage's epithet. The Sun Breaker. He was so tall that he blocked the blood-red moon from view. His eyes were twin burning suns, each of them wider across than Sakura's entire body.

"REBEL TRAITORS!" boomed the cold, iron voice of Sougon Sawar. The cold voice of judgement. "KNOW THE MIGHT OF MY INFINITE RADIANCE!"

He could not have painted a bigger target on his back. A thousand jutsu burst from all across the Overlook, all of them aimed directly at the giant man standing in its center. The sheer volume and destructive power of those jutsu would have been enough to demolish any man…

… but not Sougon Sawar. His Enshogan eyes burned, and all the jutsu collided with a barrier of Absolute Zero emanating from his body, dissipating instantly. At the same time he pointed the Masamune at a distant building. The entire building exploded in a shimmering golden haze—blown up by Bakudan.

Everything the Tsuchikage did was at a massive scale. Infinite Radiance, thought Sakura in awe. It was Sougon Sawar the Sun Breaker's signature jutsu. By growing himself into a giant, Sawar had also multiplied the size and strength of his Enshogan eyes. They could hold far more heat than a normal-sized Enshogan—making them far more powerful. The only downside would be the chakra drain, from using it too much…

The Tsuchikage was attacking the rebels with overwhelming force. Bakudan explosions went up all
around the Overlook like a string of golden lights. Then he pointed the Masamune at Doi’s encampment. "Duck for cover!" shouted Haghira Doi.

It was too late. Even Hyuuga Hiashi the Whirlwind could not contain all of the Bakudan explosion, though he tried to block it with Kaiten. The Absolute Defense was engulfed in an explosion of golden flame. Sakura, the Sand Siblings, and even Hiashi himself were blown back. The Iwa High Council Chambers came down around them. Sakura was almost crushed by the falling ceiling before Temari used her Giant War Fan to rescue her. The corpses of United Countries ninjas and rebels lay buried in the smoking rubble.

Sougon Sawar the Sun Breaker loomed above them like a divine colossus. He had ridden on the deer Tajima to the steps of the destroyed High Council Chambers—it had taken the giant animal all of three steps. His laugh was booming.

"LITTLE TRAITOROUS INGRATES," he gloated at the remnants of the rebels. "DID YOU THINK YOU COULD CHALLENGE THE POWER OF THE SOUGON CLAN? DOI DRAGONSIGHT HAS LED YOU TO YOUR DESTRUCTION!"

"What do we do?" a bloody leaf-nin whispered from somewhere in the pile of bodies, holding his head in his hands. "Oh god, what do we do?"

"Die," said another. "Just like the Fifth."

They've lost hope, thought Sakura. Breaking Doi out of Sakaicho Prison had done little to turn the tide of the battle. Even with the addition of the Iwa rebels, the United Countries was still outnumbered. And the Tsuchikage did not just have the Confederacy on his side. He also had Akatsuki. Sakura could see the black and red cloaks of Akatsuki swirling around the Tsuchikage in Uzaemo Square, floating in the air somehow, their cloaks like red swirling clouds over black skies. Like tonight, she thought, like this bloody night of death and destruction.

At the forefront of the terrorist vanguard were the great masters of Akatsuki. Sakura knew all their faces. Chuzuru Deidara, called Deidara Demonhand. Gifuu Hidan of Bloodthirst. Onira Kakuzu of the Black Stitch. Three S-rank shinobi, thought Sakura with a chill. Yet in the back of her mind a question still lingered. Why only three? Where was Yoshimoto Nagato, the Akatsuki Leader? Where was Uchiha Itachi?

"Sawar!" shouted Haghira Doi up at the giant golden man. The stone-nin rebel leader seemed no larger than an ant before the Tsuchikage. "Who is the traitor? Who has openly allied with Akatsuki terrorists against his own countrymen?"

"BETTER THAN ALLYING WITH THE APES."

"You are an unhinged madman, utterly unfit to lead this village!"

"YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO BE THE TSUCHIKAGE, I KNOW. BUT YOU WERE OF INFERIOR BLOOD. THAT'S WHY SEURIN WAS MY WIFE… AND NOT YOURS! DO YOU SEE? YOU CANNOT WIN AGAINST ME… I AM THE TSUCHIKAGE! I AM THE TRUE MASTER OF IWAGAKURE!"

"Not for much longer."

Sougon Sawar laughed. "AN EMPTY THREAT. THEY CALL YOU THE DRAGONSIGHT… HA! THE TALENT TO SPOT ANY OPPONENT'S WEAKNESSES… BUT I HAVE NO WEAKNESSES! YOUR SHADOW POWER THEFT CANNOT STEAL MY ENSHOGAN!"
"No, Sawar. You always had a weakness. It's fear. That's why you locked yourself in your castle against all your enemies…. it's why you betrayed your own father. Fear of betrayal. Fear of weakness. Fear of losing to Tsunade, just like Seurin did."

"TSUNADE IS DEAD!" screamed Sawar in a voice that made the ground shake. "NOW YOU DIE TOO! I WILL DO TO YOU THE SAME THING MY SON DID TO THAT QUEEN BITCH!"

The giant man raised his giant sword high above his head. The Masamune glowed in the night like a pillar of divine fire, so hot Sakura could feel it even from a hundred meters away. With one blow he would decimate the rebel leadership, Sakura knew. Who could block a blow of that size and power? Not Doi, or Hiashi, or Chiyo. They were finished. For some reason Sakura, looking at the deadly dreamsteel blade, was reminded of the time she had cut off Rock Lee's legs. The sword glowed white hot.

Sawar swung the Masamune with all his might—

—and was stopped.

A massive slug twenty stories tall appeared in a flash of smoke, absorbing the impact of the Masamune into its own slimy flesh.

Sakura could not believe her eyes. That chakra… Haghira Doi glanced over at Sakura in disbelief, to see if she had somehow summoned Katsuyu—though in her present state Sakura did not have enough chakra to summon a cookie crumb. It was… could it be? Sakura felt it… the chakra signature she knew so well. Like the sun against a backdrop of candles. Like a shadowed light, blinding and dark all at once. But how?

On top of the slug Katsuyu, emerging from the drifting smoke, stood a woman in white robes.

"IMPOSSIBLE!" Sawar shrieked.

"Fool," said Senju Tsunade.

There was a silence all across the Overlook. It was as if the raging battle had been frozen in time. All stared, wondering.

"Tsunade-sensei lives," Sakura whispered. The whisper became a shout. "The Hokage lives! The Fifth lives!" Delirious with relief, whopping, not understanding but not questioning her good fortune, crying tears of joy. Others took up her call. All the shinobi on their side of the battle.

A rallying cry of hope.

"The Fifth lives!"

"The Fifth lives!"

"The Fifth lives!"

Sougon Sawar had clearly lost his mind. "HOW…" he sputtered. "I SAW YOU DIE!"

"You saw another of my mud clones. Of course, I wanted you to think I was dead… actually, you might say that you fell into my trap. You must be wondering where your Akatsuki friends are.
Nagato promised you his full support, didn't he? Only he ran into an... unexpected obstacle.

"WHAT DID YOU DO?" demanded Sawar.

"You were always too narrow-minded, Sawar. Or did you think the only event of significance tonight was happening in Iwa? It is not so. Revolution shakes the Steam Country, and in the Crescent Country a vast conspiracy reaches its fatal end. There is a three front battle to save the world all across the North." The Hokage smiled. "For this one night, at least, the Legendary Sannin fight once more."

"SO YOU ROPED JIRAIYA AND OROCHIMARU INTO YOUR PLOTS, DID YOU?" The Tsuchikage seemed to have somewhat recovered his sanity. "IT MATTERS NOT. YOUR PATHETIC ALLIES CANNOT SAVE YOU. EVEN IF YOU ARE BACK FROM THE DEAD... YOU ARE STILL OUTNUMBERED. BEHOLD THE POWER OF IWAGAKURE!"

"Wrong again!" The Fifth Hokage pressed her hands together. "Summoning Technique!"

A flash of light.

Three figures appeared next to the Hokage atop Katsuyu. Sakura knew them all. The greatest, the strongest shinobi of the United Countries. Ready to fight on their side in this final battle for the fate of the world.

Hatake Kakashi the Perfect Ninja.

Sabaku Gaara of the Sand Waterfall, the Fifth Kazekage.

And Lord Mukai Hanzou the Reaper.

"I'LL KILL YOU, YOU BETRAYER BITCH!" shrieked Sawar. "I'LL KILL YOU IF IT'S THE LAST THING I DO!"

His giant eyes glowed, burning with power. Bakudan! And then Katsuyu exploded, bursting apart into thousands of small white slugs that rained through the air. In the void of the destroyed summon, the golden haze of destruction, came Sougon Sawar swinging the Masamune. But the Hokage was there, levitating in the air, a colossal Black Hole growing in her hand...

The battle began again in full force.

It was a different battle. As before, the titans of the United Countries and the Confederacy clashed in the sky above the Overlook, while their massed forces fought along the edges. Yet now the rebels fought with a new sense of hope; a sense of renewed morale and determination. Senju Tsunade was not dead. Not only that, she had a plan... a plan for ultimate victory.

A slimy white slug landed on Sakura's shoulder. "Sakura-chan! Mistress Tsunade has an urgent mission for you! Akatsuki has activated the Annihilation Device under Sougon Castle. You must get to the Device and destroy it before it's too late!"

"I don't have any chakra left!" Sakura told Katsuyu. "And Sougon Castle is guarded by the Eyeless Gates..."

But even as she spoke Sakura realized that the Hokage had anticipated both problems. First, Katsuyu began to glow with a shimmering blue aura, and Sakura felt a wave of energy flood into her body. Katsuyu was boosting her with a huge burst of chakra—replenishing Sakura's drained chakra to its full potential, healing her injuries. *This is Tsunade-sensei's jutsu. The Hokage's Advanced Mystical
Palm technique could heal her targets from a distance or through an intermediary like Katsuyu. It was not just Sakura. The little pieces of Katsuyu were landing everywhere across the Overlook, in fact. Latching on any friendly shinobi, giving them chakra and healing their wounds. The Hokage was simultaneously replenishing the chakra of thousands of ninjas. The sheer scale of the transfer was far too much for one person, even using the purple Yin Seal. *Tsunade-sensei must be taking the chakra from Konoha itself.* It was an incredible technique.

As for the problem of the Eyeless Gates… Katsuyu opened her mouth until her body had folded in two. Hidden in the slug's body was revealed a small glass box—a box with a single, stolen glowing Enshogan eye inside it. Sakura recognized it: it was the same eye that Koharu Utatane had revealed on the fateful night of Shirasu's murder. The eye that had been stolen from Sougon Charasu. With this Enshogan eye, Sakura could open the Eyeless Gates and thus break into Sougon Castle. She grabbed the glass box—it was icy cold in the grip of her hand. *Tsunade-sensei entrusted this responsibility to me... I will not fail!*

"Let's go!" a familiar voice shouted.

It was Gaara, along with Temari and Kankuro. He was flying on a tidal wave of sand, the yellow grains pouring out of the calabash gourd on his back. Following Katsuyu's instructions, Sakura leaped onto the wave of sand, as did many others. Sakura saw the flower of the United Countries gathered there. All three of the Sand Siblings. Rock Lee and Neji. Team Darui with their sensei. Team Youko with their sensei. Team Ranka with their sensei. Team Tosuken. Several teams of both United Countries and rebel Iwa ANBU. Scattered genin like Satetsu, Shinren, and Orajuchi. *This is the strike force that Tsunade-sensei has gathered to assault Sougon Castle.* For the most part, they were not quite the S-rank titans that battled it out atop the Overlook, but they were the strongest of the next generation. *The Hokage has put her faith in us.* Together they flew across the battlefield on Gaara's cloud of whirling sand, hurtling toward the very gates of Sougon Castle.

Toward their final destiny.

Temari was next to her. The sand-nin girl grabbed at Sakura's arm. "Sakura! Do you know who is waiting for us in Sougon Castle? Do you know what must be done?"

"I know," she said.

*I always knew. I denied it, I fought it, I tried to forget, but I knew.*

*I knew from the very first night we met.*

—CRASH!
Gaara's wave of tidal sand slammed right through the steel portcullis gates of Sougon Castle. And not only the gates. The entire foyer of the castle caved in on itself beneath the crushing force of Gaara's sand. White dreamstone walls exploded inward, scattering a shower of smoking rubble across long bare halls.

From the rubble and the smoke emerged the invaders.

The defenders of the castle were waiting.

Dozens of them, hundreds… blocking their path through the foyer into the deeper parts of the castle. ANBU guards. Stone-nin jounin. All the villages of the Confederacy alliance. A most formidable force.

A woman in white robes stood at their fore. It was the Mizukage, Terumi Mei. The Lady of Dew. She was undoubtedly one of the most beautiful women that Sakura had ever seen. Yet her glamorous, youthful appearance belied the deadly power that she held within her body. Terumi Mei had not become the leader of the Village of Bloody Mist by accident. She possessed no less than two different elemental bloodlines, Lava Release and Boil Release.

"Gaara," she laughed in a sing-song voice. "Didn't your father ever teach how to knock? I'm afraid you've made an awfully big mess. Don't worry. A woman is here to clean it all up."

"Mizukage-sama!" shouted Temari. "Akatsuki is trying to detonate the Annihilation Device right below us! They're going to blow everyone up!"

"Is that so? Only if we lose, I think. You needn't be concerned about that… it doesn't happen to me very often."

"It's no good, they won't listen!" said the leaf-nin Sarutobi Ranka. "We've got to focus on the mission."

Terumi Mei smiled. Then she opened her mouth, and a gigantic stream of burning lava came exploding outward at the invaders. The lava almost immediately solidified into multiple boulders of molten rock, crashing down on the invaders like a flaming meteor shower. Several shinobi were instantly pulverized, and everyone else ran for dear life. It was an extremely powerful jutsu; only Gaara, using the full force of his sand abilities, was able to keep the lava from consuming the entire foyer. Both sides fell into a chaotic, raging battle—a vortex of death and destruction.

"I'll hold off Mei!" shouted Gaara above the howling battle. "Temari, Kankuro, Sakura, go! Go on, get to the bomb!"

Behind Gaara's shield of sand they raced forward, numbers much reduced. Many had been mired in the fighting in the front of Sougon Castle; several teams separated, including Team Ranka, and Erima and Tenshe, left behind. There was nothing to be done. The small Katsuyu slugs had also vanished off their bodies, disappearing in a puff of white smoke. Evidently the Hokage required the use of Katsuyu's full bulk in her furious battle against the Tsuchikage and his forces. The chakra of Sakura and her comrades had been recharged, but it was a one-time boost. There would be no more help from the Hokage.
We must do this on our own, Sakura thought.

They ran down the hallways of Sougon Castle in the shadowy darkness—the power had been cut—operating by flashlight, Sakura and the other chakra sensors trying to sense ahead for ambushes or traps. Team Darui ran point. Kasuga Darui of the Black Cloud was a S-rank ninja, and the strongest shinobi the strike force had remaining. Once again the castle of stark dreamstone, the long, bare walls, seemed to remind Sakura of an ancient tomb. It was as if they were running toward their death. Their footsteps echoed on the cold stone.

"Sakura!" called Raiki ahead. "The gate."

Before them had appeared a huge closed door of polished black stone, glossy as polished gems, and icy cold to the touch. An Eyeless Gate. There were more of them than Sakura had seen before on her previous visits to Sougon Castle; evidently the Tsuchikage had closed them all in anticipation of an attack. The Eyeless Gates were special fuinjutsu barrier gates that controlled passage from one part of Sougon Castle to the other, sealing the secrets of the castle from outsiders. Only the Enshogan eye itself could open an Eyeless Gate.

But that was all right. Sakura opened her right fist, unveiling the activated Enshogan eye contained in the glass case. The stolen eye of the unfortunate Sougon Charasu. She held the eye up to the black door. Slowly a symbol appeared in the center of its black surface. A golden oval pointed downward, with six winged lines radiating up from its sides. The Sougon family crest. The oval represented the Overlook; the six trailing lines represented the legendary comet that had brought the Overlook to earth from the heavens. Then the black door split in two and swung open on creaking hinges.

Beyond lay the armory.


"Why, hello," laughed a cold voice from the darkness.

The armory of Sougon Castle was a vast, high-ceilinged room. Metal warehouse shelves stretched in every direction, crammed full of weapons, armor, scrolls, and all the other instruments of war. And in the center of the armory stood a disturbingly familiar figure. A gray man with eyes pale as milkglass, and cold as a snake's skin. His lips were so thin that when he pressed them together they seemed to vanish altogether, and his voice was like a sheathed whip.

It was Makoto Muro, Lord of the Blood Country, along with nothing less than a small army of blood-nin shinobi.

"We're here to destroy the Annihilation Device!" shouted Sakura. "Let us pass!"

"Certainly."

That was not the answer that she'd been expecting.

Lord Muro smiled, his pale eyes glistening. "Surprised? I know you're spoiling for a good fight… but I love my life too much to die in a lost cause. Indeed, I fear I've made a terrible mistake. Sougon Sawar assured me that he would kill Tsunade before he launched his attack. But now she has returned from the grave. This is most distressing news. I rather suspect Tsunade is going to cut off Sawar's head before the night is done. What is an amoral mercenary like me to do? Time to get off the stone-nin bandwagon, I say."

"You want to stab the Confederacy in the back," said Temari.
"That's right. You might call me a rat fleeing a sinking ship. How shall we say it? My loyalty to the Confederacy alliance is... wavering. Before long, I daresay, you may find me a great partisan of the United Countries. Depending on how the Battle of the Overlook goes, of course."

Sakura looked around at the others. "If what you say is true... then help us."

"Ah... but what would be the advantage in that? Your mission is no walk in the park... I put your chances of success at less than half. Even if I was to put my own neck on the line for you, there's no guarantee of victory. And all I would accomplish is getting myself killed, or grievously weakened. But here's a deal. I will stand aside and let you pass through this armory unmolested. I'll also tell you what you face ahead."

"All right," said Darui. "Speak, you cowardly, faithless bloodsucker."

"What a way to make friends. All right, fairy, I'll tell you. Sougon Sawar knew that you would try to send a strike force into Sougon Castle to steal, or destroy, the Annihilation Device. He's placed guards and traps at every major level of Sougon Castle and the Vault to stop you. Delaying you every step of the way, so as to buy the Tsuchikage time to win the decisive battle above ground. The object is to wear your force down little by little—a strategy of attrition. By the very end of this process, there will be almost none of you left."

"A gauntlet," said Sakura.

"That's right. You already encountered Lady Mei in the foyer of the castle, and now me in the armory. Ahead of you are the Sougon family apartments... the Tsuchikage's own apartments. He is not there, but his family is. They will make trouble for you. Then comes the Vault, and its three separate levels. The Garden of Solitude. The Garden of Ancestors. And the Garden of Fate, where the Annihilation Device is hidden. All are extensively guarded."

"Who are the guards?"

"That, I don't know. Well... except for the last defender. The most powerful of them all. The one who designed this whole gauntlet in the first place." Makoto Muro stared at Sakura with eyes pale as milkglass, full of amused calculation. "But I expect you already know... exactly who that is."

"We do," said Temari.

"Then go. I wish you all the best of luck, with all sincerity."

The Warlord of Blood stood aside, and all his soldiers with him, stepping away to hug the walls of the armory. The strike force moved forward. It was a tense passing. Sakura suspected some betrayal, or trap, perhaps at the last moment, but there was nothing. They passed through the armory without incident. Then they continued down the long, twisting hallways of Sougon Castle. The castle was like an entire city contained within one colossal stone.

As Lord Muro had foretold, they turned a few corners and came to the living quarters on the lowest level of Sougon Castle—the Tsuchikage's private apartments. The pathways of the castle had been constructed in such a way that when the inner Eyeless Gates were closed and barred, as now, there was no way to avoid passing directly through the apartments in order to go further. In fact, the Eyeless Gate on the far side of the apartments could not even be opened except by passing through the bedchamber. Yet another closed Eyeless Gate greeted the entrance to the apartments.

Sakura opened it with a sense of deep foreboding, fearing what she'd find.

The black doors opened onto a luxurious suite of living rooms, decorated in the traditional Earthen
style. The Tsuchikage himself lived on the spartan upper floors of the apartments, but they were on the lower levels now, surrounded by the ancient opulence of the Sougon clan of old. A set of half-ajar tall redwood doors were carved with ornate painted figures, each panel depicted another chapter in the illustrious life of Sougon Uzaemo. Several hanging banners were emblazoned with the Sougon family crest. A burning eye, golden with flames. Rich red woven carpets drank in the glow from bright, smokeless lamps, casting firelight around suits of armor, tapestries of great scenes of war, tastefully decorated small arrangements of flowers and blue and white porcelain pottery that displayed a feminine touch. A soft, plush child's doll was scattered in a corner. Kasuga Darui walked across the carpeted living room and pushed open the redwood doors to reveal the living room chamber beyond.

