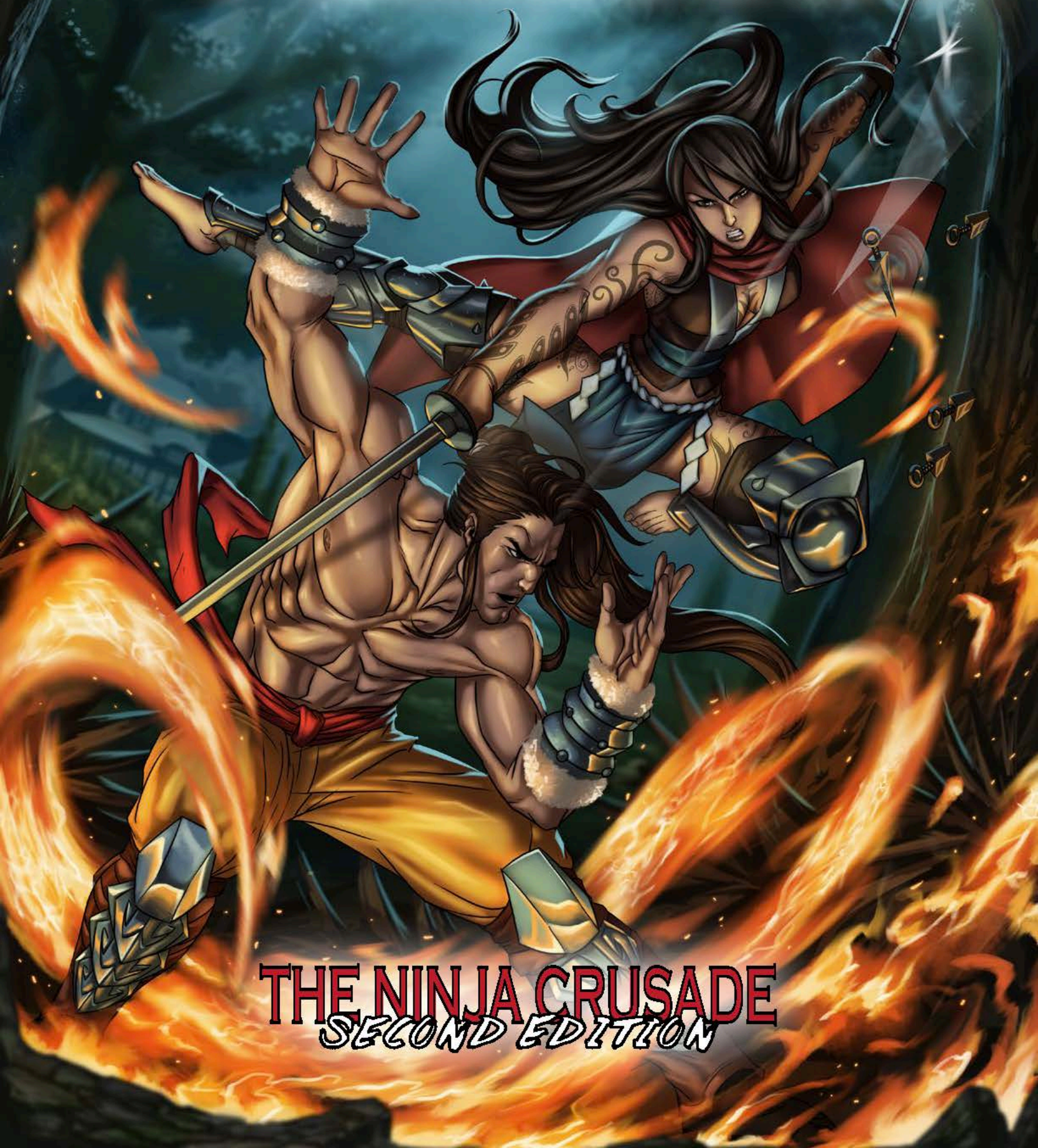
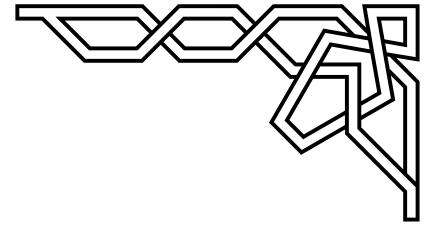