A dozen people stood behind the doors, all in shadow.

Children, Sakura saw at once. Women, and old men, and cripples.

The very weakest members of the Sougon clan.

Sosano, she thought in despair. Sosano, how could you make us fight your own family? Why did you force us to go this way?

But then she saw the old doddering man at the head of the Sougon gathering, stumbling forward out of the shadows, and she knew why.

"You," the old man whispered. "I remember you…"

Then he began to giggle.

"Damn!" said Kasuga Darui, brandishing his dreamsteel greatsword. "Stay back, all of you!"

"Who is that?" whispered Kankuro to Sakura.

"Sougon Shuichi." Sakura gave the giggling old man a wide berth. "He used to be an S-rank ninja… one of the strongest ninjas in the world. As strong as Seurin Shadowstar. Then he got old and lost his wits."

"A demented old fool, then? How dangerous could he be?"

"You don't need wits to use the Enshogan."

But perhaps, thought Sakura, there was another way to get past Shuichi without fighting him. The man had sunk deep into dementia, with the brain capacity of a small child. If they could somehow distract him, use the distraction to slip past the apartments without fighting—

"Kill them, brother!" a piercing voice shrieked.

The woman who spoke wore a thin gray bedrobe, twin to Shuichi's own, and she seemed even older. Karumi. Sougon Karumi was Sosano's grandmother, the matriarch of the Sougon clan. Disease, grief, and helplessness had rendered her into a shell of a woman: thin tangles of white hair, a dark wrinkled face, fingernails long as claws, a shrunken frame like skin on bones. In her own way, Karumi was as equally mad as her brother Shuichi. Yet her milky eyes retained a fierce strength—a fierce hatred for the enemies of her family.

"Kill?" Sougon Shuichi's eyes glowed; the embers of a dying flame, fanning to life again. "Karumi? I remember killing…"
"Please," said Sakura. "Let us pass, and no harm will come to you. We're here to disable the bomb. All of you are in danger. We're here to save your lives."

Even as she spoke, the ground beneath them shook. All of Sougon Castle trembled from the tremendous energies gathering below it—the Annihilation Device activated, counting down to detonation, just as Micho had warned. Yet Sakura's words fell on deaf ears. Sougon Karumi pointed a quivering, accusing finger at the invaders. "Kill them!" she hissed in a hoarse whisper. "Get them out of our home! Send them back to where they came from! False friends. Betrayers. Kill them before they murder the little children!"

"Sakura."

The girlish voice belonged to none other than Sosano's little sister, Semele. She stepped from the shadows to stand by her grandmother. Semele's adorable pet deer, Teru, nuzzled at the girl's side with desperate agitation. Both of them were trembling uncontrollably. Teru stared at Sakura with undisguised hatred, ears flat against her head, white-tail arched in stiff resistance. Seleme's bright, wide green eyes were streaked with tears.

"Sakura… is it true? Are you trying to kill us?"

"No."

"Daddy said you wanted to kill Sosa."

Sakura hesitated only for an instant before answering. But the instant was enough; it gave it all away. "You liar!" Semele shrieked in the face of Sakura's denial. "Why? Why would you want to hurt him? He loves you!"

"It's not that simple."

"Yes it is!"

"No." It was not Sakura who spoke, but the stone-nin bat boy, Bakura Orajuchi. Sosano's best friend, who had been raised in Sougon Castle among Sosano's own family. He spoke softly, gently. "Little Semele. When a man wants to die, but cannot do it himself, that is when he must turn to others. And that is the hardest kind of love. One day you'll understand."

"Traitors!" Semele screamed.

It was Semele's last word which finally spurred the dormant Sougon Shuichi to action. "Traitors!" the old fool echoed, giggling, laughing uproariously. But his eyes were no laughing matter. A wave of burning fire came from them, a wave of freezing ice. The alternating currents of heat and cold were so powerful that they threatened to slice Sakura apart where she stood—

—if Kasuga Darui of the Black Cloud had not intervened first. The cloud-nin engaged Shuichi head on, his entire body crackling with the power of Black Lightning. Yet even Darui seemed unable to stand up to the sheer intensity of Shuichi's Enshogan. Especially when Karumi joined in on the fight as well. Only with the support of his two students, Raiki and Kazuno, did Darui hold the line against the awesome Enshogan attacks.

"GO!" shouted Darui.

There was a narrow path between the fighting ninjas: a path leading to the Eyeless Gate beyond the Sougon family apartments. So the gauntlet begins, thought Sakura. There was no way to avoid it. By abandoning Team Darui, the remaining members of the strike force could press on without any more
delay. Yet Team Darui was also the strongest team they had. *We are weakened badly with each encounter.*

Sakura nodded, leading her team past Shuichi, past the elderly and the children of the Sougon clan. The Eyeless Gate opened at her command, the featureless black doors swinging apart to either side. Beyond, the final stretch leading down to the Vault beckoned.

Only two tried to block her way. Teru, Sosano's faithful and loyal animal companion to the very last. And Semele. "Please don't kill him," she begged, tears running down her little cheeks. "He's my brother! Sakura, please, you're supposed to be my big sister, aren't you? Don't you love him?"

*Summer fades, and shriveled leaves blow in an autumn wind. The young grow wrinkles and hardened hearts, and sprout bright young things that grow old in their turn. Nothing lasts forever.*

"I'm sorry," said Sakura.

And shoved them both out of the way.

The Eyeless Gate closed behind her.

The strike force continued in silence, running down the empty dark corridors beneath Sougon Castle, the heavy stone muffling even their footsteps. Yet not all was silent. The castle shook again, churning, the earth beneath it was breaking apart. The dreamstone walls splintered. Rubble and dust fell from the ceiling. The birthing pangs of the Annihilation Device, about to give rise to a fatal dawn.

There was another sign as well. It should have been getting colder as they descended deeper into the depths of Sougon Castle. That was what had happened the last time Sakura had been here; the temperature dropping until her breath frosted in the air. But it was getting hotter. They were obviously running toward an immense source of energy. Just the waste heat was so powerful that it bleed through all the layers of the Vault to make Sakura sweat and breathe in gasps.

"Sakura," said Temari. "How much longer?"

She shook her head. "Long."

The sand-nin Ryokan Satetsu stuttered his words. "T-t-there's only us l-l-eft."

"I know." Of all the dozens of ninjas that Tsunade had recruited for her strike force, only ten remained. Their most powerful and high-ranking shinobi—including Gaara, Darui, and several teams of ANBU—had been swallowed up in the heavy fighting on the upper floors of Sougon Castle. Even the chuunin were gone. What remained were only genin.

*Genin to save the world.*

Sakura, Temari, and Kankuro of Team Tsunade. Neji and Rock Lee of Team Gai. Aumono, his teammates lost in the foyer of Sougon Castle. The glacier-nin Koizumi Saotome, the rest of his team also lost. The stone-nin Bakura Orajuchi. The sand-nin Ryokan Satetsu. And the river-nin Hiroshi Shinren.

Only ten.

Yet had they not been tested already? By the chuunin exam. By the Battle of the Overlook. By all they had experienced in their lives. In the grip of her hand, the box that contained the stolen Enshogan eye was icy cold. The Hokage had given her that Enshogan eye for a reason. *I will not fail*
you, Tsunade-sensei. Sakura looked around at the faces of her comrades. At the faces of her friends. She knew them all, every one. "We are few, but we are strong. We are the best of our villages… the best of the United Countries. And we shall prevail!"

"Never give up!" exulted Rock Lee.

"Sssooo young", hissed an inhuman voice.

Sakura felt her gut churn. She knew that hiss—the hiss like a venomous serpent's. Before them, at the end of the dark hallway, before the great black Eyeless Gate that led to the first level of the Vault, a half-white, half-black man-thing was rising out of the stone. The thing was grinning.

Zetsu.

The Akatsuki second-in-command.

"Little boyssss. Little girlssss." Zetsu laughed, opening wide the great jaws like a Venus flytrap that enclosed his upper body. Smoking black venom dripped from the fangs of the flytrap, sizzling through the dreamstone floor—through the fabric of the red clouds stitched in his cloak. "Dare you oppose Akatsuki?"

"I thought you were dead," said Sakura.

"I wass." Zetsu licked his lips with a long, forked tongue. "I didn't like it."

Temari unfurled her great War Fan. "Oh, but I do."

"Black Thorn Maze!"

Huge, venom-dripping spikes erupted from the ground. They very nearly impaled Sakura; she flipped backward, avoided them by the skin of her teeth. Zetsu laughed hysterically. His thorns were growing everywhere, like a forest, spiraling in a twisting web, sealing the hallway ahead of them with a wall of black spikes.

"Shit!" shouted Kankuro. "How do we get through that?"

Sakura turned to look at Neji. Clawing Kaiten was their strongest and most concentrated taijutsu technique. But he only shook his head. Zetsu's poisoned thorns were too tough, and regenerated too quickly, for even Clawing Kaiten to pierce.

Then how do we break through? Zetsu was obviously trying to delay the strike force as long as possible. By using his Black Thorn Maze to block the Eyeless Gate, the Akatsuki terrorist prevented them from moving forward into the Vault. Zetsu might be able to keep them here for hours. They were running out of time.

"I will fight him," said Kozumi Saotome.

Yes, Sakura realized. Of course. Saotome's unique Hypnotic Scroll sealing jutsu allowed him to manipulate space-time. During the Third Trial Sakura had witnessed Saotome seal his opponents into a two-dimensional hole—even seal the very air so that nothing physical could pass through. The same sealing techniques would work on Zetsu's Black Thorn Maze.

"You were said you were a pacifist," Temari pointed out. "Dare you fight Zetsu on his own terms?"

Saotome coughed. Yet when he spoke, for all his oddities, his strange accent and strange clothes and
strange, ungainly posture—for all that, the young glacier-nin did not hold back. "Hotaru Eshidae the Seer says that there are no causes worth killing for… but there are many worth dying for. I will defeat this Akatsuki Devil with my life!"

"Now!" said Sakura.

Zetsu attacked, a sword of thorns growing from his limbs—

"Hypnotic Scroll: Seal Ground!"

Saotome waved his arm, the black tattoo seals glowing with crackling energy. But he did not aim the attack at Zetsu. Instead the hole appeared further down the hallway, under the wall of black thorn spikes. In an instant all the thorns had disappeared—sucked into the two-dimensional prison of the Hypnotic Scroll. Saotome had sealed away the Black Thorn Maze.

The way to the Eyeless Gate was clear.

"You little shit!" Zetsu roared.

The Akatsuki terrorist tried to summon more thorns. But it was too late. Sakura led her strike team quickly down the hallway, running over the walls and then the ceiling in order to avoid Saotome's fuinjutsu on the ground below. Saotome used another Hypnotic Scroll to seal the air around the passageway—keeping Zetsu occupied and distracted, forced him to fight Saotome instead of pursuing the escaping strike force. Then Sakura had reached the Eyeless Gate, and opened it.

The Vault lay beyond.

"Go!" shouted Saotome behind them. "Zetsu can't follow you past the Eyeless Gate! Leave me!"

They did.

*The gauntlet continues.*
As the Eyeless Gate closed behind them, the remaining members of the strike force walked into a sudden silence.

The Garden of Solitude.

It was an apt name: hushed and eerily empty, all sound swallowed up by a cavernous, meditative space. The first level of the Vault was nothing but a single massive cave. In the center of the Garden was a very wide and very shallow lake. The surface of the lake was dark in the midnight gloom, and still as a sheet of glass, with nary a ripple to mar its smooth black surface. There was nothing else that she could see.

Rock Lee frowned. "There's no one here."

Sakura shook her head. "No. He's here."

She felt him with Chakra Sensing. Or more precisely, she felt it. A presence like a wild, fierce spark, just barely concealed beneath the surface… just barely controlled. An explosive power like a fraying, burning fuse. Sakura had felt a similar chakra many times. The last time had been in the Cathedral of Hearts, when Sosano had ended Misain Sebi's life.

This was not Sebi.

But someone even more dangerous.

"It's Misain Dayu," said Neji.

The Cinder.

Dayu was an S-rank ninja, the right hand man of his father and grandfather Misain Seve the Thrice-Dead. Not only was he the sensei of the infamous Team Dayu, which had caused Sakura and her friends so much grief, he was also a known ally of Akatsuki. During the Battle of the Asylum in the Rain Country, Dayu had appeared out of the sky and lit the entire Asylum on fire with Mizuho. Sakura still remembered seeing his face for the first time: a small, slight man, yet utterly in command… his face covered completely in scarred, burned skin, dead and black.

A voice laughed roughly, echoing across the reaches of the Garden of Solitude.

It came from beneath the lake. A figure in Akatsuki robes and a mist-nin forehead protector rose out of the water to float on the surface of the black lake. "I did not think you would fall into my trap, of course," it said. Misain Dayu grinned hideously. "But I am most disappointed in the force Tsunade has sent against me. A squad of pipsqueak children… genin, even. The chuunin exam is over, little boys and girls. You fight against men now."

"We fought against you before."

The words came from the mouth of Mukai Aumono. Aumono struck his best aristocratic pose, his scarred face haughty and arrogant. Yet for all that, the rain-nin's voice was tinged with a hint of fear. He knows how powerful Dayu is, in this place.

"Ah… but it was not you, was it? It was Tosuken the Chameleon that fought against me in the Asylum. It was Maito Gai the Butcher Beast. But they are not here. You cannot hide behind their
skirts any longer, little boy. You cannot hide behind your grandfather." Misano Dayu spread his hands to either side. "Mizuho!"

The entire lake lit on fire.

Roaring, burning flames erupted from the surface of the water. The Mizuho inferno made the lake impassable, a circle of blinding fire. Sakura and her friends retreated to the fringes along the Garden of Solitude, forced back by the heat of the waterfire.

"Damnit!" yelled the bat boy, Bakura Orajuchi. "What do we do?"

"We have to get to the Eyeless Gate!" Sakura screamed back. "It's in the center of the lake. " But with Mizuho fire in the way…

A spear of burning water emerged from the maelstrom of fire. Sakura dodged the attack easily enough, only for hundreds of blades of slicing water to follow. Misain Dayu was attacking them from a distance, safely nestled within the protective cocoon of the Mizuho lake.

"He'll never leave that lake," said Neji. "Dayu knows that we have to go through him in order to break into the Garden of Ancestors. He's fighting defensively, baiting us into fighting him on his own turf."

"Stalling for time," said Sakura.

But they could not afford to lose any more time.

Time was their greatest enemy. The Annihilation Device was already ticking down to destruction. If they arrived at the Garden of Fate too late… if they arrived too late, they would have no chance to disarm the bomb before it went off. The subsequent explosion would destroy Iwagakure and every person in it. In order to prevent that from happening, there was nothing—there was no one—they would not sacrifice.

That was the gauntlet.

Temari spoke the words they were all thinking. "Someone has to distract the Cinder, while the rest of us go on."

But who?

They were only nine left. Sakura herself. The Sand Siblings. Neji, perhaps the strongest ninja who remained. Rock Lee and his powerful taijutsu. Aumono with his Hidden Chameleon jutsu. Shinren with her Reflection Mirror. Orajuchi and his bat summons. Satetsu and his manipulation of sound. Strong ninjas all, but which of them could compete with Misain Dayu the Cinder? Who could slow down Dayu enough? Which of us is the most expendable?

"I'll do it," said Aumono. In the light of the flickering Mizuho fire, the dark, savage scar across his pale face seemed almost to be alive. Under his mane of shaggy hair, Aumono's forehead protector glistened, the symbol of the hidden village of Rain: four vertical lines in parallel, like falling rain. "We have unfinished business, the Cinder and I."

"No." It was Neji. "Dayu is too powerful, his Mizuho too dominant. You won't be enough."

Aumono laughed. "Your concern for my life is most touching, Hyuuga."

"I won't let you jeopardize the mission for your own agenda."
"Then who?"

"Me."

Rock Lee gave a cry of dismay. Aumono laughed again, while Sakura's breath caught in her chest, fearing the unraveling of their fragile alliance. She stepped between them before they came to blows. Neji was right, she knew. Aumono was not strong enough to face Dayu alone. And the Byakugan was an effective counter to Mizuho. But even so… even so, there was no guarantee Neji would be anything more than a speed bump against Dayu's power. Too much was at stake. They could not afford such a margin of error.

"Then together," said Sakura. "Both of you."

Aumono stared.

"Neji!" Rock Lee's voice was pained. "The rain-nins… Gai-sensei—"

"I have never forgotten."

"I don't ask you to forget," said Sakura. "Only look with both eyes open. Don't you see? We cannot walk alone. And we cannot turn back. We have come too far together, to give up now."

Hyuuga Neji regarded her with his cold white eyes. And nodded, slowly.

"Very well. Yes, it could work… but the timing must be perfect. The way will be open only for a single moment."

Aumono grinned. "Do it!"

"Then behind me, now!"

Neji leaped forward into the lake of Mizuho. "CLAWING KAITEN!" he shouted. A hurricane of whirling chakra burst from Neji's tenketsu, forming a shield of churning claws. The Clawing Kaiten sliced through the lake of fire, pushing both water and flame away to either side. Aumono, Sakura, and the others followed closely in Neji's wake, protected by the Kaiten.

Misain Dayu saw them coming, of course. A giant waterfall of Mizuho fire crashed down on them from the ceiling of the Garden of Solitude. Neji's Clawing Kaiten was only big enough to deflect the center of the mass devastation jutsu. Aumono pressed his hands together and summoned his salamander Ibuse. The gray, fat, slimy salamander absorbed Dayu's attack with his fire-resistant skin.

Then they had closed on the center of the lake. A large, rectangular black slab rose out of the sea of roaring flames: the Eyeless Gate. The way to the Garden of Ancestors below—to the second level of the Vault. Dayu the Cinder stood on top of the closed gate, his grotesque body silhouetted black in the blinding glare of the writhing Mizuho waves. "The New Dawn rises at long last!" he cried. "The Lord Pain has spoken in righteous judgment! Let… this world… BURN!"

"For the United Countries!" shouted Aumono, and thrust his fingertips at the waterfall-nin.

Neji's Clawing Kaiten and Aumono's Reap struck Dayu at the same time. A whirling storm of churning, roiling chakra. And a razor blade of cutting death that was sharp enough to slice through solid steel. Astonishingly, Dayu tanked both attacks with his own body. He'd covered his body in Burning Skin, an armor of impenetrable burning water. With one hand he caught Neji's Clawing
Kaiten and with the other he slapped Aumono's Reap away. Yet even Dayu was pushed back by the sheer force of the combined assault… skidding backwards, away from the Eyeless Gate.

The way was open.

"Now!" shouted Neji.

Sakura leaped atop the Eyeless Gate, pressing her Enshogan eye container to the slab of glistening black stone. It began to open outward…

… revealing a spiral staircase within. Kankuro and Temari ran down the stairs, as did the others. Sakura pulled Lee along with her, worried he'd try to stay to fight with Neji. But Lee would do little good. His fighting style was a horrible match against Mizuho. Together, Neji and Aumono already stood a decent chance against Dayu. There was no point in committing more wasted resources. And I need you. "Lee! Let's go!"

The leaf-nin boy gave her a thumbs up. "Neji!" he shouted back. "Remember what Gai-sensei said! Burn with the springtime passion of youth!"

Hyuuga Neji laughed. "You too, Lee! Go kick Sougon Sosano's ass!"

And then the Eyeless Gate closed behind them.

Sudden darkness enveloped the remaining party. The Garden of Solitude had been aglow with Mizuho fire, but the unnatural light did not follow them below. What followed them instead was unnatural heat. Against all the laws of physics, it was still getting warmer, even as they descended deeper into the earth. Their footsteps pounded on the steep, winding staircase. We are getting closer to the Annihilation Device. Sakura felt like she was running toward a distant furnace.

Then the staircase ended, and they emerged into the Garden of Ancestors.

And into Geigin's trap.

Kankuro, walking point at the head of the party, crashed to the ground and did not get up again. He screamed as his bones were put under an immense, crushing pressure… his entire body being crushed against the dirt floor like a pinned insect. Even the metal joints and ribs of the sand-nin's puppets started to bend under the stress.

*Gravity Wave!*

Sakura succumbed as well, tumbling to the ground behind Kankuro. She could not move a single limb; her body as heavy as if it was made of lead. She could barely even force a breath from her lungs. The Gravity Wave had increased the effective gravitational weight of the area around the staircase by a dozen times, or more. It was an immensely powerful effect. Sakura was helpless, vulnerable to the most basic attack.

"Die!" shouted Haghira Geigin.

Geigin had been guarding the staircase, waiting for them in the darkness and in the dense tangled forest. Now the stone-nin boy threw a flurry of earth chakra-flow shuriken at the poor genin who'd fallen into his trap. Not only Kankuro and Sakura, but also Shinren and Satetsu and Rock Lee had walked unsuspectingly into the Gravity Wave. Lee had managed to climb to his hands and knees with his superior strength, but it was not enough to avoid the deadly assault.