# THE FIREBRANDS



THE NINJA CRUSADE  
SECOND EDITION



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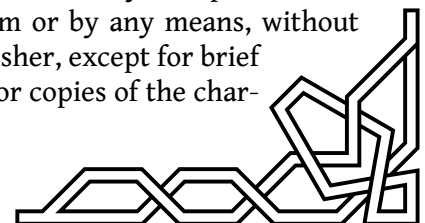
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>PROLOGUE: CONFESSIONS</b>	<b>4</b>	Tengoku Springs	42
<b>DANCING IN FIERY CIRCLES</b>	<b>8</b>	Masaki Shrine	42
An Elder's Ramblings	8	Hiho	43
History Lessons	9	The Teacher	43
Consequences	10	Learning the Art	43
New Land, New Problems	12	Clan Structure	44
The New Era	14	Other Clans	45
Inside the Circle	14	<b>BUILDING FLAWLESS FIRES</b>	<b>48</b>
Among Other Ninja	15	New Temperaments	48
The Truly Skilled Among Us	18	New Foci	49
Looking Onward	20	New Afflictions	49
A Man Who Has Seen It All	20	New Titles	50
Kokyuryu	20	New Fighting Styles	50
Quieting of the Dragons	23	Artist's Eye	50
Kakou	23	Fox Style	51
Wu Ji Theater	24	Scorpion Style	52
The Others	24	New 99 Styles	53
A Student's Response	25	New Jutsu	55
<b>PIERCED WITH BEAUTIFUL NEEDLES</b>	<b>27</b>	Way of Fire	55
The Tale of Tales	27	Way of the Immaculate Show	56
The Twins	27	Way of Inked Skin	57
The Living Chronicle	28	New Celestial Animals	58
Seeds of Rebellion	28	Foxes	58
Revolution's Bloom	29	Phoenixes	59
The New Clan	32	Red Dragons	60
Not Just Bandits	33	Gracious Illustrators	62
Tattoos	33	Way of 18 Strokes	64
Body Modifications	34	Grey Tigers	66
The Spider's Thread	35	Way of Bloody Claws	68
Initiation	38	Winds of Aion	70
Let's Have a Drink	39	Way of Deadly Crescendos	72
The Bridge to Battle	39	<b>ADVENTURE: SWITCHING RHYTHM</b>	<b>74</b>
Heiminmu	39	<b>SAMPLE CHARACTERS</b>	<b>82</b>
The Drowned Fields	40		
Tokatsu	41		
Fields of Endless Fray	41		
Kumo Grove	42		



# PROLOGUE CONFESSIONS

There is no longer fear. When I was younger, I would be paralyzed by it, a terrified statue. The curtain would rise, the lights would shine hot on my sweating skin, but the heat was no match for the heavy ice in my stomach. I could not move. The other dancers would twirl and leap around me, a frozen form. Oh, how they would glare at me.

I thought their anger was the worst thing I would ever experience. The foolishness of youth.

But I am not afraid anymore. I have long since learned to push past that terror and perform under the worst kinds of stress. The cold weight in my belly was replaced by the fire of the Blazing Dancers. Nothing can hold me back. Though tonight will be my final performance, I will not waver.

The show must go on.

My name is Kimiko Nakano, and this is my confession.

\*\*\*

I am not afraid.

As a child, I watched as the soldiers took villagers away for not paying their taxes, for not bowing deeply enough to the bureaucrats that came to collect them. I shook with fear every time. The men and women would be led past the rest of the village as a warning. I clutched at my mother's robes. I will never forget the infinite sadness in the eyes of the condemned. Oh, how they stared at me.

I think the first seeds of my rebellion were planted by their despair. I cared for the tiny plant, until the Gardeners took me in.

It is dark here. I write this by the light of the moon, using a brush and paper I had hidden in a tattoo. I drain the ink from my skin to write this message. I hope it reaches the right hands.

My name is Saya Yūsada, and I will not be cowed.

\*\*\*

I went to Ozaki as I was instructed to. It was only a small detour from the route my troupe traveled, but I brought my friends just in case. Nothing should have happened. My

mission was intended only to be reconnaissance.

We rode for hours; following the map we had been given. We had all heard of our target, and we took turns telling stories of what he had been like before. I shamefully admit that we were more like gossiping actresses than nin-ja embarking on a mission.

We took every precaution that we had been trained to consider. All modesty aside, we were a striking trio, so the three of us wore disguises to keep from standing out. I used all my theatrical expertise to make myself up as an old woman. Even my mistress was impressed. We only brought the most concealable of weapons in case our target was more prepared than expected. We were led to believe that he was distracted by the festival, and would not be in any condition to notice our observations.

The smallest details remain vivid in my mind. The scent of hibiscus was in the air, and white clouds drifted lazily overhead. It was a beautiful day, as if the spirits were blessing the color festival. If only it had been a story, where the weather turns ominous as symbolic warning, I might have foreseen what was to come.

\*\*\*

I was captured. I think it has only been 25 days, but I can't be sure.

I have been tortured. The soldiers beat me, their sharp blades slicing wherever a weapon appeared in my tattoos. They do not understand how our tattoos work, and I will not be the one to demonstrate. It does not matter. I was nearly unarmed when they found me, and I lost what weapons I had concealed in my art when they captured me.

I should explain.

I had followed a lead to Ozaki, chasing a bounty. The worst kind of scum had been spotted there during the color festival. I got there as quickly as I could, hoping to turn him over to the Dancers for a reward. I was foolish, and I did not bring backup. I hope to see Rika soon so that she can chastise me for my idiocy.

The festival was going strong. Children weaved through the crowds, pelting one another with sacks of brightly colored powders. Despite my hood, I

decided to play it safe. I grabbed one of the fallen sacks and smeared the powder on myself, obscuring the tattoo on my face. I slipped into one of the booths selling rice balls, and then I saw him.