Instead it was Orajuchi who rescued them.
He and Temari had brought up the rear of the column, and so had managed to avoid being trapped by Geigin's attack. Temari reacted quickly, using Vortex to launch Orajuchi into the air, above the limited range of the Gravity Wave. The bat boy screamed down on Geigin from above.

"Echo Attack!"

The concentrated burst of ultrasonic sound waves knocked away the swarm of shuriken. It also forced Geigin back, ripping apart the floor underneath him, and disrupting his concentration. The Gravity Wave which held down the captured genin rippled, then faded. Sakura climbed to her feet, groaning. Temari joined her, War Fan spread with all three of its purple eyes open.

"Traitor!" Geigin screeched, retreating to the edge of the wooded forest that filled the Garden of Ancestors. "Orajuchi! How could you betray Iwa?"

"Not me," responded Orajuchi. "Sawar-sensei betrayed Iwa."

"Sawar-sensei is the Tsuchikage!"

"So he should have protected the village, instead of trying to destroy it."

"That's not for us to judge."

"So even you know he is mad."

"Traitor!" Geigin screamed in a towering rage. "You disloyal, worthless ingrate! I'll kill you, if it's the last thing I ever do!"

Meanwhile, the others had regrouped, licking their wounds from Geigin's nearly successful ambush. "We should attack Geigin together," said the matronly river-nin Higeru Shinren.

Sakura saw the sense of the proposal. Geigin was not nearly as strong as the S-rank Mizukage, or Sougon Shuichi, or Misain Dayu. There was no need to try to run past him. If they struck him with full force, seven against one…

…but Orajuchi shook his head. "No. Not against Geigin."

"Why not?" asked Temari.

"Because—"

"Gravity Wave!"

This time they saw the jutsu coming. A circular ripple in the air, altering the very fabric of space and time within its radius of influence. Sakura and her friends dodged to either side. The Gravity Wave ripped across their path and then curved along the edge of the forest clearing. Too late Sakura saw what the stone-nin was really trying to do. He was using his Gravity Wave to close off the forest. When Temari tried to attack Geigin with Great Wind Scythe, the wind itself was sucked down to the earth by sheer gravitational weight. They could not proceed further into the Garden of Ancestors without hitting his Gravity Wave barrier.

"I can't beat you, by myself." Geigin smiled cruelly. "But I can keep you bottled up right here. Just like Sosano told me to."

"Crap," said Kankuro.

We're running out of time. Now Sakura realized how bad a matchup Geigin was for them. With
Gravity Wave, he had an extraordinary ability to control the territory of a battlefield. Only the glacier-nin Kozumi Saotome had the right kind of jutsu to deal with such a power… but Saotome was not there, stuck instead at the entrance to the Vault, battling Zetsu to the death. Sakura wondered if he was still alive. Haghira Geigin faded into the surrounded forest, his long, skeletal frame blending easily into the night-time foliage. Like his father, she thought again, he looks so much like his father. But Geigin's heart was with Sougon Sawar.

Bakura Orajuchi was just the opposite.

"Go," whispered Orajuchi.

Sakura glanced at the bat boy. "Do you how to get past the Gravity Wave?"

"I do. My summons—"

"Shut up!" shouted Geigin.

"Just do as I say."

She nodded. It would have to be the gauntlet again—someone left behind. Orajuchi's ability to move in the dark, his light weight—the product of hollow bones and a spindly stature—and his intimate familiarity with his teammate's fighting style made him the best candidate to distract Geigin by far. Orajuchi's eyes were black and huge, his long pointy ears twitching in frenzied agitation. The boy's leathery face was pained. Can he beat Geigin one-on-one? Perhaps. Perhaps it no longer mattered.

"Geigin!" Orajuchi spread his arms to left and right. "I never liked you, but you were my comrade. I'm sorry you chose the wrong side."

"You worthless traitor, Sawar-sensei raised you in his own home. He brought you up in Sougon Castle as part of his own family. He was your father. And his son was your best friend. How dare you betray the Sougon clan and everything it stands for! What did that pink-haired bitch promise you? Gold? Power? Sex?"

"She promised to save Sosa from himself."

"Die!" shrieked Geigin.

"Now!" shouted Orajuchi.

A thousand bats burst from the outstretched folds of Orajuchi's uniform, screeching in a nightmarish cacophony. At the same time, Sakura rushed forward, trying to break through Geigin's encirclement. Everyone else followed. Bats were everywhere, flapping wildly through the trees, descending down on Geigin from all directions. Orajuchi leaped toward his former teammate. The two stone-nins came together in a great splintering crash… and then Sakura could not see them anymore.

The Gravity Wave barrier rippled, losing strength.

Sakura barreled through it. Then she was through, and racing deeper into the ancient forest of the Garden of Ancestors. The shadowed woods loomed all around her: great sentinel trees with their twisting needles, leafy aspens, grasses and stalks of swaying bamboo. The last time she'd been here it had been high noon. Now the only light that came through the windows in the vaulted ceiling was a faint, glowing red. The Overlook is burning. The air was acrid was the scent of smoke and ash and blood, filtering in through the tunnels from the battle above.

Then the bombs began dropping on her head.
They caused quite a bit more light. Exploding figurines of red clay, tearing through the trees, blowing holes in the ground, even swarming and crawling along the ground to latch onto their victims before detonation. Sakura was all too familiar with the jutsu, *Explosive Clay*, the bloodline of the Chuzuru clan. When she looked up, several members of the Chuzuru clan were circling above the trees on flying clay dragons. Chuzuru Jibachi was there, of course. But not just Jibachi. There was also Chuzuru Ukio, Jibachi's younger brother, and at least two others. "There's nothing more beautiful than revenge!" cackled a gloating Jibachi. They'd laid an ambush of explosive destruction. Shinren absorbed and then reflected one of the bombs with her special Reflection Mirror, but more quickly followed the first. The ancient forest caught fire, flames and smoke spreading without cease. Bombs were raining everywhere, carpeting the path ahead.

"Shinren!" shouted Sakura. "Can you—"

The river-nin did not hesitate. "I'll hold them off."

It was not easy to break Jibachi's blockade, however. Even with Shinren reflecting attacks, the sheer amount of explosive ordnance being dropped was quite staggering. The Garden of Ancestors was divided into a complex of many smaller, interconnected chambers. A good part of those chambers was now being blown into smithereens. While trying to escape into the next chamber, Satetsu got caught behind the wall of explosions, and even Rock Lee was nearly trapped. There was no help to it. They could hardly go backwards to rescue Satetsu. Besides, Shinren stood a better chance against the Chuzuru attackers if she had someone to help her. Leaving Shinren and Satetsu to fend for themselves, the remaining strike force raced forward, heading for the ancestral Sougon temple not so far away.

They were only four.

Sakura. The Sand Siblings. And Rock Lee. Four ninjas remaining, out of all the dozens that had entered the foyer of Sougon Castle. Four ninjas, approaching the end at last. *Just as you wanted, Sosa.*

But she was wrong again.

She thought the gauntlet was done; she thought that Sosano would be waiting for them in his ancient family temple, four against one. He was not there. Not at the temple gates. Not in the cemetery filled with rows of white tombstones. Not on the tiled sloping roof. Not before the Shiva idols made of stone and lacquered paint. He was nowhere to be found, and then Sakura knew that the gauntlet was not yet over.

Instead a thing stood at the entrance to the temple.

The thing was covered in cables and wire: a thing of metal and steam pistons and robotic flesh. At first Sakura did not recognize him…

… not until Temari drew in a hissing breath.

"Makera!"

*Makera?* But Makera was dead. His brain had been lobotomized by the cloud-nin Imidori Jouda in the Third Trial. Sakura had seen him die with her own eyes. The depraved mist-nin Hoshigaki Makera was no more. So then what was this thing?

This creature?

"A cyborg," whispered Kankuro, awed. "The mist-nin's must've… must've salvaged his body, added
The cybernetic Makera was more powerful than he'd ever been in life. There did not seem to be a flicker of intelligence behind his artificial red-camera eyes. But that scarcely mattered. His programming evidently told him to kill anything that got too close to the Shiva temple. In fact, instead of pressing the attack, the cyborg actually returned to his original position in front of the temple gates. Like a mindless guard dog. They would never be able to get into the temple while this half-man, half-machine thing guarded it.

The sand-nin boy protested it. "But sister, if we fight together—"

"Sakura." Temari interrupted her brother. Her voice was soft as a whisper, and hard as steel. "Once you saved my little brother Gaara's life. Now I am asking you to save my other brother. Kankuro must live. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"I was wrong about you, Sakura. I thought you were just a girl… but you're a damned fine kunoichi. The finest kunoichi I ever knew. End this, the way it must be ended." She laughed softly, unfurling her War Fan. "And tell that idiot… Shikamaru… tell him to zip his fly up. He always forgets."
"Temari!" shouted Kankuro.

But she was already gone, gone in a flash of tearing wind, blades of air coiling around her War Fan.

The sand-nin boy started to run after his sister, but Sakura held him back, held him. "Kankuro! Go back!"

"But—"

"It's what Temari wanted. Temari only agreed to sacrifice herself to save your life. "Go back, and help Satetsu and Shinren. They need you." She looked the boy in the eyes. Tears were rolling down his cheeks. Then he bowed his head, and Sakura knew she had him. She had him, because Temari was the older sister, the mother really, and Kankuro was always the little baby brother. He just wanted someone to tell him what to do. And you will do as I say, because all you can do here is die. Because I promised. "Go now, before it's too late!"

She did not even look back. There was no time left… Temari could sustain her distraction for only a moment. Sakura rushed forward, Rock Lee at her side, slipping through the roaring elemental maelstrom as Temari's wind jutsu held back the power of the robotic Makera. "Lee! Follow me!" she shouted. And then they were leaping onto the roof of the ancient Shiva temple, Sakura punching a hole in the sloping red tiles. They fell through the shards into the precise spot Sakura remembered from the last time she'd been in the temple.

The mural. It stretched across the temple wall, here in the deep recesses of the temple, flanked on either side by ancient stone idols. The mural was just as old, the lacquered paint faded, the colors brown and gray, stained by incense smoke, though still recognizable. Three sisters stood weaving over a loom. Three sisters, representing the past, present, and the future of the thread of a human life. The maelstrom of fate.

And in the center of the mural, where the loom should have been, there was a black heart.

Too glossy to be painted, too smooth to be naturally carved. The heart was so large that a grown man could walk into it and stand in its center without touching the edge. Sakura unveiled the Enshogan eye container in her palm and touched it to the center of that black void. The Eyeless Gate should have been icy cold. Instead it was warm, almost feverishly hot; as was the rest of the baking temple air. Sweat poured through the spandex of Sakura's uniform and plastered her hair against her face. The heat was generated by the Annihilation Device. Excess waste heat thrown out by its unfathomably powerful core, bleeding even through the stone floor and the walls of the Eyeless Gate. They were so close.

The Eyeless Gate opened.

The black gates yawned outward into a harsh, flickering red light, and a steep flight of worn stairs that descended into the earth. The stone tunnel was long but wide, growing larger with each step forward. They were deep in the earth now—deeper than the Catacombs, deeper even the Dreamstone River itself. Then the tunnel opened up entirely into a great, circular cavern.

It was the third and final level of the Vault below Sougon Castle. The most holy place in all Iwa. A place where all the kami spirits of all the ages gather in seclusion, slumbering until their final awakening at the end of days. A place of profound spiritual and prophetic power.

The Garden of Fate.

But she had been told false.
What greeted her instead was a scene of hellish chaos. A siren pulsed across the Garden of Fate, a screeching alarm of roaring red light... shaking the very ground with its violent throes of destruction. Ancient black sentinel trees swayed and shook in the unceasing earthquake. Furnace steam billowed outward to sizzle against the cavernous ceiling high above. It was so stifling hot that Sakura almost felt her skin boil.

And in the center of the garden was the machine.

It was a terrible thing. Immense, glowing red with heat, fed by huge, black cables that burst from the floor and which thrust deep into its chest—the thing had a chest, blinking lights and pulsing arteries and seals screeching with deathly power—like a giant incubator, a metal and flesh womb. The vaginal opening of the womb faced Sakura, so bright and so blazing hot she could not look at it directly—the seething heart at the core of the most powerful weapon in the world. With each heaving contraction the womb called the Annihilation Device bled—rivers of black blood, like oil, that poured out of the hole. The contractions were almost complete, the bomb almost born. A glowing digital clock built above the hole flashed the remaining time before detonation... counting down the few remaining minutes to doomsday. Black blood and screeching screams and red light and the shaking ground turned a sanctuary of peace into a ghastly nightmare. A hellish blaze burned across Sakura and Lee's faces.

They were not alone.

A tall, thin ninja stepped out from behind the Annihilation Device.

A stone-nin.

As she had known it must be.

Sosano.

"I see you, Haruno Sakura," the boy said, so softly. His eyes were dark inky slits, and golden flames burned outward from their center, blossoming like so many glittering flowers. "Welcome to the Garden of Fate. And to the last battle."

"Sosa, stand aside. You're trying to blow up your own village."

"If it cannot save itself, it's not worth saving."

"Sosa... if you don't stand aside, I'll have to kill you."

The countdown timer on the Annihilation Device flashed to fifteen minutes.

"Is that so, Sakura?" The boy smiled, a flash of white teeth in the pulsing dark. "Then you'd best be quick about it."
"We'll stop you!" shouted Rock Lee. He ran at Sosano with fists held high. "I won't let you hurt any more people!"

"Lee, wait—"

Lee did not hear her. He tried to punch Sosano in the face, to which the stone-nin responded by freezing his punch in midair and then kicking Lee in the stomach. Rock Lee flew back right through a sentinel tree, splintering the ancient wood into a thousand pieces.

It hardly slowed the leaf-nin boy down. "You good-for-nothing deadbeat!" Lee shouted with his next breath, scrambling from the ruins of the demolished tree. "You betrayed Sakura-chan!"

"Not at all, my fuzzy egghead. I told Sakura the truth the first time we kissed, but she did not want to hear it."

All men must die.

"Why are you doing this?" Sakura demanded.

"You know why."

"No," she lied. "No, this has no purpose. Using the Annihilation Device on Iwagakure makes no sense. Don't you see? That's what Akatsuki wants, Sosa. They want you to destroy Iwa."

Sosano smiled. "What makes you think I'm not working for Akatsuki?"

That gave her pause. "You're not."

"No. I suppose not." His tone was regretful, as if he wished he'd thought of it earlier. "But I am my father's son. That's what you never understood, Sakura. I told you, but you didn't believe me."

Sosano's features were shadowed by the furnace-red steam of the Annihilation Device next to him. Rhythmic, pulsing light seared across the cavernous reaches of the Garden of Fate. A hissing shriek came with every gyrating contraction of the enormous machine, soaking the grass underneath with belching oil. Blasphemy, thought Sakura. They had defiled the spirituality of this sacred place with violence. High above them, through the ventilation shafts carved in the dreamstone ceiling, came the noise of desperate battle. Ninja fighting and dying in the heart of Uzaemo Square. Sakura had no idea who was winning.

"Your father failed, Sosa. The Fifth lives."

"Indeed. The old whore is more cunning than I imagined. Still, it doesn't matter, does it? She is not here… and here is where the fate of Iwagakure shall be decided." Sosano gestured to the pulsing siren of the Annihilation Device, the countdown timer inscribed in its side. "The clock of fate ticks to the end."

Fourteen minutes.

"Damn you!" shouted Rock Lee. "Sakura-chan, we've got to stop him."

"I know."
"I mean… we can't hold back." Lee's eyes were wide. "Everything we've got. Even if…"

"I know."

Sosano laughed out loud. "Poor dumb Lee, trying to talk Sakura into killing me. Don't you realize she's been waiting to kill me since the day we met? Her heart is frozen stone, boy. She doesn't care about me, or you, or anyone else. She'll sacrifice your life without thinking twice, just to suck the blood from my neck."

"You shut up about Sakura-chan!" Lee barreled forward, a shocking blur of speed. For an instant Sakura could not even see where he had gone to. Lee must have opened all his Chakra Gates, all six of them. Suddenly he was above Sosano, screaming down in a halo of blazing fire, a halo of sheer power and speed. His outstretched fists were a wreath of flames. "Morning Peacock!" he screamed.

This time Sosano did not deflect Lee's attack so easily. "Kinetic Transfer!" he shouted. His Enshogan drained most of the heat from Lee's punches, but he could not absorb it all. He skidded backwards, off-balance, nearly falling.

"Don't underestimate me!" cried Lee. The leaf-nin boy's entire body was aflame with pure chakra. "I am the Handsome Green Flash of Konoha!"

"Well, you're from Konoha, I suppose." Sosano pulled his dreamsteel katana out from the scabbard at his waist. "Fire and Ice!" The counterattack was immediate. A blur of fire and ice, slashing curtains of alternating head and cold. Sosano went directly for Lee's position. Lee was faster, stronger, but Sosano had the superior range and technique. A mighty taijutsu battle raged, evenly matched on both sides.

It was time.

*Past time.*

Sakura opened five Chakra Gates, letting the overwhelming power rush through her body. Then she flashed a quick series of hand seals. "Mirrored Clone!" Four mud clones rose from the ground around her. Concentrating, she extended her chakra fields to encompass the mindless clones, connecting herself to them as if bound by invisible cords. Then at once she was looking out at the world through five sets of eyes. Five sets of senses. Above, the great cavernous ceiling. Wild forest to either side. Behind her, the ancient stone steps that led down from the Garden of Ancestors. And before her, the Annihilation Device. The sinister machine towered over the trees like a giant rusted womb, shaking the very ground with its violent contractions. Two ninjas battled in its shrieking wake.

"Lee!" she shouted. "Box him in!"

Her clones swarmed in on Sosano from all sides. Almost casually, he swung his sword and cleaved one of the clones in two from head to groin. Even with five Chakra Gates open Sakura was not fast enough to dodge the unleashed force of Sosano's Fire and Ice taijutsu. But she needed only distract him. Force him to confront her, and create an opening for Rock Lee.

Sosano drew back into a defensive stance against their combined onslaught. Katana whirling, spinning, steaming ice on one edge of the blade, burning fire on the other. Lee could not slip past the shifting blade, even with Morning Peacock. Sakura rushed forward with her real body and tried to punch her ex-boyfriend in the face. Sosano dodged, but Sakura's momentum carried her into the Annihilation Device behind him. There was an awesome crunch as her chakra-enhanced punch encountered the massive metal hulk; a shockwave that shattered the stones of the ground beneath.
Yet when Sakura removed her hand, the Annihilation Device had not a single scratch. So Sosano told the truth. The Device can only be destroyed by spiritual jutsu.

The countdown timer had reached thirteen minutes.

Sougon Sosano laughed. "Is that the best you have, apes? I've hardly broken a sweat."

"Combined Genjutsu!" Sakura threw all the genjutsu she knew at Sosano. Sleep, Blackout, Mirage, Binding, Amnesia, Whiteout, even Fear. Useless against Sosano in isolation, in combination the far more complex and intricate genjutsu proved effective indeed. Sosano's movements suddenly slowed, his entire nervous system under assault. Lee closed in for the decisive blow.

"SUPER DYNAMIC ENTRY!"

There was an earsplitting crack, a vacuum funnel in the air. And then Lee's kick connected brutally with Sosano's chest from above. The stone-nin was blown through the floor of the Garden of Fate. Layers of solid dreamstone, destroyed by Lee's incredible strength. The smoking crater must have been ten meters deep.

"We got him!" Lee exulted.

"No," shouted Sakura, "no, finish it, now!" The same kick had ended the life of Dr. Honjo Micho—Micho Manslayer, an S-rank shinobi. But unlike Micho, Sosano had the Enshogan. And he could drain the kinetic energy from his body to protect himself from damage—

"BLAST WAVE!"

Sosano's scream filled the air. And with it came the fire. A wave of explosive heat, blasting from the crater hole, hot enough to turn every tree it touched into cinders. It would kill Sakura where she stood.

She had only a single instant to react. Sakura lunged forward, diving in front of Lee.

"Summoning Technique!"

The Blast Wave slammed into them… and was stopped. A large white slug emerged from within the haze of smoke. Its tough slimy skin was largely unaffected by the Blast Wave, shielding Sakura and Lee from the force of the attack.

It was much less large, however, than Sakura had expected.

Katsuyu turned to regard her with waving eyestalks. "Sakura-chan. How may I assist you?"

"Grow... bigger?"

"I'm sorry. Mistress Tsunade requires all the rest of me. This was the most she could spare."

A cackling laugh erupted from within the smoking crater. "How sad for you." Sosano climbed out of the crater. His hair was disheveled, long black hair hanging down to his waist, and his gray robes ran red with blood, but otherwise he was in one piece. His eyes were bright as twin suns. "Sakura. Dear Sakura, it's all slipping away. All your hopes and dreams have turned to ashes. Not even the Queen of Torment can stand against fate. Your precious United Countries shall be annihilated before it was even born. Blast Wave!"

The second Blast Wave was even more powerful than the first. It filled the entire chamber, a wall of
rippling golden flame, racing through the brush to light primeval sentinel trees on fire. Katsuyu absorbed the wave of furnace heat…

…and then Katsuyu exploded.

The slug burst into a thousand pieces. Sakura was thrown back by the force of the explosion, almost losing her footing. Pieces of slug rained down on her.

"Shit!" said Sakura. Katsuyu was not affected by Blast Wave, but the giant slug was vulnerable to a more focused attack. Sosano had used his Bakudan jutsu to destroy the stationary Katsuyu.

A third Blast Wave followed right upon the heels of the second. Sosano would drain all his chakra if he kept up such attacks, surely, but Sakura suspected she would not live to see it. "Lee! Split up!"

"Right!"

Rock Lee leaped to one side, Sakura to the other. Sakura somersaulted forward, pressing her hands into the charred earth. Earth Release: Diamond Wall! The barrier of reflective, diamond-like stone erupted just in time to block the Blast Wave from engulfing Sakura's body. She did not stop, though, but continued to run forward. This was a wise decision. A fraction of a second later Sosano aimed his Enshogan at her Diamond Wall and blew it up, sending glittering shards careening across the floor.

Bakudan explosions continued to follow her, and then another Blast Wave, like swells of crashing fire. It was all Sakura could do to run, hide, dodge. Another Diamond Wall, another desperate leap into the underbrush. Run, hide, dodge. Damn, how to get to close to him? Sosano was dominating the battlefield with his Enshogan. The Garden of Fate had become a smoking wasteland. The fire had largely burned itself out by now, but here and there a few patches were still raging in the brush, fiery islands in a sea of ash and cinders. Elsewhere the trunks of burned trees thrust up like blackened spears. Other trees had fallen and lay athwart with limbs charred and broken, dull red fires smoldering inside their hollow hearts. There were hot spots on the forest floor as well, and places where the smoke hung in the air like a hot gold-gray haze.

"My turn!" shouted Lee.

The headstrong leaf-nin boy raced around the Garden of Fate. Sakura could hardly even see him. Lee's speed was so blistering fast that wind swirled behind in his wake, smothering the fire. He charged in to attack Sosano from the front, behind, the sides, above, below. "Konoha Leaf Whirlwind!" he shouted, heedless of the risks to himself.

"Katsuyu!" Sakura shouted. "Use your acid!"

Katsuyu's body was split into a thousand little slugs, scattered across the battlefield. Sosano's Bakudan attack had not permanently harmed her, and now she reformed into several larger bodies. Each one spit sizzling corrosive acid on Sosano. It was the same type of attack that Sakura had tried on Sosano during their short, careful fight in the Third Trial. But this time was different. No holding back. Sosano dodged both the acid and Lee's diving strikes, curtains of heat and cold whirling around him like a storm.

Sakura joined the fray directly, making more Mirrored Clones to replace the ones that had been lost. One of her clones punched the floor with Chakra Enhanced Strength, causing the ground to cave in beneath Sosano's feet. She herself attacked with her twin chakra-cast kunai, engaging Sosano's katana directly. They clashed in a jarring ring, both weapons glowing with primal energies. Rock Lee ambushed the stone-nin from behind. Yet Sosano seemed far faster than he was before. He's
opened his Chakra Gates, too. It meant the fight had escalated to its final stage.

All their cards on the table.

The fate of the world in the balance.

Sosano's Fire and Ice taijutsu was a blur of flame and chilling frost. He charged forward, slashing his sword in a blazing arc. Rock Lee barely escaped being slit through the throat. Lee's slowing down, Sakura knew. He'd permanently lost the chakra in his lower body—which after all was only an Advanced Transformation jutsu—and Chakra Gates were burning away the rest. Sakura was hardly doing better. They had been fighting for their lives all night. They'd sustained serious injuries: broken bones, stab wounds, blood loss, body trauma. At the Overlook, the Hokage had replenished their chakra via Katsuyu… but that infusion was nearly gone, too. Only Sougon Sosano was completely fresh. He'll wear us out first, and then we're finished.

Sosano did not let up the attack. He pummeled Sakura backward, all the way to the edge of the smoking crater next to the Annihilation Device. When she twisted away, he spun. The spinning cut slashing a gash down Sakura's chest, through her leather chest armor and deep into her side. Sakura cried out, falling awkwardly into the crater. Rock Lee tried to go to her rescue—and then Sosano stabbed him in the stomach.

"Lee!" Sakura screamed.

Lee howled as he went down. Sosano's frozen blade went clear through him and out the other side, impaling Lee into the floor. Lee's legs suddenly vanished, his Advanced Transformation jutsu broken by the shock of his injury. Where his lower body had been, there remained only a cast of plaster bandages. Lee thrashed helplessly. Blood gushed from his skewered stomach, staining his green jumpsuit in rivers of dark red.

"Delusional little boy!" exulted Sosano. He lorded over the defeated leaf-nin. "Dare you test the might of the Sougon clan? We are the glorious descendants of the Sage of Six Paths himself! I am the heir to the Enshogun eye, I am the scion of Uzaemo and Sawar and Seurin. I am the Prince of Dawn! Don't you get it, you ugly ape? She loves me even now. You never had a chance." Sosano laughed luridly. "That's why she cut your legs off."

"Sakura-chan!" Lee cried out.

She struggled to stand, holding a hand to her side to stanch the wound. Save Lee. She had to save Lee, she had to stop Sosano. Could she do it? I must. Five Gates open were not enough. And the alternative was death. I must reach deeper. I've got to finish it, everyone's counting on me. Or they would have all died for nothing.

Sakura opened the sixth Chakra Gate.

The rush of pure power was stupendous. She expected it. She used it, pushed it to her maximum limit. Her body would never recover, she knew. It was far too much chakra at once, her circulatory system overloaded with the violent force. Irreparable damage to every part and organ and cell in her body. But the future longer mattered. Only now; only this moment. Only this boy with burning golden eyes. His arrogant sneer, his treacherous betrayal. Sakura would not let him leave the victor.

Sosano lifted his sword for the finishing blow on Rock Lee's life.

She charged. With one hand outstretched she flung another genjutsu before her, a Combined Genjutsu. With the other she punched at his head.
"That again?" Sosano laughed as he sidestepped the blow. "Fool me once—"

Sakura's knee connected with his balls.

The power of the unexpected strike knocked Sosano clear into the air, stunned. Sakura followed by stabbed a chakra-cast kunai right into his face. Charged with tremendous earth chakra-flow, the kunai hit Sosano with the weight and piercing force of an onrushing freight train. The attack would have killed anyone else, but Sosano cheated death once again. He used his Enshogan to freeze the air in front of him, draining most of the kunai's energy. Not all of it. The remaining force sent Sosano clear across the Garden of Fate to crash unceremoniously into a stand of smoldering trees.

"Third's time the charm," she said.

Sosano emerged unceremoniously from the stand of trees with a bloody face. His nose was broken. "Ah. I see. So that's... gentaijutsu." A fighting style which combined genjutsu and taijutsu in one. There was an incredulous wonder in Sosano's voice. "I almost died."

"That's what you keep telling me, Sosa."

"Oh, I knew you could do it."

Next to her, Rock Lee moaned in pain. Sakura bent down to inspect the hole in his gut, using Advanced Mystical Palm to quickly cauterize the wound. She could do no more on such a short timetable. The clock on the side of the Annihilation Device flashed to ten minutes. "Lee, get up," she told him urgently. "Get up now, we're winning. He's on the run."

"Sakura-chan..."

"You can do it, Lee. Just like you saved me in Kindness Hospital. Please, Lee, don't give up now."

That roused Rock Lee to indignation. "I never give up! That's my Ninja Way!" The leaf-nin boy remade his Advanced Transformation jutsu and then staggered to his feet. "Sakura-chan, your punches. How did you...?"

"Gentaijutsu. It's Tsunade-sensei's fighting style. You attack with genjutsu and taijutsu at the same time. I opened Six Gates to do it."

"Ah, that explains it," complained Sosano. "What an unfair advantage."

"Like being born with the Enshogan?"

"Really, Sakura. Have you met my family?"

He attacked. Head on, his katana a tempest of whirling power. Yet Sakura met him blow for blow. Her constant volley of genjutsu slowed Sosano's reaction time, enough that she was able to fight him on even ground. Then Rock Lee joined, and Katsuyu, and their combined assault pushed Sosano back. Not fast. Not easily. But inexorably. Sosano retreated backward. Lee got in a few glancing blows, and then Sakura followed with her chakra-cast kunai, slashing cuts through the stone-nin boy's robes, drawing blood. In her fists the twin kunai were burning hot, white torches of light. Sosano tried to use Earth jutsu—Earthquake, Fangs of Wrath, Bedrock Coffin—to put distance between them. But to little avail. Soon Sosano found himself backed against the far wall of the Garden of Fate.

"Surrender, Sosa. It's over."
The stone-nin laughed. "Is it? Or am I just enjoying the suspense?"

The dripping condescension made her hesitate. "Fire and Ice is your best jutsu. And you lost."

"Sweet, silly Sakura. You have never seen the true power of Fire and Ice."

Then it happened.

Sosano raised his gleaming white sword…

… and a Blast Wave came out of it.

Sakura and Lee could not avoid the blast. Lee took most of the damage, standing his ground using a cloak of pure chakra. Then Sosano turned the blade to its other edge, and Absolute Zero flashed out. Lee was utterly frozen, entombed in a dead zone of zero kinetic energy. Even light did not seem able to pass through. "Lee!" shouted Sakura, but she should've worried more about herself. Sosano turned his katana again, slashing outward in a wide arc. Blast Wave tore from the left side of the blade, and Absolute Zero tore out from the right. Both attacks hit Sakura simultaneously. She screamed beneath the onslaught of searing extremes, helpless to resist.

An instant more and she would surely have died. But Sosano was not finished with her yet. He drew his sword back, stopping the assault. Sakura collapsed to the ground in a heap, stunned. Her body was burned all over, both from flames and from frostbite. There was so much pain that she didn't even feel it. She was numb to the pain. Hot white spots crawling across her vision.

Sosano shook his head. "See, Sakura? You never believe me." He kicked idly at Rock Lee's frozen form, knocking him from the Absolute Zero barrier. Lee sprawled motionlessly next to Sakura, his body covered in ice from head to toe.

"Fuck," Sakura groaned.

"Well, if you insist."

"Sakura-chan!" echoed a deep, resonant voice. "Get away, I'll distract him!"

Three Katsuyu bodies emerged from behind Sosano, each one twice as tall as a man, spitting acid at the stone-nin in a sizzling stream. Sosano spun without hesitation. With a single slash of his katana he froze the three Katsuyu bodies in Absolute Zero. Then he slashed again with Blast Wave. Katsuyu shattered into a million pieces of steaming ice. Even the slug's malleable cellular structure could not recover from such a totalizing attack. She was gone.

Sakura climbed numbly to her feet. "That's… not fair."

"Yes, very well, I admit it. The Enshogan really is way overpowered. Hey, you made me do it."

Sosano came at her again. One slash of his sword was a Blast Wave, the second slash a wall of Absolute Zero, pummeling Sakura from all sides. So this is the true power of Fire and Ice. Sosano had been holding back all along, intentionally restraining the amount of heat or cold he put out. Now the full power of his Fire and Ice nintaijutsu was unleashed. It was all she could do to dodge. And badly. Sosano's sword sliced into her body repeatedly, carving her shinobi uniform into tattered ribbons. Deep burning cuts bit across her thigh, her forearm and side and stomach and chest, across her scalp. Blood ran down over her face like a red waterfall.

"Come, Sakura," mocked Sosano. "Where's that gentaijutsu now? Not enough concentration?" He stabbed at her heart. Sakura stumbled backwards, falling to one knee. The stone-nin boy brought the
full weight of katana down on her. A high arcing cut, the blade singing down toward her head. Sakura brought her chakra-cast kunai up to parry—

One of her chakra-cast kunai shattered, exploding like so many shards of glass. The other went spinning out of her hand as she was blown back by the force of Sosano’s Blast Wave. She rolled hard on the ground, coming to rest against the blackened husk of a sentinel tree. Sakura was not even sure how she was still alive. Only six Chakra Gates open was allowing her to absorb Sosano’s brutal punishment.

Sosano laughed. The Annihilation Device loomed behind him, the boy's form silhouetted black against the eerie red light. She could see the countdown timer clearly. *Seven minutes, god, there's only seven minutes left.* Sosano turned the flat of his katana to her. For some reason Sakura's eyes could focus on nothing else. The shimmering white blade, the tiny elegant characters burned along the dreamsteel edge. *I see with eyes in their last extremity.*

Sosano's favorite poem, and her epitaph.

"You're finished, Sakura. Do you hear the sounds of the battle above us? They're already dying down. The so-called United Countries has been consumed by its own arrogant pretensions. I expect my father already has Tsunade the Betrayer's head mounted on a stick. Don't worry. You'll join your sensei very soon."

"MORNING PEACOCK!"

The attack caught Sosano completely by surprise. Rock Lee appeared from the ground right under Sosano's feet, erupting in a blur of titanic fire. Sosano could do nothing more than wrap himself in a barrier of ice, trying desperately to shield himself from a fatal punch—

But Lee did not aim for Sosano.

Instead he punched Sosano's sword.

The dreamsteel katana shattered into a thousand pieces.

Sosano shrieked in fury. His shriek was cut short when Rock Lee punched him in the mouth. "The Lotus of the Leaf blooms twice!" shouted Lee triumphantly. Sosano's shields, his whirling curtains of Fire and Ice, seemed like tissue paper before the might of Lee's burning, blazing fists. Lee pummeled Sosano's body directly now, over and over again. Sakura stared in wide-eyed shock.

"Without his sword, Sosano can't use Fire and Ice effectively!" It was a stroke of genius to destroy the sword first.

Sakura did not know how Rock Lee had recovered from being frozen. She didn't know how he had summoned the willpower to use Morning Peacock a second time in the same battle. Even using such a jutsu once could've killed him. To use it twice, and with barely any chakra left? It was an unimaginable feat.

Rock Lee had saved her life again.

With a final savage kick Rock Lee sent Sosano flying into the opposite wall, where he disappeared in a cloud of dreamstone dust. Then the leaf-nin boy rushed over to Sakura's side.

"Sakura-chan! Are you all right?"


"For you, Sakura-chan… anything."
You're still in love with me, she thought. Even now... even after all I did to you. Sakura let him pull her up. Let him hold her as she leaned heavily against his shoulder. Her thoughts were wandering now, splintering. She had run out of chakra. She'd suffered a concussion, and critical blood loss, and traumatic body damage. She was surely in septic shock. It was hard to stand up. Hard to focus. I'm dying. Rock Lee's face floated in front of her, thick fuzzy eyebrows furrowed in concern. A kindly face, she thought. A plain face, but kindly. He was a good man. A loyal and incorruptible shinobi. It should have been good enough. Good enough for any woman... but not her. Rock Lee was everything that Sakura had always told herself she wanted. But she had only been lying to herself. Oh, Lee, don't you get it? Poor dumb Lee. You're too good for me.

Forget me, Sakura, whispered a boy in the dark winter air.

Then the boy began to laugh.

He laughed, and laughed. And when he finally spoke, his voice soft as smoke, strong as ancient roots, Sakura recognized him as Sougon Sosano. "Magnificent!" he exulted. He staggered out of the hole Lee had made, nearly falling face first. Much more than his nose was broken now. Sosano limped, clutching his side, blood shining through the holes in his tattered robes. Yet his eyes were bright as flames. "Yes, magnificent! A battle worthy of the Garden of Fate. You apes have pushed me to my limit. Oh, yes. Even the eggbrain got in a good lick." He threw the hilt of his broken sword away.


"Oh, no. I want you to see this."

"Lee, stop him—"

"DISTANT STARLIGHT!"

Everything went black.

Genjutsu, Sakura thought for an instant. But it was no genjutsu, no trick of the mind. All the light in the world had disappeared. There was only darkness. She could not move. She had no control over her own body. She was not even sure she had a body... it was if her consciousness had become separated from any real physical existence.

And, then, in the middle of that darkness, appeared a torch.

A radiant flame. A glowing battery of heat, summoning all the light in the world into itself. A man with burning eyes.

A god.

"What is it?" cried Lee. "What happening?"

"Energy," whispered Sakura. She slumped to the ground helplessly, the chakra draining out of her. "Heat is just energy. And so is chakra. The Enshogan..."

Sougon Sosano spoke. "Yes. The ultimate jutsu of the Enshogan. The greatest creation of my mother, Seurin Shadowstar. Total mastery of energy itself... total power. I control every single source of energy in this room. Even the energy inside your own bodies. You should be honored, apes. No one has ever before forced me to use Distant Starlight in a fight."

"He can't keep it up. The focus required..."
"I don't need to."

Sosano strode confidently forward, his body glowing with stolen power. Sakura and Lee were utterly helpless to resist. He punched Lee in the face. The brutal Enshogan-enhanced punch knocked Lee out cold. "Look, poor little Lee lost his legs again." Then he picked Sakura up by the neck and snapped both of her legs. The chakra stitches she'd used to bandaid her broken bones gave way with a sickening crunch.

Sakura screamed.

When she crumpled to the floor, light returned abruptly to the Garden of Fate. The Distant Starlight was over. The entire jutsu had lasted less than thirty seconds...

... but it had won Sosano the fight. There was no doubt. Sakura and Lee's chakra was gone, and Sosano's chakra had been replenished. Even though she could move again, she couldn't go anywhere. Her legs were broken. She couldn't even stand up. Dazed, all she could do was raise her head to look at her attacker. The inflamed network of blood vessels that coiled around his golden pupils seemed utterly obscene.


"You leave Sakura-chan alone!"

Rock Lee had somehow willed himself back to consciousness. Flashing hand seals, he re-created his Advanced Transformation in a puff of smoke. Sakura was amazed Lee could even open his eyes, much less pull off another chakra-heavy jutsu. Like Sakura, Lee's Chakra Gates had been sucked dry by Distant Starlight. He had nothing left except for life energy. And there isn't much life left.

"You rotten bastard! Sakura-chan loved you, and you betrayed her! You're the worst kind of trash!" He charged at Sosano with fists outstretched. "Rock Lee, the Sublime Green Flash of Konoha, will bring you to justice!"

"Bakudan," said Sosano.

Lee's legs exploded in a haze of shimmering gold. The transformation vanished; Lee screamed in pain and fell to the floor in a heap. He has no chance. Without Chakra Gates, Lee didn't have the speed to challenge Sosano. Yet Rock Lee still did not give up. He pushed himself upright and made another Advanced Transformation.

"Bakudan," said Sosano.

Lee's legs exploded again. He crawled helplessly on the ground, blood gushing from the stump of his torso. "You—you bastard. I won't give up... Advanced Transformation Technique!"

"Bakudan," said Sosano.

Rock Lee's legs exploded a third time.

"Stop!" Sakura screamed. "Sosa, stop!"

Sosano ignored her. "Come on, you cripple," he taunted. Rock Lee was slow to move in response. Far slower. Lee tried to bring his hands together to make the seal for another Advanced Transformation, but failed. "Get up, little ape boy, and rush me again. What happened to the Will of Fire, eh?"
"Damn you…" Blood poured from Lee's mouth, from a hundred scalding wounds. "You… you worthless coward. I don't care how many jutsu you have, no true shinobi would ever abandon his comrades! Advanced Transformation Technique!"

Sosano shook his head sadly. "There are no true shinobi. There is only... fate."

"For Konoha!" shouted Rock Lee. "For Gai-sensei! For Sakura-chan—"

"BAKUDAN!"

The explosion caught Lee in the middle of his Konoha Leaf Whirlwind. Lee tumbled backward from the fiery blast, rolling like a rag doll across the charred, smoking earth. He didn't move.

"Lee!" Sakura screamed.

There was no answer. No, she thought, no, not like this. With a supreme effort Sakura crawled on her hands and knees toward him. Rock Lee lay sprawled flat on the ground, face up, his eyes closed. He's still alive. Unconscious, but alive. Despite all his wounds, his bloody face, the sleeping boy seemed almost to be at peace. Such an innocent face.

She turned to Sosano.

Her lover stood in the center of the Garden of Fate. The Annihilation Device pulsed behind him, that terrible metal and flesh construct, thrashing like a woman giving birth. The earth rumbled with each heaving push, louder and louder. Five minutes left. Shrieking, as it began its final descent to its conceived purpose. A bomb of mass destruction to obliterate Iwagakure and everything around it for a hundred kilometers.

Death.