\*\*\*

We arrived in the early afternoon and chose a tea house with a balcony to be our vantage point. Ichiwa, one of my two friends, went to freshen up while Sarashi made arrangements with the proprietor. I watched the riot of color in the streets as children played at war. If only it were so innocent and joyous. There, in the square, I saw him.

The others were nowhere to be found. I could not lose him, so I followed.

He led me through narrow alleys and ended up in a bar. It was the worst kind of dive, the kind of place I was made to dance when I was still paying my dues. The wooden floors were soggy, rotten and soft like sponge under my feet. The smell of mildew and stale beer almost made me nostalgic, but I remembered why I was there. Someone groped at me as I went past, but he would have touched anyone. My disguise was not compromised.

There, in the back, I saw my quarry.

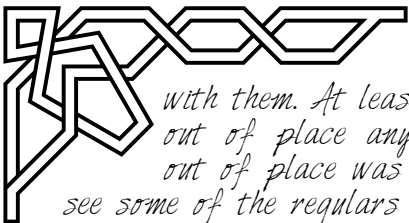
He leaned against the filthy wall and listened while a man at a table spoke. I could not hear everything they said, but he seemed to be taking on a job. The man appeared to be an agent for someone known as the Weaver.

A reveler brushed past me, her tunic leaving traces of the scintillating powder on mine.

"Apologies, grandmother," she said, and stopped. She looked from me to my target. Her face was stained with the powder. "This is a rough place, grandmother, and it is about to be more so. It might be better if you go."

\*\*\*

I followed him into a bar that was filled with rough and tumble types. Enforcers and con men, smugglers and bandits drank sake and beer. I recognized some of them. Under different circumstances, I might be drinking



with them. At least my tattoos didn't seem out of place anymore. No, what seemed out of place was the old woman. I could see some of the regulars eyeing her up. Her robes were too nice for this place. She was going to get robbed.

But that wasn't my problem, was it? I was here to grab him, and get the reward. I scanned the room, and there he was - in the back, leaning against the wall. The old woman got in front of me, as if she were going to the same table I was. I slipped past her, but left smudges of color on her robes.

I apologized. Better to give her fair warning. Things were about to get dicey, and I told her so. And that is when everything went to hell.

\*\*\*

My disguise was obviously a success, especially in that poorly lit bar. The woman's eyes widened as she looked over my shoulder and I realized that I had let my attention wander from my target! I tried to turn, but the woman shoved me to the side, and bolted to the right.

"Hideo Kyo! You're coming with me," the woman yelled.

But he was not looking at her. Somehow, whether by jutsu or accident, Kyo had seen through my disguise.

For the first time in years, I felt that ice in my stomach. I froze, as Kyo pulled a kunai from his belt and spun, whipping it in my direction. I've heard others say that in situations of mortal danger time seems to slow down. In my case, it seemed to speed up. The kunai left his hand and suddenly I was on the floor.

The woman stood, her back to me. Her cloak lay pooled on the ground at her feet, and her arms were swirling with animate tattoos. I'd never seen one of the Virtuous Body Gardeners in person, but I had heard enough tales to recognize one. She touched her arm, and the skin seemed to bulge and twist as ink seeped from her pores and turned solid. I watched as a blade emerged from her, its tattooed representation sliding from view.

I was no longer paralyzed. I stood, abandoning the hunched pretense of age

and prepared to join the fight, when my-our-target stretched his mouth wide and breathed a gout of flame at the Gardener. She had not taken her eyes off him. She still believed that I was a defenseless old lady. I admit that, even then, a small part of me felt a swelling pride in my disguise.

As the flames licked at her clothes and skin, she shouted, "Grandmother, go!"

\*\*\*

I tried to dodge right, to draw his attention away from the old woman, but he seemed more interested in her than he was in me. He launched a kunai at her, and I was going the wrong direction. I grabbed at one of the damp support pillars, but it was slick with mold. I reversed my momentum, but lost control.

I slammed into the old woman, knocking her to the ground. The kunai buried itself in my shoulder. We were beyond subtlety, so I shrugged off my cloak, and pulled my sword from its place on my left arm. I heard the old woman struggling to her feet behind me, but I couldn't check on her with an enemy in front of me.

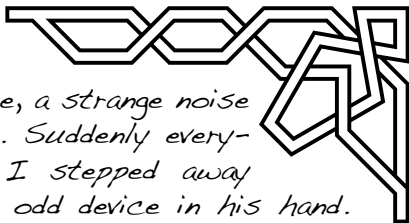

Kyo took a deep breath and let out a kiai that brought an eruption of flame with it. I shouted for the old woman to run and took the brunt of the blast. The last thing I remember was hitting one of the support beams and hearing it give way.

\*\*\*

Even as she crashed into the beam, I knew that its rotted core would not be able to withstand that sort of punishment. The damp wood crackled as the heat from Kyo's flames turned the water in it to steam, and the pillar buckled with a sickly chunk!