No, it can't be. There was an element of ghostly unreality to everything. Too much had happened. Is this how the world ends? Is this fate? She didn't understand. It was so hard to focus, to think. Her mind was as shattered as her broken body. It's a joke, she thought. Just a joke, a bad nightmare. Sakura wanted to laugh. She would wake up in the morning and there would be Sosano in the bed next to her, yes, that was how it would be. Sosano, whispering naughty ditties in her ear. Sosano, reciting poetry against the moonlit stars, holding her close, kissing her, loving her. His eyes were as dark as the night woods. No, this has to be a nightmare. It couldn't be real. Sosano was a man torn apart, she'd always known that. Brainwashed by his father, torn between his duties to his family and his dreams of a different world. But there was a decency in his heart… a gentle vulnerability. A deep longing to be free.

"Sosa," she whispered. "Sosa, stop."

He stretched out the palm of his hand toward her, and then his eyes were golden flames.

"Please," she begged. "Please, don't do this. You're… this isn't you, this is your father, don't you see? This is his twisted jealousy and hatred. Come back to me, Sosa. Let's run away, just like we dreamed…." She groped for the words that would fix it all. "Please. It's not too late."

"It was always too late," said Sougon Sosano.

He turned the palm of his outstretched hand away from her, toward the unconscious Rock Lee. Sakura saw what he was doing. "No… you wouldn't."
"No? Rock Lee, helpless, legless. He's no threat at all. Sweet, innocent, lovely little boy. You don't think I'll kill him? After all, there's no reason to."

"You wouldn't," Sakura said. "You—"

Rock Lee exploded. His body erupted in an inferno of golden flame, a bloody storm of skin and limbs and guts. What remained of Lee's head rolled into Sakura's hands. Half his face remained, the flesh burned off, unrecognizable except for one fuzzy black eyebrow.

Sakura threw up. She couldn't help it. She retched up all her contents of her stomach, gagging, unable to stop. *No*, was all she could think, no, it didn't happen, but it was, *it was*, and Sosa, Sosa the boy she loved, Sosa the murderer of Rock Lee, he was turning his burning eyes to her, and Sosa was laughing and cackling and screaming, "I would! I'd kill you all, your lives are reason enough, just like I killed Lee, just like I killed your little ANBU friend Pug, *every last bloody ape on earth*, and you, Sakura, you're next."
When Sakura stopped retching, Sougon Sosano grabbed her neck and rammed her face through a wall.

It took several tries. The wall was made of pure dreamstone, and the first time Sakura's head only cracked it. Sosano rammed her face into the wall again. The wall developed even more cracks, and a lot of swarming black dots, though perhaps that was only a malfunction in Sakura's vision. The third time was the charm. Her head went right through the wall and out the other side. Her vision was red now, and streams of hot blood poured down her face. It did not even hurt. There was only a numbness, a headache of surpassing weariness. She wanted very much to go to sleep, but Sosano's hand was still tight around her throat, choking her, and the survival instinct to breathe overwhelmed all else. Sakura thrashed with her free arms, trying to pry his fingers off of her.

Sosano kicked her in the stomach.

That hurt very much. It would have knocked the air out of her, too, if Sakura had any left. As it was, blinding pain arced up and down her spine. Sosano kicked her again. She could almost hear her intestines rupture. Sosano kicked her a third time, and Sakura went limp. She couldn't breathe. She was dying, dead, just like Rock Lee was dead. The Annihilation Device was ticking down to zero... they were all dead. It was over.

_Not like this_, a very small voice whispered inside her. _Not like this, do something!

Her hands were still free. Sakura brought them together, somehow, and made a hand seal. _Diamond Wall_. The Diamond Wall burst out from underneath her, ramming upward to attack Sosano. He blew it up with Bakudan, but the momentary distraction allowed her to form a chakra scalpel and slice Sosano's wrist around her neck.

He screamed, very satisfactorily, and let go. Sakura fell hard to the ground, taking great gulps of breath. She twisted around and looked up with a great effort. Sosano had backed a few paces away. He was holding his useless right hand, sliced open to the bone, blood pouring down it, his burning eyes the brightest gold she had ever seen. "Bitch!" he spat.

Sakura staggered desperately to her feet, clutching her stomach. When she tried to walk, she stumbled sideways, her ravaged and fractured legs giving way. She could feel herself bleeding to death inside. No time to heal it, to stitch it together, no time at all. Sosano could easily have blown her bits where she stood with his Enshogan—she was not dodging anything right now—but he seemed to want to draw out the battle. Sakura knew it was the only advantage she had, however meager. _I've got to distract him_.

"You're a sadistic psychopath," Sakura whispered.

He laughed. "So I am!"

"Temari was right. They were all right. I don't know how I didn't see it."

"Didn't you?"

"You hid the truth from me."

"Such pitiful lies, Sakura. The times for lies is long past." The stone-nin boy stalked forward, slippered feet crunching on the shards of his broken dreamsteel sword. His eyes were flaming stars,
his voice a frozen wasteland. "You knew that the Sagewood of Iwa was not the first time we met. It was the Forest of Death. You knew my uncle Charasu was sick… you knew he couldn't have gone on any missions. It was me and you knew. I broke into your secret laboratory and stole the Annihilation Heart. I fought you in Red Rock Cliff, in the Lighthouse, in the Forest of Death. I blew up the ANBU Pug right in front of your eyes. You knew it was me all along… and you loved me for it."

Her voice was twisted agony. "No."

"Even now it excites you, doesn't it? Face the truth! We are both alike, we are the only two that can truly understand each other. This is the life you wanted. This is the death you wanted. You never admitted it, but I saw it. I saw it in the Forest of Death, I saw it in the Cathedral of Faces when you tried to kill me with my own sword. You love killing, don't you? To tear out a man's throat. To order a man to his grave. It makes you feel so strong." The boy roared in crazed, giggling laughter.

"Haruno Sakura, you bitch. You're a monster, a psychopath, just like me. You're a shinobi, and you will die like one."

Sakura tried to punch him, but he was too fast. Her strike went wild and careened into a burning sentinel tree, blowing it up. Sosano whirled behind her in a storm of pulp and wood chips. Yet she was not done. "Combined Genjutsu!" she shouted. Whiteout, Binding, Amnesia, and Fear, four genjutsu in one single attack. Genjutsu to slow Sosano down, to dull his reaction speed. She spun to punch him in the chest, a blow with her all strength behind it…

… yet he stopped it with a single hand. Sosano had used his Enshogan to drain all the energy from her punch.

"Ah, the fabled gentaijutsu again!" Sosano laughed. "Doesn't work so well without Chakra Gates, does it?" He twisted Sakura's wrist, dragging her toward him, and then viciously smashed her in the face with his elbow. The blow sent Sakura flying across the length of the Garden of Fate and against the Annihilation Device itself. She groaned, falling to the ground. The floor shook violently, the heaving metal womb of the Annihilation Device about to give birth. Red light pulsed from its vaginal opening. Rivers of steaming black blood, shrieking with every contraction. Only four minutes left.

Four minutes before the end of the world.

Sakura did not think she had that long herself. Her face was a bloody ruin. Her nose broken, her eyes near swollen shut with bruises, spitting out broken teeth from her mouth. A ringing was in her ear, a dull pain in her chest. She could hardly even feel her arms and legs. I've lost too much blood.

Something was under her, something familiar, hidden in the long green grass. A chakra-cast kunai.

Sakura tried to roll over, grab it.

Sosano stomped her in the chest.

Sakura cried out in agony. The force of the blow broke her ribs and cracked the earth beneath. Then Sosano stomped on her chest again. "Little fucking slut!" he screamed. When, after a while, she tried to crawl to her hands and knees, he kicked her savagely between the legs. Sakura screamed, writhing on the ground in blinding agony. She thrashed feebly beneath Sosano's heel.

"No," she gasped. "No… I… I won't…"

"Won't let me win? Bitch. You're mine."

"You… lying… bastard…"

Sakura tried to roll away, but she was still pinned by his foot, and now he grabbed her forearm,
twisting viciously. The bones in her arm snapped with a sickening crunch. Sakura shrieked. "Bitch!" he shouted. He lifted her off the ground and slammed her body brutally into the Annihilation Device, like a human hammer. Again. Again. Again, swinging her body this way and that across the Garden of Fate like a rag doll. Sakura's head hit the side of the Device so hard that her Konoha forehead protector shattered, the headband plate breaking into little metal shards.

Finally Sosano let her limp body drop to the ground again. Sakura lay helplessly in a pool of steaming black blood, the life going out of her. *I'm finished*, she thought. Her right arm was broken, her legs, her ribs. All her strength. Blood poured out from a hundred cuts, from her burned flesh. She could hardly see. Her head blazed with rending pain, blinding dizziness. Even the burst of energy from six Chakra Gates had gone, leaving only coldness, only numbness. *I tried my best.*

Sosano stood above her. Gloatting, raving. Long black hair cascaded over his face and down to his waist, bloody and disheveled. He was injured, too, but his golden eyes burned bright with power. His voice was a mocking sneer. "Is that all you have? How disappointing. I thought you'd have more than this, Sakura. The fate of the world at stake, your friend murdered in cold blood, and all you could do was tickle me in the foot. All that time cultivating you… training you, teaching you, making you stronger. It comes to nothing, in the end." He cackled madly, a hooting hyena laugh. "You pathetic ape, I thought you were strong. You're a weak fool, just like Rock Lee, just like your worthless village, like the United Countries, all your delusional dreams. I'll destroy them all!"

*Why won't he finish it?* Sakura thought. He should just kill her and be done with it. The Annihilation Device was above her, pulsing red with building power, shrieking its destructive siren with every shuddering breath. Its red light was so bright now that it hurt even to look at it. She felt so cold. Then she felt that something was in her left hand, warm to the touch. The chakra-cast kunai. Somehow she had grabbed it by instinct. The only weapon she had left. Lee's gift to her. The only thing that remained of Rock Lee, his legacy, before Sosano blew up his head.

*I'm dying*, she thought. But not dead yet. No.

She threw the chakra-cast kunai at Sosano…

He stopped it easily, draining its momentum.

… and then she punched it.

The chakra-enhanced blow shattered the kunai into a thousand flying pieces. Sosano had expected the first attack, but not the second. At point blank range, the shrapnel bombarded him with the force of a detonation. Glittering shards of chakra sliced into the stone-nin's body, gouging deep holes through his flesh. Sosano screamed, covering his face. Sakura followed up her attack with an uppercut to Sosano's jaw—putting all her remaining strength into it.

Sosano was sent flying into the upper reaches of the Garden of Fate. He hit the ceiling high above, made a terrific crack in the dreamstone canopy, and then came down again on the other side, slamming into the floor with a gruesome crunch. Sakura tried to stalk toward him, to finish him, but her legs gave out midway there, falling flat on her face into a bush. Sosano got up before she did. The boy's robes were ripped apart, his naked torso bright as bronze in the blazing light of the Annihilation Device, badly bruised and bleeding heavily. Sosano's face was twisted into an expression of rage. He stretched out his one good hand towards her across the room, like he was going to crush her head with his fingers. "Bakudan!"

But this time the explosion was badly off the mark. Her attacks had hurt him badly. The Bakudan
went wild, missing her by greater and greater margins, though she could hardly move herself. *He's afraid, he's trying to end the fight.* But he couldn't hit the broadside of a barn.

"Bitch!" Sosano spat, giving up his *Bakudan* jutsu for lost. Instead he closed his left hand into a fist. "Do you think I need my katana to kill you?" A blade of shifting red flames coalesced from his fist, a blade of foaming blue frost. "I can use Fire and Ice just as well, with these eyes."

*Yes,* thought Sakura. *Yes, and that is your weakness.* But what could she do about it? She'd nothing left…

…or did she?

She thought back to their short, abbreviated fight in the Semifinals of the Third Trial. She had lost then, even with Katsuyu. She had lost again in the Vault beneath Sougon Castle, with Katsuyu, and Rock Lee, and Chakra Gates. *How can I beat him?* He was too strong. She couldn't win…. no more than Jouda could have beaten Makera.

Sheathing the sword. She charged at him, fist raised high, her throat a primal scream.

He charged at her, hair wild, eyes shimmering gold, thrusting his sword before him in a storm of heat and cold.

It came down to their last two techniques.

As it had before.

As she'd always known it would.

*Fire and Ice…*

…versus *nothing.*

The blade of flames and frost slid directly into her chest. Sakura let herself be impaled. Let the sword enter her body… and used it. A chakra scalpel formed in her remaining good hand, the blade sharp to cut through steel. Point blank range.

Sakura aimed for where she knew Sosano would be most vulnerable.

*His eyes.*

The Enshogan.

The cut went right through his temple and bit into his right eye socket. *So cold,* she thought, and then the eye was a ruin of black fluid. Yet Sosano jerked his head back before she could finish before the
stroke, so that the last of it only took off a part of his nose. A shriek came from the stone-nin boy.

Then Sakura felt the weight of the burning sword stuck in her own chest, like someone had thrust a torch around her very heart. She tried to shout, but blood welled from her throat. The thrust had pierced her lung and come out the other side, scorching half her chest. Even when Sosano staggered back, both hands clutching at his eyes, she could do no more than slump to the floor, falling to her knees. Sakura felt all her remaining strength leave her. She had nothing left. No weapons, no stratagems, no chakra, no hope. Where was Katsuyu? Then she remembered that Katsuyu was dead. Rock Lee was dead too. *Sosa killed me, and I couldn't finish him.* The weight of her failure was enormous.

"Fucking slut!" Sosano was shouting.

The right side of the boy's face was a bloody ruin, angry and sinister in the searing red light of the whirling Annihilation Device. Yet his left eye still burned with the power of the Enshogan. *He sees me still.* "You'll pay for that, bitch," he spat, his face disfigured by a crazed blood rage. *Bakudan!*

The explosion was pure agony. For a moment she thought she had died, but somehow she was still alive. She was on her back. She looked up through dazed eyes to see Sosano's tall shadow standing over her. Vaguely, she was aware that the Bakudan explosion had blown away the front of her uniform, leaving her chest burned to the third degree. So vaguely. "Slut," Sosano said with a sinister grin. *No*... blood filled her vision, she was blacking out. Yet she no longer had the strength to move. "Slut, you're mine." Sosano climbed on top of her, ravenously biting at her burned breasts with his teeth. Sakura arched her back in blinding pain.

Sosano's weight lay on hers now, pinning her down. His breath stank of blood and earth. "Sakura, you slut," he said, his one good dark eye shining like that of a demonic vulture. He ripped at her spandex uniform, wrenching it down around her legs—

"No," Sakura mumbled, trying to resist, but it was useless. She had no energy left. It was... she was going to be...

Sosano tore away at the remaining shreds of Sakura's uniform. Tearing at her bloodstained United Countries vest, tossing aside her leather chest armor, her sandals and knuckle gloves. Ripping her tight spandex bodysuit into pieces. Gashing her panties apart. Like a starved predator he dove down on her, pressing his tongue on her face, licking her breasts, biting them, slobbering over her prone, limp body. She was utterly naked from head to toe. "No," Sakura whispered, but the stone-nin only laughed, crazed, insane, gripped by madness.

"You leaf-nin bitch," he hissed at her. "You're so beautiful, so fucking beautiful. Especially like this. You fucking slut, I'm going to rape you until you die. A Sougon always gets what he wants..." His hair spilling out over his face like a river of darkness, enveloping her. He undid his robe, unraveled his loincloth, pulled it down. His thick black erection loomed large in Sakura's bloody vision. Then he thrust into her.

"No!" sobbed Sakura.

"Yes!" Sosano shouted. Thrusting into her with desperate, destructive force, forcing her mouth open, pressing his tongue inside. Molesting her limp body, using her, taking her. His penis slammed into the walls of her vagina again and again. Pain and horror, pain and blood, pain and betrayal—

*Is this the end?* A vision came to her... a vision of the people that she loved. She saw Kakashi, with Naruto and Sasuke. Her mother and little sister. Temari and Kankuro and Orajuchi and Shinren and Yukari and Rock Lee. She saw Tsunade-sensei. The dream of peace. She saw Konoha. Duty, the
village, honor, good and evil. The Will of Fire. *Aren't these things worth fighting for?*

But it wasn't enough. Not enough… the fire had gone out. Only ashes remained. She couldn't...

Sakura felt herself fade away into darkness...

And then she was gone.

The buried stone walls of the Vault were gone. The dark wild earth, the Annihilation Device, the shrieking, pulsing red light. It was all gone.

There was only the sky.

The sky, the blue sky. Blue as the surface of the sea. *What's that?* Sakura wondered. What was this vision? *So blue and large and quiet.* In the back of her rational mind she knew the sky was not real, it was a hallucination of her mind in its last death throes. But somehow that seemed insignificant to her now. *Everything is insignificant compared to this sky.* The blue sea compassed her entire vision. Empty and motionless, drained of either kindness or hatred. A world without man, without good and evil. A world of pure innocence. *What is it?* she thought. *What is in this sky that is so beautiful?*

Was it God?

*NOT GOD,* said a voice.

It was a demon that spoke. A gaunt, translucent specter, floating out of that blue sky. White was its long, shaggy hair, and white was its draped robes, but its skin was grey as smoke, and the two long horns that curved from its forehead were red as blood. When it opened its mouth, the ghost was full of sharp, jagged teeth, and a tongue like a pale slithering snake.

She saw it.

*I know you,* she thought. A titter burst from her lips. *Oh, yes, I know.*

The Shinigami.

The God of Death.

COME, the Shinigami said.

The demon seemed almost to smile through its jagged teeth. *Death,* she thought. Death was welcoming her. She was going to die. *Yes.* She reached for the Death God, for its final embrace. For an end.

COME, the Shinigami said. YOUR CHOICE.

Sakura was confused. What was her choice?

DEATH, the Shinigami said. YOUR CHOICE.

*No,* she thought, *no,* let it be over. She was so tired. Desperately she reached for the Death God. But the more she reached, the more it seemed to move away. It faded. The blue sky faded, bleeding into a stone floor, and the body of a dying girl, and a heavy body atop her, inside her, until she was the Death God and Sosano was the Death God and they were the same. She saw herself; she saw Sosano. She *knew* him. She felt their chakras, how it flowed through both their bodies, through all things. She saw their souls, glittering points of light. She saw them as Tsunade-sensei must have saw them. And she knew the power. The power of the spiritual world, borrowed, channeled. The power
over life and death.

DEATH.

YOUR CHOICE.

YOUR FATE.

Echoes. Ghosts of her whole life, every moment, every memory that made up who she had ever been. Enishi. All the love she had ever felt, all the hatred, all the hopes and fears and all the pain. And death above all. All the death she'd ever known. The loss, the loneliness, the heartache. So much. Too much. Her father, a feeble bag of skin and bones wasting away to his last breath on the last year of the year. Seurin Shadowstar, her dripping heart in a golden haze. Haku, a hand through his chest, and Zabuza. Cradling Pug's detached head in her blood-drenched arms. A little girl martyr kneeling in the Asylum, screaming but no sound came out. Sougon Nachi, his throat slit by a kite wire in a desert canyon. Nonou, drowning in her own corrupted blood. Asuma and Tenten, Akimichi Auni, Noatari Chusei. The jinchuriki Azuraki Han, the untouchable girl Urashima Kocho dying of tuberculosis, Misain Rei in her death throes, Sebi crying, begging to be spared, mutilated Anake lying on a slab in the morgue. Baki dead, tortured Shikamaru in chains, Morino Ibiki's head flying through the air. Makera and Jouda embraced in death, Dr. Honjo Micho's shattered glasses. Temari's hard, clear eyes as she told Sakura to save her little brother's life. Rock Lee, a burned fuzzy eyebrow rolling to her feet. Sougon Sosano telling her that he loved her, killing her, raping her. His body a shadow, a ghost of light and memory, and the only real thing the small glittering orb deep in his brain, fragile and bright as a mirror on the wall. His soul. Sakura reached for it with her blazing mind. Two souls touching, grasping, balanced on the edge between sanity and delirium, the edge of this world and the next. I see you. She reached for him, and then she knew.

Death. My choice.

My—my strength—

The stone keeps to its path.

It was enough.

Sakura laughed.

"Torment," she whispered.

Sougon Sosano's soul shattered to pieces.

And so did hers.

He did not go limp and blank, as she expected. Instead he screamed. He shrieked and rolled off her, into the grass, clawing at his own face. Sakura got to her feet slowly. She felt nothing. Everything was a shadow: her naked body, the dirt and blood beneath her feet, the dreamstone walls, even the pulsing red light. Only the glittering soul in her own brain was real, and the broken soul in Sosano's. When she looked past Sosano, to the Annihilation Device which pulsed in the final throes of its birth, she saw the souls there as well. Four souls, for four jinchuriki. Four souls, from which the Annihilation Heart derived all its power. The countdown time to its detonation flashed to a single minute.

"Finish it," Sosano gasped.

His soul was broken, all in fragments, yet something held the remnants together still. Some impulse
of life, of hatred. Some delusional capacity for suffering.

Madness.

"I don't want your pity!" he screamed, writhing in insanity, like a mad feral dog, asking her to put him down. He stared at her with his only good eye, the Enshogan burning gold. "I don't want it! Fuck you! You whore! You coward! Finish it! Finish it! Finish—"

She did.

The physical death followed shortly after the spiritual. It was almost an anticlimax. He made a long, horrible choking sound, his limbs jerking violently. Then there was silence. In the rubble of the Garden of Fate his limp, bloody corpse looked very small.

All men must die.

It was easy to use Torment on the Annihilation Heart as well. What did it matter, that each time she used Torment she sacrificed a piece of her own soul to the Shinigami? It was just another chip off her own twisted existence.

Four jinchuriki souls suspended in a construct of chakra and metal, cracking, breaking.

Twenty seconds—

Nineteen—

Stopped.

The light went out of the Annihilation Device. The whirling machinery of incubation and destruction, the contracting womb… all fell silent. It was over in a single moment. The Garden of Fate was all in darkness, all in stillness. The earth no longer moved. The only sound was the faint rumble of the Dreamstone River through the stone walls. Shaft of faint starlight pierced from high above, the world outside Sougon Castle filtering down deep into the cold frozen earth. The great metal and flesh construct of the Annihilation Device was no more than a inert statue, buried in charred trees and branches and vines and flowers. A dead metal bomb, covered in dead life.

It was over. The world is saved.

She felt nothing.

There was another sound. Coming through the shafts. But not the sound of battle. A faint sound, the sound of a man's voice, carrying over the Overlook, rippling deep down through the ventilation shafts into the Vault of Sougon Castle itself.

"THIS IS HAGHIRA DOI. REPEAT, THIS IS HAGHIRA DOI. THE OVERLOOK IS OURS. SOUGON SAWAR IS DEAD. ALL REMAINING RESISTANCE, SURRENDER AT ONCE. I REPEAT, SURRENDER AT ONCE. THE OVERLOOK IS OURS."

Sakura sunk to the ground. She crawled over to Sosano's body, and she held it in her arms. The boy did not move. "Oh, Sosa," she whispered.

And even as she cried, even as the tears burned like acid down her cheeks, she did not stop. Sakura licked the hot blood off her dead lover's face, his destroyed Enshogan eye. She swallowed it desperately. The blood of Sougon Sosano tasted like secrets, like long walks in a forest wood, like an embrace on a twilight mountain, like crazed cackling laughter, like death. It tasted so good. So
The taste of the strong. "Oh, Sosa. Is this what monsters do?" she asked the lifeless corpse, kissing him on his bloody lips, biting pieces off his swollen bloody tongue. "Is that what you wanted to show me?" Sakura wished it would never end.
They found her in the darkness, they found her in the shadow of the Annihilation Heart and gently pried Sosano's corpse out of her arms, and gathered up the pieces of Rock Lee in a bag, and gave her healing, and draped rags around her body to cover her nakedness. Sakura barely felt it. When they tried to put her on a stretcher she shook her head and told them no.

She wanted to walk.

And to carry the body.

And so the victors of the Battle of the Overlook came trudging out of Sougon Castle into the dawn light.

The Overlook was a reeling jungle of smoke and rubble, barely recognizable. Where once had gleamed the level red tiles of Uzaemo Square, now only a twisted ruin remained. The battle had shattered Uzaemo Square as if it was a pane of glass. Thousands of human corpses littered the cracks, making the ground slick with blood. Iwa's entire central Kuramae District had been obliterated as far as the eye could see. The Iwa Council Chambers; Kindness Hospital; Sougon Castle—all gone. Not even the sacred Katsu-ji Temple had survived. The dawn sun shone through the temple's broken bronze gate like a great golden eye, washing the battlefield in light.

A man was waiting for her at the entrance to Sougon Castle. Densuke Tosken the Chameleon. He had lost his straw hat, and his thick dark hair unfurled behind him like a sodden flag, heavy with blood.

"A great battle is a terrible thing," the rain-nin told her, gesturing to the ruins of the Overlook. "But in the midst of blood and carnage, there is sometimes also beauty… beauty that could break your heart. I shall never forget the way the sun looks as it rises upon the Overlook now. Ten thousand men have died, and the air is thick with moans and lamentations, but above us the sky turns gold and red and orange, so beautiful it makes me weep to know that my students will never see it."

Kyoroku Erima and Junichiro Tenshe lay on the ground, limp and still. Dead. Erima's cold lips were twisted into a strange smile. Tenshe's blotchy face had grown yet more blotches, open wounds where the daggers had been thrust into his head. Who on the other side had killed them? Sakura suspected she would never know.

They were not alone.

The swamp-nin Yoshimi Saori.

Yasunari Tontero and Yahiro Izen of Grass.

The glacier-nins Konoe Naraku and Uraouji Memei, their bodies locked in a stiff, frozen embrace.

The amoral blood-nin Makoto Mazu.

Sougon Shuichi, the demented clan elder, still in his bedrobes, a hole in his heart.

Kasuga Darui of the Black Cloud.

Teru, the beloved pet deer of the Sosano clan.
The cyborg monster, Hoshigaki Makera, ripped in half from top to bottom by hurricane winds.

And Temari.

All dead.

She lay with her War Fan at her side, like some kind of praying angel. Blood had poured down the front of her chest, where the exploding weapons of the cyborg Hoshigaki Makera had ravaged it; making her face pale as ice. Temari did her duty. She died so that the rest of us could live. Sakura would never forget.

"Kankuro?" she asked.

"In the medic tent." The sand-nin Ryokan Satetsu stood slightly apart from them all, his eyes beady and bloodshot in a pinched face. His father's face, yet a boy's voice. A boy's stutter. "He… he didn't want to leave Temari's side. I had to drag him there."

"Then you did well, Satetsu."

"Is…" Satetsu faltered as he stared at the body in Sakura's arms. "Is that—"

"Yes," said Sakura. "I killed him."

She found Haghira Doi the Dragonsight in the center of Uzaemo Square. The victorious leader of the Battle of the Overlook was a skeletal figure, covered head to heel in drying blood. Corpses were at his feet, and the legendary sword Masamune was in his hand, the point so sharp it seemed to slice the very wind. Doi curled his fingers around the hilt and thrust the katana deep into the rubble, motionless, as if standing a vigil over the dead. Blood ran down the edges of the glittering white blade and into a pool at the Dragonsight's feet, bright red in the dawn.

The head of Sougon Sawar, the Fourth Tsuchikage, floated in that pool like a swollen balloon.

Where the rest of Sawar's body was, Sakura could not say. Perhaps it had been buried under the rubble, or obliterated in the battle. There were other bodies enough. The Iwa ANBU Commander Sougon Mari. Sougon Razu. Tajima, the noble matriarch of the white-tailed deer of the Valley of Spears. Tokako Matsushita the Stonecrusher. Iranki Okita the Fearless. The Akatsuki missing-nins Gifuu Hidan and Onira Kakuzu. The waterfall-nin Inamida Osamu. The swamp-nin Shigeru Yorai of the Crag. Wakanura Chiriku, monk of the White Temple. The rain-nin Nichiren Pou. An entire mountain of bodies.

And Doi's son, Haghira Geigin.

Sakura scarcely recognized him. Geigin's face had been half-ripped off, and he was missing half his entrails as well. Sosano's teammate, the one he always scorned. A pawn, not a player. Yet Geigin had remained loyal to the Sougon cause, even when his own father had not, and it had cost him his life. Next to Geigin, on the bloody rubble, there was an empty space.

"The Prince of Dawn," said Haghira Doi, stirring from his vigil at last. "And the Sun Breaker. Father and son, united in death, as they never were in life. May God have mercy on their souls. And on my son's."

Sakura's arms were stiff from carrying Sosano all the way up through Sougon Castle; her body numb with grief and hurt. "Doi-sama," she started, before she caught herself. No, he is the Fifth Tsuchikage
"I must remember. "Tsuchikage-sama. The Annihilation Heart has been destroyed, and the
defenders of Sougon Castle are no more. The castle is yours."

He searched her face. "Arashi the Demonslayer told me the same once, long ago. In the final climax
of the Battle of the Gongs... Seurin's greatest victory in the Second Ninja War. Though they were
born in the same year, the year of the Shadowstar Comet, your father and Seurin met only once.
Arashi landed at Lussajis as part of an invasion force led by Misain Seve the Thrice-Dead. Seurin
was outnumbered three to one, yet she routed the invaders on the streets with minimal casualties.
Only Arashi stood fast, hiding with his forces in the city castle. Seurin challenged him to single
combat. Let two shinobi meet in battle, she said, and let there be only one who returns. Arashi
accepted. And so they faced each other beneath the walls of Lussajis.... and though they fought with
all their strength, not one home was destroyed, not one more civilian suffered injury. In the end the
duel ended with both fighters bleeding on the ground. As I came running forward, to cradle Seurin in
my arms, Arashi spoke to me, a bloody smile on his lips. The castle is yours, he told me. As souls
reincarnate in an endless cycle of life and death, so too history repeats itself. Thirty years later,
beneath another set of castle walls, two shinobi met in battle, and only one returned. So Arashi's
daughter killed Seurin's son, and so the Battle of the Overlook is done."

"No," said the boy Bakura Orajuchi. He knelt by Sosano's side, tears streaming down his black,
leathery cheeks. "You didn't kill him, Sakura. He killed himself. I knew it would happen. He'd been
waiting for years... waiting for the right moment to die. He wanted his suicide to be beautiful."

"He was a romantic."

"He was a coward. He knew what his father was doing was wrong, but he didn't have the courage to
stand against him. The courage to keep on living. He threw it all away for nothing. He was my best
friend, and now he's gone." Orajuchi's voice was angry, bitter. "Sosa went off to the death he always
wanted, but he left the rest of us here, to pick up the pieces. You, me, Semele. And now we have go
on living. That bastard, he never deserved us."

"No," said Sakura softly. "But he has us, anyway."

When Bakura Orajuchi stood, Sakura saw the stoop in his stocky shoulders. The way the bat-boy's
ears had shriveled up, like worms on a fire, and the torment in his huge, shiny black eyes. Orajuchi
little piece of your heart, to remember. To keep him alive."

The dead are not dead.

"Always."

The Fifth Hokage stood alone.

There was a hill of rubble in the north part of Uzaemo Square—the remains of what appeared to be
the Iwa High Council Chambers. The United Countries had assembled a makeshift headquarters
here. It was a hive of activity; rescue workers rushing the injured to the medic tent, grizzled chuunin
barking orders, Katsuyu's divided slug clones crawling everywhere looking for more survivors. The
rest of the Overlook had been destroyed, yet here order still reigned.

Many great personages were collected on that hill. There was Hyuuga Hiashi the Whirlwind, Sakura
saw, and Anayama Chiyo the Weaver. Konoha ANBU Squad 1. Nobunaga Kikuko the Spinster. A
man in a hooded reed cloak who could only be Hanzou the Reaper himself, Lord of the Rain
Sarutobi Inishu. Unchiku Narumi of Wave. Gaara, blood trickling from a cut on his forehead, over
the tattoo of "Kindness". Hatake Kakashi the Perfect Ninja, her old sensei, whom she had last seen in another lifetime.

Senju Tsunade stood apart from them all, looking at the dawn.

The hill was not high, yet it hurt to climb it all the same. It hurt even to move. Sakura had opened six Chakra Gates, and not only opened them, but pushed them to the very limit; forcing too much chakra through her body over and over again. With each breath she took, there was a stabbing pain. An ache that pierced through every muscle and joint in her whole body. The pain won't go away, this time. Sakura knew the pain would not leave her until she was dead.

And not just her body.

Her soul was damaged as well. I used Torment… I sacrificed a piece of myself to the God of Death. It was if a hole had grown in her heart, as if there was a hollow place where her feelings had once been. Would she ever be able to cry again? By using Torment, she had crossed the barrier between the realms of life and death—a piece of her at least—and now death cast a pall over everything, like a shadow over the light. Like the noonday demon. She felt numb and ghostly.

Is that you how you feel all the time, Tsunade-sensei?

The Hokage was all in white. An impossibly spotless white, clean as new fallen snow, though all the world was covered in red blood. Her white gown had not even a single stain on it.

When Sakura was close enough she saw that the Hokage's hair was white, as well.

The white hair was thin and fraying, fallen out in ugly balding clumps. Yet the hair was fairer to look upon than the Hokage's face. Hideous black scars slashed all across the pale wrinkled skin, making a ruin of its once beautiful features. There was a stump where her nose should have been, a crater where there should have been her chin. Who is this ghastly disfigured woman? thought Sakura. Then she remembered it was the Hokage's true face. Tsunade had used all her chakra in the battle and had nothing left to maintain her transformation jutsu. She has used up all her strength, and now she is old again. Only the eyes, piercing and sharp, still retained their luster, a trace of the Scarred Beauty's former splendor.

The Hokage's left hand was enclosed in a fist. Now she opened it and showed its contents to Sakura. A glittering gold medallion, etched with the symbol of Konoha. A chuunin medallion. "Congratulations, Sakura," said the Hokage softly. Her voice was an aged rasp, a faded echo. It did not sound like a congratulations at all. "You earned it."

Sakura took the medallion.

"Dr. Micho was an Akatsuki traitor," she said. "Rock Lee killed him."

The Hokage only nodded.

"Sosano killed Lee," she continued. "He killed Pug, too, back in the Forest of Death. That was the first time we ever met. And I killed Sosano. I used Torment. I drove him insane and then I sent his soul to hell."

The Hokage said nothing.

"At the end… he was so strong. I tried so hard. I tried to think of you. Your dream of peace. I tried to think of my family, my friends, the village. But it… it wasn't enough. Only one thing was enough."
"And do you know now?" the Hokage asked. "What you want? Why you want to be a ninja?"

Twice she lied, and twice more. But at last she spoke the truth. "I want power. I want to hold another person's life in the palm of my hand… to taste his blood in my mouth. And it feels so good. It's what I want. It's what I always wanted."

"Yes," said Senju Tsunade. "And now you know the source of your deepest strength. That is why you have continued so far down this twisted path, even when you had so many chances to run away. But there was always something holding you here. It was death. The power over death, to decide who shall live and who shall die. It excites you… it intoxicates you and makes you always hunger for more. More power, more control, more killing. In another world, they would call you sociopathic. A monster. In this world we call you strong. The ruthless, cruel strength which cannot be broken. The hunger that this world requires—to send your closest friends to the grave, to comprise your own principles, to make the decisions that must be made, and the most horrible monster is the visage of your own reflection, and when it is all gone, all of it, as it must will be, all the glory, the honor, the love, the hatred, the dreams, the duty, when it is all gone, only the hunger remains. But the hunger is enough. One day, Haruno Sakura, if you live, you shall be Hokage."

They did not say anything after that.

The Fifth Hokage looked out over the ruins of the Overlook. The sun was rising. It ascended slowly into the sky, streaking the dawn with rays of red and gold. The day was cloudless. Sakura could see from horizon to horizon, her view marred only by the smoke from the still smoldering Sougon Castle. Heaps of corpses stretched across the length of Uzaemo Square, so jumbled together that she could not tell which had been United Countries soldiers, and which Confederacy. To either side the two streams of the Dreamstone River were calm, a sheet of glittering glass. Carrion crows circled in the sky, diving down upon the battlefield to feast upon the bodies of the dead. A stench of death reeked through the air, mixing with the smoke, the metallic scent of blood.

For a long time they stood there in silence.

But one thing more nagged at Sakura.

"I thought you were dead," she said. "When Sosa blew up Sougon Charasu… but that wasn't your real body, was it?"

"Of course not."

"You used an Advanced Transformation jutsu on your clone. The same one you used to disguise your face. You faked your own death."

"Yes."

"But then… where was your body? If you weren't Charasu, then… who the hell were you?"

"Who was I?" The Hokage turned to stare at Sakura. "I was the pig."
The days after the battle were even more exhausting than the battle itself. The battle had been one primal scream fueled by adrenaline; the days after a series of excruciatingly dull moments that never seemed to end. There was the time spent recovering her strength. There were the political meetings that Tsunade-sensei insisted she attend, Haghira Doi and the leaders of the United Countries negotiating round and round in circles. It was a foregone conclusion that Iwa would join the United Countries, but the new Tsuchikage seemed to want to make the process as maddeningly difficult as possible. Doi's way of asserting independence, Sakura supposed, though indeed completely pointless, like the meetings themselves. She had not quite realized before how much time all these people spent in meetings. In her idle moments—which were many—she wondered how much history had been created by the leaders of the ninja world boring each other to death.

And then there was the recovering of remains. Much of the village had been destroyed in the Battle of the Overlook. Uzaemo Square had been obliterated. Thousands of people were missing. Sakura spent much time digging through the wreckage, looking for bodies or, more usually, pieces of bodies. She had done such things in Konoha, after the December 7th attack, but this was on another scale altogether. This time she was a chakra sensor. If she concentrated, she could feel the faint chakra residues of dead people all around her. This ability had made her indispensable to the recovery effort. The intensity of the battle had been such, that the parts of a particularly unfortunate body could be scattered over half the village. The rescuers wanted her to identify and find them one by one. It was exhausting, monotonous work. And pointless, she thought; what did it matter if she found the corpse of some lost villager? It was still dead.

Temari's body had been whole. Sakura saw it again after the Battle of the Overlook, when she went to the overfilling mausoleum in the ruins of Katsu-ji Temple and happened on Kankuro grieving over the stiff white corpse of his sister. Gaara had been there, too. Gaara was crying.

There had not been much to say. Both of them knew that Sakura had ordered Temari to her death. Both knew her decision had been justified. She suspected Gaara would have made the same decision, in her place. But the abstract knowledge of that truth made no difference.

"So we meet again, Haruno Sakura," the Kazekage had told her. "I wish it were under better circumstances."

"Yeah. Me too."

"The judges made Temari a chuunin. Posthumously. She deserved every bit of that honor. She deserved more. My councilors want me to give a full ceremonial parade for her, back in Suna. A parade. I will, of course, if only because that's what is expected. Do you think a parade will help, Sakura? Do you think a parade will help take away the pain, here?" Gaara pointed to his heart. It was a real question. Even in his Kazekage robes, the boy had never looked more young or fragile.

"I don't know."

Kankuro roused himself. "You don't understand. You think you were close to her, but you didn't grow up in Suna. You didn't grow up in our family." His voice was as raw as his eyes. "Temari was everything to us. She was our mother and our father and our sister, all in one. No one else could have done what she did. She was the best of all of us. It shouldn't have been her. Not Temari. Never."

"She gave her life for you. For all of us. I'm sorry."
Sakura turned to go, but Gaara stopped her with a question. "Sakura. Do you believe in God?"

Did she? Sakura remembered going into her room that first day, at the Zoo, and seeing Temari praying with her metal fan spread out in front of her. It had surprised her, that Temari was that kind of person. She remembered how Temari had prayed for the souls of the dead in the Cathedral of Bones; she remembered her strength. Temari, her deep faith. But Sakura had never had such faith. *I believe in death.*

"I don't know."

Gaara's eyes were hollow black circles. "I do. I must. I believe God is kind. I believe that we are not alone—that my sister is not alone, even now. I couldn't bear it, if I thought she was really gone."

"Then I envy you, Kazekage-sama."

Sakura was much envious, in those days after, though her envy only fed her guilt. *I am envious of the dead, as if I wished to be rotting in the grave with them.*

She had moved out of the Zoo into Tsukai Gardens. Absurdly, the Gardens remained for the most part an idyllic paradise, somehow untouched by the fighting. Her new apartments adjoined the Hokage's own, and so every morning she would wake up to the best view in the whole villa, looking out at the kaleidoscopic flowers of Walking Stick Hill. The flowers were more beautiful than ever, this time of late summer.

Yet the beauty did little. Actually, Sakura missed her little room in the Zoo. The stink of it, the bare walls, the way every part of it had been littered with Kankuro's gadgets. It felt almost like home. Her apartments in Tsukai Gardens lacked for nothing, except that there was no life in them.

Every night she went to sleep alone, with no one to keep her company except her own memories.

There was not even Tonton to take care of. Once Sakura had tried to look for the runaway pig, before she remembered that Tonton had never really existed; at least not this version. The real Tonton was still back in Konoha... and had never left it. What had gone to Iwa was not a pig but a devious disguise. Sakura had taken care of that disguise for months, washing it, feeding it, petting it. Sakura could not count how many times she had gone to sleep with Tonton in her arms, whispering secret nothings into the pig's fat pink bulk. The idea that Tonton had actually been Tsunade-sensei the whole time was nauseating. It would have angered and embarrassed Sakura even more if she was not still in awe of the sheer brilliance of it. She'd never suspected, not once. Neither had Sosano. *A small price to pay, in order to save the world.*

Sakura knew that now.

The 54th Iwa Chuunin Exam ended where it had begun, so many lifetimes ago.

The Overlook.