The entire structure started to sway, and I barely had time to gather my chi and leap to safety. The bar collapsed on itself, trapping the woman who had saved me within. But it also trapped Kyo. I dug through the wreckage and debris, trying to find her, to pull her free. Sarashi is no Brewer, but he is adept at healing. Surely, he could help her.

I had not even spoken to her, and she nearly



gave her life to save mine. No, not to save mine—to save an innocent's. I know that she would have chosen differently if she had known who I was; she would have assumed I could take care of myself. Her wounds were my fault. Her death, if it were so, was on my head. And the pile had begun to smoke. Some of that sodden black wood had actually caught fire.

So I dug, tossing planks of wood aside as I tried to save the woman who had tried to save me. I uncovered other patrons, those who hadn't been smart enough to clear out when the fight had started. And finally, I found her.

I pulled her free of the wasted bar and dragged her unconscious body out of range of the flames. The powder had been wiped free of her face, but there was still color there. A sun and a dragon were tattooed there.

Then I looked up, and saw Kyo.

"Hideo Kyo," I shouted, standing and drawing my tessen. "You have betrayed the clan that took you in. You are no longer one of the Odoriko, ronin. For those you have hurt, you will be punished!"

He laughed at me. Kyo stood there, his clothing torn, covered in soot and mold. He had zhua on his hands. "Little one, if you think you can stop me, you're welcome to try."

We leapt at one another. I was surprised by the glee on his face. He was enjoying this! His claws rattled on my fan as we made our first pass. The bar's fire was giving off an enormous amount of greasy black smoke. We didn't have much time before the militia would arrive.

The air around Kyo ignited into a white-hot corona, making it difficult to look directly at him. Instead, I watched his reflection in the metal blades of my fan. I was prepared when he attacked again. Arrows of flame shot at me, but I easily blocked them with my tessen.

I breathed deeply, willing the chi down into my legs, praying to my ancestors to give me the strength I would need to prevail. Praying that Ichiwa and Sarashi would find us before the militia did. I pushed myself, and launched into motion. Kyo's reaction was fast, but not fast enough. My fists exploded into blurred motion and I pummeled the ronin, hitting my mark hundreds of times.

I heard a loud noise, a strange noise that I did not expect. Suddenly everything seemed wrong. I stepped away from him, and saw an odd device in his hand. Like the firearms the soldiers use, but smaller. My side felt wet.

He began to run. I tried to chase him, but it felt like I was moving through quicksand. Before he could get out of sight, I threw my tessen. I felt lightheaded, and my vision swam. The fan spun out, arcing toward Kyo.

But it did not hit its intended target. A child ran around the corner, his father playfully chasing him with a pouch of the colored powder. The razor fan slammed into the man instead.

I collapsed there, in the street. I saw the unconscious woman who had tried to save me. I saw Ichiwa and Sarashi finally arrive. I saw the child, tugging at his father's lifeless hand. And I saw merciful darkness.

\*\*\*

I woke up in militia custody. They took me, and now they intend to execute me. I am to be a warning, an example to the common people. Don't step out of line.

If this is my fate, if there is nothing to be done, I hope that for at least some of the witnesses who will watch me die. I hope that a new seed of rebellion is planted.

\*\*\*

My companions took me, and Kyo escaped. I cannot bear the dishonor I have brought upon myself and the Blazing Dancers. Somewhere in Ozaki, a child and his mother mourn their father. Somewhere, a woman who tried to save me has been condemned to death.

Places, everyone. The curtain is about to rise on my final performance.



# CHAPTER ONE: DANCING IN FIERY CIRCLES

## AN ELDER'S RAMBLINGS

Wine? I haven't had a vintage this delectable since I was on the stage. This makes introductions much smoother. I look different than you were expecting? Well, I suppose it has been a long time since my picture was draped on posters throughout the city. As you obviously know, my name is Nozomi Hayakawa and I help run the Wu Ji Theater.

It has changed much since it first opened, but I can still remember the first show I saw there. It was Amdo Sakya and his team of acrobats, and I swear that they never touched the ground for the entire performance: even while they bowed they hung suspended in the air swaying to and fro. My father held my hand and told me that he had met Sakya in the market earlier that month. Mind you, this was years ago: back when the theater was used for plays and astounding feats instead of as a training ground, back before the executions had begun. Not even Sakya's incredible abilities helped him outrun his undignified, empire-sanctioned murder. At least they made his death as spectacular as his life.

The thing about the stage is that it nev-


er changes. The players upon it and the stories being told shift and blur, but the stage remains the same.

There is a chaotic flurry backstage as new souls prepare to be judged by the gaze of the all-important audience. Great efforts are made to ensure that no one outside of the troupe ever sees the tangle of drama behind the curtain. Perfection is demanded and those that fail to deliver are sure to not step foot on the stage again. That's how it's always been. Once everything soured and the executions began, the great Iwakura claimed he could actually kill a noble onstage without anyone being the wiser. He managed to pull it off too, receiving a standing ovation from the nobleman's friends and colleagues for his troubles. Iwakura was truly a master of our craft.

Now the empire has decided that ninja were the cause of their downfall? That we are no better than the animals they use to hone their hunters' skills? So be it. If we are to be slain in the streets beside degenerate filth, then we shall resist and make our resistance known. We are not the kind to bend to expectations.

The Empire is made up of people, true? Well, the first thing the Emperor has done to make our extermination easier is convince the citizens that ninja are no longer people. We're branded as lowly thieves,





murderers, second-rate charlatans and exploiters. The Blazing Dancers are exceptional at two things: drawing attention to ourselves and convincing people that we are whoever we want them to believe we are. If the Empire seeks to kill criminals and enemies of the state, than we shall make them kill innocents and kindly neighbors instead. Leave direct opposition to the other clans. Our true power is to sway the hearts and opinions of their strongest supporters: the public and the very soldiers tasked with the killing.

There is no benefit for anyone on the front lines of a war. The victors enjoy the spoils, but the rewards are given first to the higher-ups and very little manages to trickle down to the lowly troops. A parade and a bottle are usually all that's given to placate them. Our clan tries to keep away from the front lines. Why, we try to stay away from all lines entirely. Placing ourselves within their ranks instead means we can see who does the fighting, who does the ordering and who doesn't want to do either. From there, it's simple to make a soldier view his career with disdain or convince an officer to fall in love with someone he's supposed to have hung.

Changing the opinion of even one person may turn the tide in a war, and this is what we pride ourselves with doing. Other clans rush into the battle, spilling blood and burning cottages, while we encourage the Empire's fine citizens to come and enjoy our festivals so we can influence what they feel and for whom. Every person that comes to our show to boo us - usually for political reasons - merely strengthens another's opinion that we are indeed as we portray ourselves. Our smiles make an audience share our wealth of happiness, our bows humble us to them, and when we mill amongst them during other performances, we appear just as they see themselves. Once they see us as peers, the rest is easy. With a word, we can (and have on occasion) incite riots and anarchy, but that is not our normal way. The day will come when the people will need no encouragement to tear away the shackles placed upon them by Izou, and they will do so thinking it was their own idea. We fight a longer war than the other clans, but one also with a higher yield. Our enemies become our supporters and stubborn aggressors soon become spurned by their peers. We have no need to ever force our blades through the armor of our enemies, for they are already there.

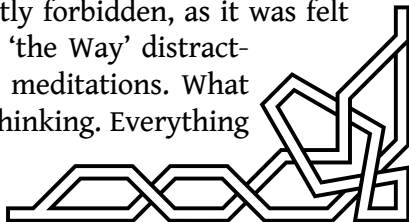


## HISTORY LESSONS

Oh dear, listen to me. It's like I've been practicing that for years. I assure you, it's not a well-trained dialog. Why, the poison your masters slipped into the wine changed the palate just enough for it to rule out sharing this bottle with my friends. It's a shame to have wasted this vintage too.

You're still alive because I'm fairly certain that you had no idea how to plan an assassination attempt when you stepped inside the inn. So adorably clueless. Don't be embarrassed - you belong to the Grasping Shadow clan, don't you? That must be exciting for you, as someone in the business of murdering those whom your masters consider disagreeable. They don't generally send young assassins after me anymore. The Shadows must see the same potential that I see in you to have thought you could get the best of this old lady. You'll be doing great things before the year is out, I do not doubt it, unless they intended for you to drink the wine too, but that's probably not the case, right?

Why would they want me gone? Well my dear, it is the way of the Shadows to remove obstacles through violence and remain the bogeymen of the dark. You see, I am not a quiet woman and I make my ideas rather well known. There are those who try to silence me in the only ways they can dream up; murder and dread. If your employers had listened better this would have all worked out years ago. That is enough about where you came from, however; since your masters wanted me gone, I shall tell you why. Of course, like all good stories, this one starts a long time ago. The Odoriko clan was made from the greatest minds in the world who were brought to the brink of extinction by the only man who has the power to do so: The Emperor. Before I get to that, however, let me tell you about our time in the Land of Exalted Flame. To the Far East, there is a land of discipline, faith, fanatical patriotism and mystery. For thousands of years it has stood as a stone of single-minded obedience that waves of individuality crash fruitlessly against. This void of life is where our clan was born, created by a secret love of music and dance that had been strictly forbidden, as it was felt that anything apart from 'the Way' distracted the people from their meditations. What is the Way? It's a way of thinking. Everything



one does for fun, love or even boredom takes away from the path that the Way has made. Anything that falls outside the ideas of loyalty to one's country, service to one's elders or sex whose sole purpose is creating other devoted followers are enemies of the Way. It's about being more effective than happy. It works in its own fashion, I suppose, but to follow the Way is to turn your back on your heart. The Odoriko were stifled and trapped in the Way. They were young, in love with the arts and denied both their youth and their passions, which gave way to a quiet rebellion. The young and riled told the old and obstinate that a change was needed and in return were scolded as children. The King, a man of extraordinary willpower, made the Odoriko a fair and gracious offer