Sakura remembered walking into the Overlook for the first time; how the castle had loomed above her like a monstrous bleached skull. That was the night of the First Trial. The night the Tsuchikage Sougon Sawar had invited them to dinner, and the night his son had kissed her for the first time. *His lips were warm as summer, but I did not see the death lurking beneath.*

It was a different place which Sakura returned to now. The peak of Sougon Castle was little more than a ruined rubble. Deep cracks ran all along the walls, and in places the stone had fallen out altogether, making holes through the white dreamstone like little windows. In time the damage could be repaired, certainly. But the scars would remain. *It's gone, all of it. Never again would the
Overlook be considered an impregnable fortress. Never again would a Tsuchikage declare that Sougon Castle stood forever, lest Sougon Castle carry him off to his grave, as it had carried off the Sun Breaker.

The new Tsuchikage was a man of few boasts. "Kneel," Haghira Doi told them, the sword Masamune glittering in his hand like pale white fire. One by one he tapped each person on the shoulder with the katana blade, the edge so sharp it drew blood at the slightest touch. And then, "Rise. Rise now, you who have braved all hazards, you who have done honor to your village, and to the name of shinobi. Now you are Chuunin."

They rose.

Sakura rose with the rest, the golden chuunin medallion clutched tight in her fist. On her right was Hyuuga Neji, and on her left, Sabaku Kankuro. They stood in a row, all those genin whom the examiners had deemed officially worthy of becoming chuunin. Touin Yukari. Kirazu Raiki. Higeru Shinren. Kozumi Saotome, and Bakura Orajuchi, and Ryokan Satetsu.

And those not with them.

Those who had died, before they could receive their promotions.

Imidori Jouda.

Sabaku Temari.

And Sougon Sosano.

The promotion ceremony was short, a mere formality. Yet it was a kind of closure all the same. An ending. It's done, Sakura thought, looking down at the dark green flak jacket she wore now, the symbol of her new status as chuunin. This was why I came to Iwa, for this. There was nothing left for her here anymore.

Afterward, the Hokage approached the two new leaf-nin chuunin as they stood atop the ruined peak of Sougon Castle, watching the Dreamstone River churn far below. "My congratulations to you both."

Neji stared at her with unblinking white eyes. "And Lee? What about Rock Lee?"

"What would you have of me, Chuunin Neji?"

"A battlefield promotion. A medal, for valor in the line of duty. For his country. Lee died for you."

"Yes." Senju Tsunade's voice was a trickle of ice. "Medals I can give, but death is beyond my power. Is this truly the boon you seek?"

"It is."

"Then it shall be done."

When the Hokage had left, Sakura turned to Neji. "I didn't think she would say yes."

"She had to." Neji raised his face to the bright morning sky. "Tsunade has few allies in Konoha. Even fewer after the Battle of the Overlook. She can't afford to make me her enemy."

"Enemy?"
"Didn't I tell you, Sakura? I'll have vengeance on them all."

A chill crept down her spine. "Lee wouldn't have wanted that."

"Lee's dead."

They were all dead. Lee. Tenten. Anake. Even Maito Gai, sacrificed by the Hokage to a fate worse than hell. Neji's all alone, and revenge is the only thing left to him. "All the more reason to honor Lee's memory."

"Is that so, Sakura? Tell me then. How ought we to honor him?"

It was a question Sakura was not sure she could answer.

"Lee… he wouldn't have ever given up."

"Yet you ask me to give up my vengeance."

"No. Only channel it. Use it, as Lee used his, to protect the ones that he loved."

Neji considered her with a careful look. "You mean Gai-sensei."

"He's still out there." Sakura remembered the Asylum. She remembered the face of a little girl martyr, mouth gaping grotesquely, as if she was screaming, but no sound came out. "We can still bring him back."

"I've not forgotten."

"Then what will you do?"

"What I must." Neji closed his eyes and bowed his head. "Aumono came to see me last night."

Mukai Aumono had been promoted to chuunin, too, but he'd never shown up for the ceremony. Nor had any of the rain-nins. What could Aumono want with Neji? "What did he say?"

"He said he was being sent on a mission. Back to the Rain Country, to fight Akatsuki. He said more as well. He told me about his life. About growing up in Rain, about Hanzou the Reaper who he had never really known. Aumono talked about his father." Neji looked up at her, and Sakura was startled to see that he had activated his Byakugan. Tears brimmed around the edges of the engorged whiteness, reflecting it like a magnifying glass. It was as if he was trying to see all the way across the world, to the Asylum, and even beyond. To see the truths hidden inside the very world. "Aumono told me that we hadn't finished what we started, when we fought in Chuunin Exam Stadium. He offered to let me finish it."

"You… you killed him?"

"No. I gave him this." Neji brought his hands out of his robes. He was holding Rock Lee's forehead protector in his hands. The metal plate had been shattered in three pieces, from the Bakudan explosion that had blown apart Lee's head. Neji had pieced it back together, cleaned it as best he could. Visible cracks ran all along the shimmering steel, like damaged glass. A potent symbol of their fallen friend; a constant reminder. "I told him to hold it in his hands, just for a moment. I told him that there had been enough killing. And then Aumono made me a promise. He said that he would do everything he could to shut down the Asylum. That he wouldn't ever give up until the Rain Country had become the Valley Country it used to be. And that one day Maito Gai would live again. It… it was the oddest feeling, Sakura. Right here, in my chest. The oddest feeling."
"What?"

"I believed him."

Neji left with the noonday sun, descending the Overlook with the other chuunin, but Sakura lingered on.

There was yet one more thing for her to do here.

Sosano's funeral.

They buried Sosano in the Vault, locked deep away in the lush greenery. Mirrored sunlight from the surface washed the underground caverns in a blaze of golden light. Wild trees laden with sap, huge grasping vines, tall tangled grasses bursting with a profusion of flowers. The Vault was beautiful still, yet even here the air was rank with the scent of death. *A pretty graveyard, but full of ghosts.*

Semele met her at the entrance.

The girl wore a simple gray kimono, the ancient golden crest of the Sougon clan stitched into its back. She seemed so small, but no longer young—so different from the person she had been before. In her hard face then Sakura saw the burdens that had haunted her older brother; a sort of intense glimmer that danced across her bright green eyes, a hint of some hidden terror underneath.

For some reason, Sakura thought of Sasuke.

Not Sasuke as a teenager, but the Sasuke he had been. A little nine-year child, at the funeral after the Uchiha Massacre. The whole village had been there. Sakura had been there, hugging her mother's waist, her mother's stomach round with the still unborn Kyoki. Sasuke's face darkened when he saw. What was in those eyes? Jealousy? Hatred? Torment? *I never knew him after that day, not truly.* Sasuke had been surrounded by a crowd of thousands, yet he'd never looked more alone.

*Semele is the last,* Sakura thought. Not quite, not in the same way that Sasuke had been, but close enough. Semele was an orphan now, all her close family ripped away from her. How life seemed to repeat itself, how the tides of death seemed to reoccur again and again in a discordant symphony. As if they were always striving to break free of their destinies, but in the end could never escape it. Not as they who called themselves ninjas.

"I don't know if I belong here," Sakura told her.

"He would have wanted you to come."

Semele led her and Orajuchi through the Eyeless Gates, one by one, to the Shiva temple cemetery in the Garden of Ancestors on the second lowest level of the Vault. It was cool this far beneath the surface, serene. Shafts of light pierced down from the ceiling to illuminate rows of white tombstones. Large aspens twisted from the walls, spreading long leafy fingers over the cemetery. A few of the leaves were already turning color, red and gold and yellow, the first signs of the autumn to come.

Sakura could just hear the faint roar of the Dreamstone River behind the stone walls. With a start, Sakura realized just how close the Sougon clan cemetery was to the place where she'd fought Sosano for the final time. *I killed him in the Garden of Fate, in the chamber below my very feet.*

There were six caskets, gleaming like snow in the late summer light.

Sosano; his father; his uncle Charasu; his aunt Mari; his witless great-uncle Shuichi; and his cousin Razu.
The greatest shinobi of the clan. The mourners at the funeral were those who had been left behind: women and children, widows and orphans. They nailed Sakura with hostile looks as she came in, Sosano's enemy lover, clucking angrily like so many hens and geese. But they did nothing more than squawk at her.

Ignoring them, Sakura fixed her gaze on the coffins. A baby-faced priest from Katsu-ji temple was there to perform the funeral rites. He wore golden robes woven with the colors of the Five Gods of Zen, burning incense and intoning the ancient prayers, the prayers that had already been old when the Sage of Six Paths walked the earth:

Fleeting alas are moments,
subject to rise and fall.
Having begun, they cease;
their subsiding is bliss.
So life goes on and on.

"My brother composed a note before his death," Semele said. "I will read it now."

The note was as elegant and enigmatic as the boy had been.

"I am living in a world of morbid nerves, clear and cold as ice... I do not know when I will summon up the resolve to kill myself. But nature is for me more beautiful than it has ever been before. I have no doubt that you will laugh at the contradiction, for here I love nature even when I am contemplating suicide. But nature is beautiful because it comes to my eyes in their last extremity."

He meant to kill himself, Sakura thought. He always meant to, and he wanted me to do the deed. Even now Sakura felt the seduction of it; the power she'd felt when the Shinigami had touched her soul, reaching to take it away.

Death had come to take them all.

SOGON SHUICHI
436-526

SOGON ONOKI
443-510

SOGON SEURIN
472-509

SOGON SAWAR
476-526

SOGON CHARASU
483-526

SOGON SHIRASU
485-526

SOGON MARI
487-526

SOGON SHUNE
492-526
In the middle of the service the matriarch Sougon Karumi suddenly stumbled forward, overcome by emotion and grief. No one pulled her back. She cradled the caskets in a wild frenzy, long white hair in disarray, wailing and shrieking, all her worst fears come true. Once again, her country shamed. Once again, her family ruined. The death of her sons and grandsons, the useless futility of their sacrifices. The men of Sougon had stood proud against the entreaties of their enemies, refusing to bend to any compromise and conciliation, but in the end, like dead leaves, shriveled and useless, fate had swept them away.

The great days of the Sougon were gone.

At last came the time to lower the departed into the earth. Sakura watched as the gathered mourners each took a turn thrusting their hands into the mound of fresh earth, scooping handfuls of dirt onto the caskets. Finally it was her turn. She dug in deep into the earth, and threw, filling in Sosano's grave.

And suddenly the memories came flooding back, stronger than ever. Of a sword glowing in a summer wood, and Sosa's body twined against hers beneath a dark moonless night. Of the long lonely trek through the Frozen Forest, and the gleam in Sosa's eyes when he called his father a fool. Of the way he'd laughed at the very end, like a mad feral dog, asking her to put him down. For a second Sakura had to fight the tears exploding out of her. What she felt then seemed to be impossible to express in words. Oh, Sosa, I loved you. You knew I loved you, so why did you make me end your life?

Sougon Semele was last of all.

Semele knelt before her father's and her brother's grave, palms digging into the dark earth. She was crying. The sobbing was almost obscenely loud; a keening, eerie sound. The sound of a young sweet girl who had lost everything.

When she opened them again, and looked at Sakura, her eyes were burning flames.

*The Enshogan.*

Once, a lifetime ago, Sosano had told Sakura that he did not think Semele would ever be a ninja. That Semele took much more after her mother, the elegant courtesan Enyo Kayura, than after her father. That Semele had failed to awaken her Enshogan, even after years of training, and Sosano doubted she would ever awaken it. The thought did not trouble him. Semele was a talented artist; a creator of life, not a destroyer.

I don't need my little sister to protect me, Sosano had said. I'll protect her, with these eyes.

But Sosano was dead.

Semele stared at Sakura as if she wanted to burn her to the ground where she stood. She could, now, with those eyes. Semele looked completely different with the Enshogan. She looked like her brother had looked, that night under the Overlook in the pulsing red glow of the Annihilation Heart, that
night just before he had blown Rock Lee to bits.

The funeral was over.

Afterward, Semele walked her out of the little cemetery. As they parted Sakura couldn't help but turn back. "I loved him," she burst out. "Sometimes I thought we'd spend the rest of our life together. But then... he was one side, and I was on the other. He wouldn't stop, he wouldn't surrender. I did what had to be done."

"I know. You do not need to justify it to me. Just as my brother did not need to justify his actions to you, or to anyone else. Except to his own conscience."

Except to himself. "Semele... I'm sorry. That everything turned out this way."

"It is enishi. Fate goes ever as fate must." Semele's face was cold as a winter frost, her eyes bright as burning stars. "I see you, Haruno Sakura. We shall meet again."

"Yes." Sakura knew all too well what the girl meant. As enemies. "I see you, too."
Sakura knew it was time to leave when the leaves began to fall.

They left one by one, group by group, village by village. Red and orange leaves swirled down from bare branches, splattering Iwagakure with a kaleidoscope of brilliant color. The wind blew steady and fierce, kicking up gusts of fallen leaves. The air was thick with the scents of autumn. Rotting compost and dry grass, muddy rivers and fields of crops ripe for harvest; the chill of frosts yet to come.

The chuunin exam was over. Sougon Sawar the Sun Breaker had fallen, and the Annihilation Device had been destroyed. The world was entering a new era. With signatures from three of the major countries, the United Countries had finally become operational, taking on the force of binding international law. There was talk of building a headquarters, perhaps in Ashwarren, or Sawara, or even Hiroshiki. There was talk of Akatsuki, too, and the looming threats which the new United Countries faced from all directions, enemies already plotting to snuff out the organization in its cradle.

But all that was in the future.

In the future, but not now. Not now—not yet, with so many of her comrades still unburied, with so many wounds still to bind up. Now was the time for rest. Now was the time for reflection.

For mourning all we've lost.

Sakura fingered her necklace, the amber stone on its thin golden chain around her neck. The stone was small but heavy, dense with hardened tree resin. It lay between her breasts, taking the place of the chuunin exam key she'd worn for so long. It seemed that no sooner had the one trial ended that another took its place. Only I will wear this burden for the rest of my life. The amber caught the hazy autumn light, glittering bright, orange and ocher and gold. The colors refracted the sun like stained glass.

I won't ever forget, Sosano. I promised.

Like leaves drifting off a tree, the shinobi who'd gathered in Iwa for the chuunin exam departed again, returning to the places from which they had once come.

The mist-nins left first.

There was no reason for them to linger. Kirigakure had been on the losing side of the Battle of the Overlook, and the Mizukage had no intention of joining the United Countries, though she was forced to recognize the new post-Overlook order. Team Keel was all dead, and Hachiko the Hound, and hundreds more. Badly weakened, the Water Country could only retreat back to its islands to lick its wounds.

But that was not who Sakura came to say goodbye to.

Nobunaga Kikuko's houseboat was just as Sakura had seen it last. A ramshackle, cozy thing floating in the Yellow River, the chimney in its center belching black smoke. Four women in civilian clothes stood on the deck, drawing back the gangplank which connected the boat to the shore.
Team Kikuko had survived. The Spinster was as gross a hag as ever, Yukari a fierce scrawny thing, Kuina still gawky as a giraffe, Onome freckled and friendly. They'd not seemed to change at all, which seemed impossible to Sakura. But then, they'd already known what they wanted.

"Sakura!" hollered Kikuko. "Come to see us off?"

"Come to see what trouble you're getting into."

Yukari laughed. "As much as possible."

"You're leaving, aren't you?" asked Sakura. "Not just from Iwa. You're leaving Mist. You're going to become missing-nins."

"That was always the plan."

"The Mizukage will go after you."

"That's what makes it fun," declared Nobunaga Kikuko. "Missing-nin is such a dreary word, don't you think? Call it exile. Call it… an adventure."

"Come with us, Sakura," said Kuina suddenly. She had the grace to blush as she said it. "Just the five of us. Five women, against the world."

"A kind offer, Kuina. Someone made me that offer, once. I declined."

Yukari's eyes were chips of blue ice. "He would never have run away with you, Sakura. Even if you'd said yes. He wanted to die."

"I know."

"Let her be, girls." Kikuko's eyes twinkled. "Why, I did not leave the village until I was five times her age. There is still time. But never forget, Sakura. You always have a choice. And it is never, ever too late."

The houseboat began to move, drifting with the muddy current. From here Team Kikuko could sail the Yellow River into the Dreamstone, and then the Dreamstone River all the way down into the open sea, the Sea of Solitude that stretched out like a sheet of rippling glass across half the known world. "Full steam ahead!" Kikuko shouted, and the girls scrambled to obey the command. Kuina at the tiller, Onome shoveling coal to stoke the engine, Yukari climbing onto the roof to act as a lookout. The steam boiler gave off a gigantic hiss, belching a great trail of smoke behind it.

Sakura called after them. "You bastards, you better not do all the fun stuff before I catch up!"

Nobunaga Kikuko the Spinster cackled. "I told you the day we met, Sakura. The next generation always surpasses the last. What is it the stone-nins say? Ah, yes. I see you."

Yukari whooped. "Let's go, Grandmother. The world's waiting for us. A world full of beautiful, fuckable women." She turned to Sakura, laughing, and blew her a kiss.

Sakura caught the kiss in her hand, then touched it to her lips with a finger, as if shushing them. All of Team Kikuko giggled. Sakura giggled, too. Yes, she thought. It's never too late… as long as I'm still alive. I won't forget. The rickety houseboat receded into the distance, becoming smaller and smaller.

Onome began to sing. A snatch of the song came drifting by on the wind. "…I loved a maid as fair
as summer, with fire in her hair…”

And then they was gone.

Next to leave Iwagakure were the lesser villages.

The Blood Country departed in triumph. It was said that the Warlord Makoto Muro had never met anything he could not stab in the back. He’d proven the truth of that during the Battle of the Overlook, when he'd switched sides to the United Countries as soon as he saw an advantage in it.

Even the death of his own son, the equally opportunistic Mazu, had not dampened the Warlord's spirits. Makoto Muro rode proudly through the ranks of his soldiers, laughing, boasting of total victory.

Watching the pompous ceremony from afar, Sakura almost admired the Warlord's total lack of conscience.

Numagakure, Kusagakure, and Kawagakure also joined the United Countries, following the new Tsuchikage's lead. The three villages of the North's heartland left Iwa within hours of each other: the swamp-nins in their camouflaged wetsuits, the grass-nins in their dark gray nylon, the river-nins with their clinking jade hairnets.

Higeru Shinren embraced Sakura warmly, kissing her on both cheeks. Her matron's face was wan, with a half-healed scar still running down one brow, but her eyes sparkled with life. "I'm glad to have met you, Sakura. You are a true friend."

"I'll miss you, too."

"Come visit me in River when you get the chance. Bring your family. I'm sure your sister and my daughter will be terribly fond of each other, yes?"

"I hope so." Kyoki would have grown, as little girls did at that age. Changed. Her mother, too, who'd quit her job as a librarian and inexplicably decided to enter village politics. And the man she had married in Sakura's absence—this Ogata Shingo. He was part of their family now, too. "I… I've been away for a long time. I've never even met my stepfather."

"Tell me if he's doing anything bad, and I'll come and kick his ass."

Sakura laughed. "I will."

Shinren bowed her head, tiny jade rings tinkling softly in her long graying hair. "Water may travel great distances… but it always flows back to the source from whence it came. Until our lives cross again, Sakura."

The waterfall-nins departed in the middle of the night. Recalled by Misain Seve to face his displeasure, the Hokage informed her. Seve the Thrice-Dead was not happy with how their mission had gone.

Sakura felt sorry for the poor waterfall-nins. But not too much. I'll see them again on the battlefield, she thought, and sooner than I'd like.

Parting from the other villages was more bittersweet. The Dust, Wave, and Glacier Countries had joined the United Countries before the Battle of the Overlook, and Sakura was sorry to see her allies and friends go. Unchiku Narumi bowed to her, thanking Sakura for all she'd done to honor her student Nonou's name. Ashuju Ryua wheezed through his nose, yet his voice was
defiant. Kozumi Saotome of Glacier was subdued after the death of his teammates, but still insisted that Sakura should wash her hands at least ten times a day.

The Steam Country had remained neutral through the entire conflict between the United Countries and the Confederacy. That did not change now. Considering the revolutionary events that had so recently transpired in Steam City, however, Sakura bore the steam-nins no ill will. She even asked Naemura Dakun to deliver a message for her to Naruto, if he was still in the country.

The various Ambassadors departed next. First, Ambassador Loom from the Iron Country. Loom, characteristically, said nothing, but he bowed low to the Hokage. And then Imanuel Burgouine, Ambassador Extraordinare from the United Republic of Genoa. The scheming Genoan ambassador had somehow emerged from the cesspit of Iwa politics smelling like a bouquet of roses. Burgouine smiled slyly at Sakura as he kissed her hand, and complimented her new necklace.

And then, Kumo.

It was a splendid caravan, white and shining, with all the wealth and power and pageantry of the Lightning Country; the mystique of those who others called fairies, and they themselves termed the masters of the clouds.