- put on a show that embraced the Way. If suitably impressed, he promised to indulge the small things like painting and decorating the young had clung so tightly to. If the show proved simply a waste of time, the clan was to be disbanded and entered back into the fold. It was a challenge to win over the hearts of the Exalted Flame or die, as a life without art was death itself: a sentiment we share to this day. The performers traveled to the palace after gathering what meager supplies they could find in a loveless land and began their show. They took the first clumsy but inspired steps as Odoriko that day, performing for the King through dance, excellent acting, spirited juggling and a variety of fire manipulation tricks created specifically for his amusement. They watched his expressions in hopes that it

would have an effect on him, but he was as hard to read as a stone. The Odoriko tried their best to convince him that art and the Way could live side by side. My, were they mistaken. One of the pieces they performed was a satire of tired people with crushed spirits brought to animation by turning to the arts. It was a vision the clan wanted to share with the King, the two destinies intertwining and weaving a beautiful future for the nation. The King, unfortunately, didn't take it that way. He didn't need to consult with his advisors after the performers took their silent bows. He banished the Odoriko for mocking the Way. He felt that their proposed new direction in life was a slap in the face to his beliefs, and his people concurred.

## CONSEQUENCES

Our master at the time was forced to commit seppuku to spare his family and those who had built the sets.

All the actors, however, were rounded up and marched for weeks without end to be thrown into the Okibi Island volcano. They were at least quick to meet their ancestors. The rest of us were not as blessed.

The Odoriko were hunted like vermin through the streets and those caught off guard suffered terribly before being killed. They barely had enough time to gather food before striking out into the dark night with no

where to go. Behind them lay the tall walls of home, and before them stretched the Desert of Black





## NOZOMI HAYAKAWA

Having been around for nearly 80 years has not slowed down this still-able dancer one moment. She is one of the eight head teachers at the Wu Ji Theater, having once shared the spotlight with some of the best dancers in history. Her focus today, however, is recruiting those who have lost their way or have been ejected from other clans. This, obviously, makes other clans despise her, as she is actively taking their students. Due to her focus, she has not left the Wu Ji Theater city in years. She is cunning, intelligent, dedicated, and able to spot the smallest details that give her insight to her new students.

Her family lineage can be traced through the Blazing Dancer clan and she sees her students more as her children than her pupils, and remembers all of their names. She teaches how to put one's heart and soul into every performance. Hayakawa is always hustling through the theater corridors, helping those who need guidance and readying for the next festival (especially if there is wine).

Hayakawa is six feet tall with long gray hair and shining green eyes. It's hard to miss her in a crowd of people, as she wears the most flamboyant outfits she can muster.

Sand - named long ago when the ninjas of the Land of Exalted Flame scorched their own country to prevent the Empire from gaining a foothold there. You've heard of it before, I'm sure, since the Shadows also hold land in the territory that was scorched. Is it not a place of unbearable heat? No food lives there and all the water evaporated years ago. For the Odoriko, it was a hard choice - certain death at the hands of the Exalted Flame or almost-certain death in the desert.

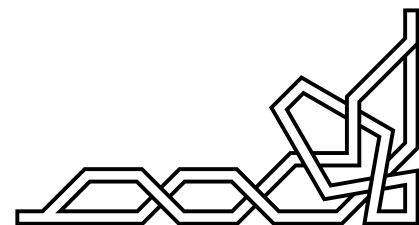
Others that had tried to cross the Great Desert were overpowered by the harsh conditions of the ashen plains. It took weeks for the Odoriko clan caravans to crawl across the seemingly endless sprawl of barren land. It was only due to their willpower and mastery of fire jutsu that the clan survived.

Obviously, there were tragedies in the boiling

wasteland. Many of our elders did not survive the trip. With them, troves of information died: a vast wealth of set building, stories never written down, rare martial arts techniques, jutsu secrets still lost to this day and more all went to the grave. The bones in the desert hold more beauty and imagination than any performance held since their passing. The sun and searing ground caused us to slough away our vanity, our pride, our desires and dreams. It reduced the clan to its most basic component: survival. Once that was all there was, the Odoriko became focused and sharp like a blade, finding a new purpose in that land of death. They remembered the lessons learned from the past, but forged the clan to have a new purpose of pure domination. The dancers who survived the blazing sun would perform as jesters and acrobats and bringers of joy as before, but now with a hidden purpose behind each step. Now, however, the Odoriko would never let anyone know our true meaning for existence. The desert transformed the clan into a force to transform others.

Once across, the Odoriko clan spent its time tending to the wounded, finding food and combing the outskirts for those who had been separated from the group. Our old way of life had evaporated in the Great Desert and the clan was left with nothing but hundreds of hungry people near death and an empty feeling inside. Could they return to the Land of Exalted Flame one day? In doing so, they would face a great army intent on the death of all Odoriko. So, our founders did what came naturally: they turned to the new land, their unexplored home. They held performances for people they met on their travels, formed new loves and struggled hard to create a new way of life with everything they had. They have never given up—and the Dancers today live our lives in the same way.

//



## NEW LAND, NEW PROBLEMS

After surviving the trial of the Desert of Black Sand, the Odoriko gathered together what was left of their caravans and loaded whatever supplies they could find for their travels. Our kind became nomads, traveling the land not only in search of riches and adventure, but also a place to raise our children, plant our crops and do everything else that others took for granted.

We went into the world chasing our dreams. We

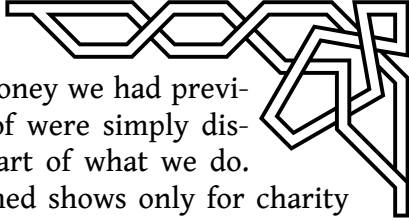



had the drive, imagination and vision to accomplish anything we could come up with. We were the beautiful flower that grows out of the crack in a stone walkway. Small shows commenced for curious people we met on the road or at one of the many small towns we passed through, and for friends we met on our travels. The Odoriko were different than anything ever seen before in the Izou Empire, and it wasn't long before the rare show with tiny audiences became an enormous production held to the deafening roar of an excited crowd. Jade and gold poured into our clan as more and more people traveled from all over the

Empire when our caravans were spotted.

In fact, the Emperor tried to tax us once so he could build a second castle for himself in the North. Our fans brought a massive protest to Daiwa on our behalf. We did not care for the trouble, but we knew our opponent well. After the Emperor inevitably withdrew his request, the Odoriko clan paid for the castle in full as a benevolent gift. In return for our generosity, the Emperor gave us the Empire's official approval, rejecting the entertainers that came before us, and our audience doubled almost immediately.

It was not unusual for nobility to call upon us to entertain guests or even come in to perform for their entire fiefdom, making the Odoriko almost as well known as the Emperor himself. Everyone loved us and we were



bringing joy and love into the hearts of the entire Izou Empire. Our dreams had been achieved.

Of course, now I'll share with you how the Emperor destroyed it all. The greatest of the Odoriko were invited to hold a festival in the Emperor's grand honor. Our clan built a large stadium for him and his family to witness our amazing performance in. As was customary, we opened with high energy dances and fire breathing that led into comedy, topped off with a crescendo of dazzling lights and death-defying acrobatics. Unfortunately, the performance never got past the comedy.

You see, to the south, the Emperor's youngest godson was having trouble keeping control of his people. It was nothing bigger than any other noble could handle - general taxes and living arrangements and so forth. Our show, however, featured a young boy trying to herd goats into a pen that was too small for them to fit. The Emperor loves his godson and commented once that the boy would grow wise through his dealings with people, and the act was supposed to be displaying this very sentiment. Our Master was even to come on stage dressed as the Emperor to give direction to the young boy. We had somehow missed the news that the south was in revolution and his godson had been killed: his head mounted on the stake of a goat pen earlier that week.

The Odoriko were declared to be blasphemers against the Emperor and the reputation of all involved in the production was damaged despite our massive apology. Our master was once again taken from us: this time given the choice to die for our clan's shame. We were left with a fraction of our followers and the people spit whenever the Odoriko were mentioned for years. So we fled.

We crossed raging rivers, the dire cliffs of mountains, forever dodging the eye of the Empire's hunters. Finally, we made it to the one place where no army could: the peaks of the Takiyama Mountains. We crawled through the ragged passes before ending our journey at the base of the Ensen Volcano. We built a small town after we had recuperated from our flight, and that town was the basis for what became the Wu Ji Theater many years later.

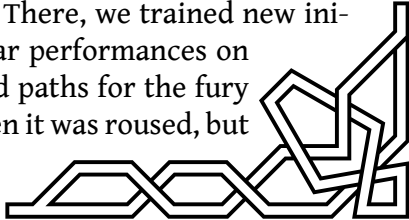
The Odoriko started again with small audiences, this time as the Blazing Dancers. The large crowds from our glory days drifted away. We learned quickly



that the attention and money we had previously enjoyed so much of were simply distractions from the true art of what we do. Our clan instead performed shows only for charity or in poor villages to raise their spirits (and also our own). After finding our focus and gaining the love and adoration of the people on the outskirts of the Empire, we set about to sharpen our main weapons once more.

Admission to our shows was usually free, although sometimes we asked for a small donation. The nobles who had heard of our trouble in the past were intensely curious but remained at a distance as not to sully their names. How could we entice them in? Nobles are, by nature, followers, so all we needed to do was to find one of them with a passion for color and cheap tricks, and we slowly took the rest of them as well. After all, many imitations had sprung up after our exile: some even tried to return to the old days of quiet flutes and sleepy music, but none of them were half as good at their best as the Blazing Dancers were at our worst. There was demand for something that only we could fulfill, and it wasn't long before the Izou nobles were overlooking the Emperor's disdain and lining our pockets again.

It was not long before the Empire, the vast blunt animal of bureaucracy, was again officially funding us for our dedication to the arts. The Blazing Dancers were recognized for the culture we provided to the impoverished, the delight we brought to the rich and the happiness we sowed throughout the nation. Would-be students made regular pilgrimages from all over the world for the chance to audition to join our now prestigious troupe. For every ten we took under our tutelage, we turned thousands away. It would have been easy to fall back upon the old, disgraceful lure of money and attention, but we never did for even a moment.