At the front of the caravan stood the two cloud-nin prodigies, Kazuno and Raiki. They were lovers, she knew, with an unbreakable bond of shared intimacy. Yet between them there was an absence nonetheless. A void of negative space. Behind them, where had once loomed their sensei, Kasuga Darui of the Black Cloud. Before them, where the small pygmy Imidori Jouda had once stood. Sakura saw it and she was sad. The dead are not dead.

"Thank you," Sakura told them. "For all your sacrifices. We could not have won the Battle of the Overlook without you."

"You are too kind." Fukunaga Kazuno shook his head. "Kumo was slow to help you in your fight. That is true, neh? Even now, Raikage-sama refuses to join the United Countries. Yet, let me offer you a small justification. Caution is not the most valorous of courses… but perhaps it is sometimes wise. And perhaps there is as much honor in living as there is in death."

"Men's lives have meaning, not their deaths."

The albino Kirazu Raiki grinned. "Jouda would've said the same."

Kazuno's voice was a low rumble, like thunder. "And Dee-chan. And our sensei."

"Will you do a favor for me?" asked Sakura.

"Ask," said Kazuno.

"Tell the Raikage about what was happened here. He'll listen to you. Tell him about the Battle of the Overlook. Tell him about Akatsuki. Tell him about all the sacrifices we made. Tell him if he does not take the fight to Akatsuki in alliance with us, then ultimately it shall not be only Dee and Jouda and Darui-sama who pay the price, but all the people of the Lightning Country. Tell him that, even behind the great walls of the Bulwark, even in the commanding heights of the Cojira Mountains and above the Sea of Clouds itself, he is not safe."

Raiki stared at her with glittering red eyes, a faint smile playing on his pale, beautiful lips. "Is that a threat?"

"A warning."
"Then this favor we shall do. Good luck to you, Haruno Sakura, and may the grace of the storm ever light your days."

So there were only three.

The three that had started it all. That had forged the United Countries in blood and battle even before they'd arrived in Iwa.

Most of the rain-nins had already left Iwa, including Aumono, recalled back to their capital of Bliss to launch an offensive against Akatsuki. Those who remained were mainly strangers to her. But one day Densuke Tosuken the Chameleon reappeared. The hulking man walked into the Hokage's offices as if he owned the place, throwing his still wet straw hat on the table.

The Hokage did not seem surprised. "Your report?"

"There's been a sighting. Nomo Orochimaru the White Snake has appeared in Rain."

The Hokage didn't say anything. Only looked at Sakura.

As if waiting for her answer.

Sakura clenched her fist tight. "Sasuke?"

The Chameleon nodded. "Yes, and the Uchiha boy as well. This intelligence is not a day old. I came by summoning scroll as soon as we received it. If you wish to take care of this matter personally, Hokage-sama, we may return to Rain right away."

"No."

"No. The Fifth shook her head. "No, not yet. It's not the right time. Keep the United Countries informed of any developments." She clicked her fingernails together. "Still… I suspect we cannot ignore the White Snake. I know Orochimaru too well, and he's surely up to something. It is no accident that he has surfaced in the Rain Country at this moment." She turned to Sakura. "Do you know what has happened there? What caused Aumono to return with such haste?"

Sakura frowned. "Because Akatsuki was weakened in the Battle of the Overlook. Hanzou wants to press the attack while they're vulnerable."

"True enough," said Densuke Tosuken. "But not entirely so. Lord Hanzou is dying."

Sakura was stunned. "That's impossible."

"The Asylum sustained him for many years, but even a jutsu such as Death Soul Salvation has its limits. All deals with the God of Death must run their course." Tosuken's voice was ashen. "Hanzou-sensei is a great man. There will never be another of his like again. But he is not immortal, and indeed is very sick. Death comes for him like a thief in the night. It is expected that Aumono will inherit his grandfather's throne. What will happen then, when he takes power, only Aumono himself knows."

Sakura tried to wrap her head around the possibilities. A power transition in Rain, right now, after so many years. Right after the creation of the United Countries. "But that means… without Hanzou's power to hold the country together… there's going to be a power vacuum. Aumono will try to fill it, but he's only a boy. Akatsuki will surely try to overthrow the government. And… maybe Orochimaru, too."

"A most volatile situation." The Hokage stared at Tosuken. "What would you say to… sending an agent? A singular personage, one whom we both trust, but whom also has freedom of action,
independent of either Ame or Konoha. A wild card, to track down Orochimaru and to take the measure of the developing political maelstrom."

Tosuken stroked his chin. "An intriguing proposal. Yes. I think Lord Hanzou would approve."

For a moment Sakura did not understand. Then the answer came to her. "You mean Jiraiya-sama?"

"And Naruto." The Hokage seemed almost amused. "Let those two idiots stir up a little bit of trouble, I think. It's the only thing they're good at."

"What about me?" asked Sakura.

"What about you, girl?"

"I..." She trailed off. What can I say? "I only mean... my place is here. With you. But..."

"I have a mission for you as well." The Fifth spun a kunai, placed it on the map. "Koharu Utatane has returned to Konoha with the intent to mount a coup against me. Her master and lover, Danzou the Whisperer, thinks he can become the next Hokage. ROOT was crippled by our actions in Iwa. They must make a move soon, or all is lost. When we return to Konoha, they will be surely waiting for us." Senju Tsunade looked up sharply. "I always anticipated that Danzou would overreach his ambitions and destroy himself, but I never expected that he would do it quite so fast. It is quite vexing. I had hoped to have two or three quiet years to plant some seeds and allow some fruits to ripen, but now... now, I am not sure what will happen. Events are moving faster than I planned for, spinning out of control. The endgame approaches." The Fifth Hokage's voice was icy, her eyes orbs of dark stone. "And you, Sakura. Your mission is to remove Shimura Danzou from the living world, before he removes us."

The few remaining rain-nins in Iwa left with Tosuken, using summoning scrolls to warp back to Amegakure in an instant, the seals melting down in a flash of explosive power. Sakura watched them go, wondering to what country they were returning to.

All was changed now. She wondered about Mukai Aumono, waiting for his grandfather to die. She wondered about Aumono's promise to Neji. She wondered about Maito Gai. She wondered about Orochimaru the White Snake, and Sasuke, and Naruto.

Naruto, will you find him? Sakura tried to make the question into a prayer, like Temari would have. Will you bring him back?

For she could not.

Not yet.

And then, at last, the Village Hidden in the Sand.

Sabaku Gaara, the Fifth Kazekage, stood aloof in the center of the sand-nin caravan gathered before the gates, looking up at the sky. It was starting to rain. The rain pattered on the stones cobblestones, on clumps of leaves and on bare branches. Rain dripped down Gaara's pale face and across the calabash gourd he carried on his back. Only a boy, eyes black and ardent, yet he nodded when he saw her. Acknowledging that she saw him in turn; a shared understanding beyond words.

By the Kazekage's sides, flanking him, stood the men who he commanded. His people, that had borne the battle and survived. Tangan Wekku. Anayama Chiyo the Weaver. Anayama Ueno and Anayama Tokusai. Hattori Otokaze the Shattered. Ryokan Satetsu, once his bitter enemy, now an ally.
And Kankuro.

Kankuro was somber in the autumn rain. The grinning, japing boy she'd known seemed a thing of the past. A memory, as faded as the leaves that fell from the sky. Sakura almost did not recognize him. His face had no paint, and he dressed in the standard uniform of a sand-nin. He'd grown thinner as well, losing his boyish fat, the bones showing in his cheeks. Wet leaves fell in his hair, caking him in brown and mottled red, the colors of rust and death. Sabaku Kankuro looked at her with hard eyes, his mouth a tight line.

Summer's end had come to him as well.

"I have a letter for you," he said.

The letter was in Temari's hand. To Shikamaru, it said on the envelope.

"She wrote it after Shikamaru was rescued. After he left to go back to Konoha. She was so happy he left. 'Now he'll live,' she told me." Kankuro's voice broke. "Temari wasn't sure she would ever see him again, so she wrote that. A letter of farewell."

A stinging was in Sakura's throat, making it hard it speak. "I'll deliver it," she promised.

There was not much left to say. It had all been said; or it did not need to be said. There was a deeper connection between the two of them now… a bond forged by mutual death. A bond of blood. Sakura wondered at how far their relationship had come, since they'd first met on the streets of Konoha. Sakura wondered at all that happened, to bring them to this point. Shadows and memories and ghosts.

"I blame you, you know," he said. "I can't help it."

"I know."

"But I blame myself, too. It would have been what she wanted. Just like Baki-sensei taught her. Temari did not doubt, you see. Temari had faith. She lived her life as a sacrifice, and so she ended it the same way. On her terms. I just… I just wanted her to be proud of me. I guess that's what I always wanted. She was my big sister. Now she's gone. Her, and my parents, and Baki-sensei. All gone."

_The sandstorm passes, but the stars remain._ "And Gaara?"

"He's my little brother. The Fifth Kazekage, and my little brother." He smiled bitterly. "I have to take care of him now, just like Temari used to. Like Temari took care of me. I'm the man of the family, now. I've got to be strong for him."

"You always were, Kankuro."

Kankuro hugged her.

It was a fierce, sudden thing. Sakura felt the warmth of his face against her own, his clear soft skin. Sakura felt his tears. He was the same age as her, fifteen, nearly a man grown, but in that moment Sakura could only see the little boy he must have once been. What Temari must have seen, when she had looked upon her little brother. And then he was a boy no longer, but a man of Sunagakure.

"Thank you, Sakura. Have a swift, safe voyage." Kankuro smiled a strange, sad smile. "And pull your cloak up. The leaves are getting in your hair."

Konoha left Iwagakure last of all.
There was not much ceremony. Nothing like the send-offs Sakura had received previously. Only uniformed shinobi forming in ranks at the gates of the Lion Bridge, with their cloaks and pack horses and wagons, looking ahead to the Minoji Road beyond. To Hiroshiki, and then west across half the world. To the place from which they had begun their journey such long months ago.

The Fifth Tsuchikage, Haghira Doi, came to say goodbye.

There was talk. Talk of Akatsuki, and the United Countries, and the sinister plots of Yoshitomo Nagato. Talk of Orochimaru, and Uchiha Itachi, and all those who wanted to destroy the fragile alliance between Iwa and Konoha. Talk of the many battles and desperate fights to come, of the sacrifices that would need to be made. The long war which had only just begun.

"As per your request, the High Council has voted on the matter of Kashima Village," said the Fifth Tsuchikage at last. "We agree the caste system is an obsolete, blasphemous relic. Henceforth, no one shall ever be made untouchable again. Public access to Kashima Village has also been restored, for those who willingly make the journey."

"But you will not abolish it?"

"No. It may be many years yet before Kashima Village itself disappears. The prejudice against its inhabitants may never go away."

"I see. So the edifice of oppression survives. The house has received a fresh coat of paint, but still it stands. A man I knew would see the house burn instead."

"You mean the traitor." Doi's voice was quiet. "Micho Manslayer, who proved to be an Akatsuki agent from the very start."

The Hokage did not speak for a long moment. "It was a mistake to trust Honjo Micho as much as I did. In the end, he did terrible things. Foul acts that undermined the very survival of our civilization. He has answered for those crimes with his life," She paused. "Yet none can deny that Micho saved many lives as well. His cause, though it was, I believe, one of the worst for which a man ever fought, was nonetheless one for which he suffered much, and fought for long and valiantly. I do not rejoice in his passing. It is said in the Rain Country that the human heart is always in conflict with itself. If that is true, then Micho is both a saint and a devil. Perhaps you might consider what I say, in the matter of the previous Tsuchikage, and all those who followed him into the abyss."

"Like my son," said Haghira Doi. His thin, skeletal face was plaintive, wise. Once again Sakura was reminded of an old, gnarled tree. Like a tree, he was slow in taking his ground, but firm when the storm rose. The tempest had carried away half of Iwa, yet Doi Dragonsight stood unbroken, unbroken. "I will think on your words, Tsunade. Ride the road true to Konoha, and may God lend strength to your heart, for what you face there. Seurin will be watching, old friend. I see you."

And so the time had come.

The Lion Gate swung wide open, its yawning mouth revealing the White River beyond—the long road that led to Hiroshiki, and then east to Konoha. The road by which they'd come, and which they now left.

The caravan of leaf-nins was gathered before the gates. Contained in that caravan were the many bodies of the dead. The wind blew through ancient trees, their gnarled leaves starting to turn red and yellow and brown, for summer had reached its end. Sakura stood at attention in her new chuunin uniform, the amber stone on its necklace cold and hard between her breasts. Two hundred had come to the Earth Country. Less than half that number were coming back alive; the rest
had gone in body bags.

So many were missing from their ranks. Akimichi Auni. Hyuuga Nyuka. Hatsutori Yashi. Koharu Okazaki. Genma and Aoba. Ino's father, Chouji's father. Dr. Honjo Micho. Anake. Asuma. Tenten. Rock Lee. A litany of names, a mind-numbing list, doomed for the survivors to repeat it, day and after, enduring, until they too were no more.

But there were survivors, as well.

Hyuuga Neji, standing aloof before the carving of the lion at the gate, his hands folded in meditation. Somehow he seemed to know what she was thinking, staring through her with those blank white eyes. He was looking east, he saw. In the direction of the Rain Country, of the Asylum. His eyes were very white.

Team Ranka was by the gates. Sarutobi Ranka, Hiraru and Kanetsu. Sarutobi Inishu was there, too, talking with Captain Yamato. Hyuuga Hiashi and Hoheto. ANBU Squad 1. Aburame Kuren and Muta. Genma's students, Hatsutori Yashi and Umeta Leiko. Katou Taki the Judge. Inuzuka Tsume.

And the Fifth Hokage.

_The Queen of Torment_, they called her, but Sakura knew now she was no queen at all. Only an old woman, trying to find her way just the same as the rest of them. She wheeled up in front of the gathered leaf-nins, splendid on her white horse, her white robes and false golden hair that rippled softly in the autumn breeze.

Sakura thought she would give some kind of long speech. Just like she'd done so many times before. At the beginning of their journey. On Deathtrap Mountain. After Asuma and Tenten had died. On the dais of Aoyama Chuunin Exam Stadium. Some kind of cathartic extolling of higher ideals, praising their victories and eulogizing their sacrifices. Some kind of grand summoning, to live up to the true purpose of the chuunin exam, to the true meaning of Konoha's creed— to pay any price and bear any burden in the cause of freedom, to do their duty as they understood it. To save the world.

But Sakura was wrong. Even after all that had happened, after all they'd been through, she still did not know her sensei as well as she thought. In the end, Senju Tsunade spoke only three words.

"Let's go home," said the Hokage.

They turned to take the long winding road east, towards Konoha.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that's it.

Thank you to everyone who read this fanfic, and especially those who reviewed as well. It's been a long ride—I know. I posted the first chapter of WILL OF STONE to on June 1, 2010. This final chapter arrives seven years later, at last bringing Sakura's journey to the conclusion that I originally envisioned for her.

I never thought it would take so long.

That's probably an understatement. Actually, I almost quit midway through. Writing a novel of this length and complexity was something I had never done before. It was
fantastically difficult. I was so busy with real life, too, and the moment that personally inspired the story for me had already passed. I felt like I was going through the Iwa Chuunin Exam myself. But even years after I'd updated—incomplete and unfinished—there were still people reviewing. And favoriting it. And telling me that they kept on coming back to this story, again and again, and they wanted to know what would happen next.

I heard you.

I never would have finished WILL OF STONE without you guys. Thanks so much to everyone who reached out and who kept the flame burning. Thanks for sticking it out on this journey with me... I hope the ride was worth it.

There's one more chapter after this one. It's a coda to the novel: a poem, actually. It takes place during the timeline of the story (between Chapters 95 and 96), but can also, I think, be read as a reflection on the broader themes I was trying to express with this work. Please enjoy.

You guys take care now :)

sadfascist
October 24, 2017
Coda: The Amber Stone

Walking through a summer wood
   My foot catches on a stone
A black ugly thing shaped like brick.
   I pick up the thing to toss away
   Into the shadows off the path
   Where it belongs.
But another hand touches
   Mine own, stays me.
Wait, he says. That is very precious
   What you have found.
I don't understand. It's just a stone, I say.
   He laughs softly.
Behind, the sun peeks through tangled leaves;
   His breath is summer smoke,
   Felt but not seen.
Not any stone, he says. Another name
   He calls it, a word I do not know.
I mouth the syllables, strange but sweet:
   Amber. What's that?
He smiles indulgent. Long ago, he says,
   A tree grows here, in this place we stand
In an ancestral wood. Oh, the tree is young and
   Strong then, and its hale heart blood
Is golden sap flowing through lumbered veins.
   But the tree grows old, and its blood also,
   Cold and slow, until it congeals into
A fossil substance, a progeny harder than iron yet
   Brighter than any jewel. Ages pass,
   The tree is gone, and the tree's children,
   And grandchildren
   But the frozen heart blood lingers,
Choked by clay, forgotten, unknown, it speaks still
   If you know to listen.
   A witness to what once was,
   The voice of that long dead tree.
Taking a knife he pinches the stone between
   Thumb and forefinger, and shaves it.
   Chips of black crust fall away
   Like beetle skin. Then beneath—
   Glittering gold, and crystal,
   Mirrors within stained mirrors,
   The amber stone.
He displays it as a man does to a woman.
   It's beautiful, I whisper.
   Yes, he says. A good thing
   You did not throw it away!
We laugh at my folly, and for a time
   All things pass away but the
Fragile truth of love.
Back home, I tell him, there are no places like this,
Relics of prehistoric mystery.
The forests are all blank grown, the
People, too, bound together by a dream
Of the future, not a past destiny.
There is no thing called amber there
Resting quiescent in the earth;
It is the limitless sky at which we stare,
Building our cities vertical, spiraling higher and higher
Like hands, reaching
For the sun. Our most prized stone at a spark
Crumbles to black dust,
And soot and smoke, for coal is
Good only to burn.
How wondrous it must be to have roots
Like this, the mystic chords
Of ancient faith, and hearth,
The strength where you always know your place.
But I misspeak, my words careless.
His brows furrow in shadowed discontent,
And I remember, too late, that
This place is not my own.
Don’t leave, he says then. I love you.
His eyes are dark and glistening, like wet stones
under a cold mountain stream,
And each word he speaks is blood.
But I cannot give him the answer he wants.
Why must we be enemies? he pleads.
Anger blazes my tongue. You ask too much! I cry.
To stay is to forfeit all I am, yet dare you
Do the same? Is it me truly you love or is it
Your precious duty?
He falters as if I slapped him.
For he too has promises to keep,
Vows binding, and sanctified by death.
We turn away, each to each;
The forest is silent but for
The cicadas singing in hidden spaces
At the last mating.
Sudden as hope he takes the amber stone,
That lump of gleaming fossil life;
He presses it into my hands.
This is yours, he says. My one last gift to you—
It is no accident that you would find this now
At our parting; it is fate.
I knew it when you found the stone,
That it was destiny that had done the deed.
When I was a child my father used to tell me a story
Of the secrets of the amber stone,
How if anyone found it
That meant
Someone had stolen your heart,
Pulled it out of you, froze it,
Turned it into everlasting gold.

My heart is in this stone,
You found it along the path, it is yours
And no one else's.
All I ask is that you keep it safe
After I am gone;
That is my only request.

His speech finished, but a moment
His hands linger on mine, fiercely gentle;
There is no more to say but
Farewell.

The sky grows red with sunset, and
Sharp with painted shadows,
The last exhalation of summer.
How strange it is that things
Are most beautiful and most wondrous
Just before their end.
He smiles at me sadly, once;
Then he goes.

Alone I linger in the dark woods, remembering
The cool bark, knotted and twisted and rough
Like old men's faces;
And fat peaches, overripe, weighing down
Branches with their swollen life-fat, then
Dropping to the earth, bursting,
Smearing the air with sweet nectar; and
Soft beds of summer grass,
Wet with morning dew;
And the press of skin, muscles and sweat,
Hot breath and lips and
Strong limbs gripping, clutching at
Forbidden pleasures tasted
In defiance of a finish.
Then I, too, bid my leave,
Taking the rival fork along the path
From whence he came. I do not look back.
Yet still the jeweled stone is there,
Clenched tight in my fist,
Beneath the faint starlight
Frozen hard to the touch.
And then I know
I cannot equal his precious gift
Beyond all cost, his
Heart of stone.
For my love is not like that;
Not amber, but coal
Which at a spark flares up in flames,
Brilliant, dazzling, searing the air,
But just as soon is gone, and
Where the spectacle was,
Ashes only remain.
The coal-fire, too, surviving,
Its fuel spent, but stoked soon to
A new source of sustenance.
No, I cannot gift him my heart,
Yet still a scar there is
Within my chest, a flicker of fire
Crushed, cast
Into amber stone.
The stone is his promise to me, I know,
And my promise to him,
That too, I shall keep, for
As long as amber endures
I cannot forget
Walking through a summer wood.

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