The Blazing Dancers decided that a more centralized location was needed, giving a fixed place where people could journey to see our stunning performances. The Wu Ji Theater, or the Infinite Theater, was erected at the base of the Ensen Volcano and became a home to the clan. There, we trained new initiates and held spectacular performances on a regular basis. We carved paths for the fury of the volcano to take when it was roused, but





with our talents with fire there was never any true worry about the town. In fact, few feared for anything under the watch of our clan.

The Wu Ji Theater could hold hundreds inside, and the walls could be lowered to make it possible to see our shows from the outside as well. This was initially a good way to impress all the people of the area at once without making farmers and seamstresses pay for seats. Of course, come winter, the collapsible walls were sealed and the inside of the building was professionally designed. To help spread our message to the downtrodden citizens of the Empire, we regularly held parades and invited them to our dress rehearsals that were nothing short of spectacular.

The theater itself, as you can clearly see, is made from the best wood in the empire and covered in ancient gargoyles donated to us from one of our admirers from the spoils they received when they sacked a castle in the Land of Five Blades. There are more secret passages in these walls than there are in the Emperor's concubine chambers.

## THE NEW ERA

As with all good things, the time of the Wu Ji Theater came to an end when the Emperor declared all ninja were traitors and conspirators. Our clan gave one last astounding performance, purposely leaving the crowd wanting more of our specialized form of expression. We closed our doors to the public for good. Everyone wondered what we were up to as the sounds of twanging sitars and the swelling of our choirs' voices can still be heard on quiet nights. The great mystery proved too intriguing for some to ignore, and from time to time we would have people try to steal into the theatre to find out the truth. Those that managed to sneak in undetected were eventually taken out or often offered a place amongst us. New initiates would prove their loyalty over time, only to learn the theater is, in fact, still in business - just not for normal performances anymore.

Within the protective walls, we pass along our knowledge of performance and manipulation. Once the pupil has chosen their calling and has begun their journey on the road to perfecting the craft, we give a glimpse of the ninja arts. Not all of

our students deserve the chance, but can still be quite fine performers in their own right. Those who accept our true nature, however, can become glorious warriors indeed. Our lessons are of observing and manipulating others: how to spread lies, how to turn people against their masters, how to blend in with a crowd to avoid notice, how to defend themselves with any found object, how to change a person's mind, and - most importantly - how to do all of these things under our enemy's direct gaze.

All of this relates to you now too, doesn't it, now that you are joining the Blazing Dancers? I know you didn't say you wanted to, but you didn't have to. Your eyes spoke a thousand tales of your inner pain and we are here to comfort you and enlighten you to your true path in this world.

Your nod in agreement will suffice.


I'll tell you what happens now. Every new ninja that joins our ranks has a rite performed for them. You stand in meditation at the center of a circle of Dancers and flame, each growing closer and closer. Finally, after nearly an hour of intense sweating and constant fear of the encroaching fire's bite, you'll leap to your feet and instinctually mimic the other Dancers' movements, becoming indistinguishable from the rest until the dance is over.

All those involved are covered in ashes and soot by the end, symbolizing the great journey all of us have taken to get to where we are now. It thanks the Great desert for being our womb and welcomes you into our hearts and our clan. It is not to be taken lightly and your future will be quite short if you are unable to attain this level. I have high hopes for you though.

Welcome to the Blazing Dancers. Training begins in the morning.

## INSIDE THE CIRCLE

Close, but next time try to get hit less. I realize that there are six people in masks dancing around you and that such a thing can be slightly confusing, but that's the point. At this stage of your training, only one of them is trying to strike you through the chaos, so it's not that difficult. Try listening to the



difference of their foot movement. It's subtle, but it's there.

Ok, I'm done. Sorry about that interruption, where were we? Oh right – the basics. There shouldn't be more than a 2-step difference between when you're dancing to a pleasant tune and when you're fighting to the death. Your balance should be in the same place if you're kicking for show or doing it for real. Your skill at dance becomes your skill at combat, flowing from one to the other flawlessly. This creates an element of surprise, which lends more power to your attack. Soldiers will let a pretty girl dance around them all day... or until she finds herself in a good enough position to strike.

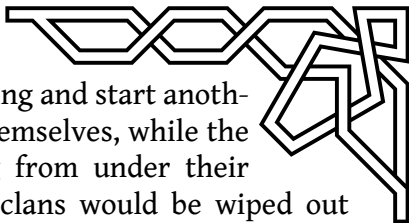
That pirouette is wrong. Do it again.

You must become more like the poisonous frog than the crocodile. You're still trying to hide your intentions when you should be exposing the wrong intentions instead. Everyone knows alligators bite, but not many realize how deadly the cute frog is until it's too late.

What? Of course we kill people. Hayakawa's stories are great for painting us as victims of circumstance, but we're not above spilling a little blood when necessary. This is a war and people get hurt. It's not like we train exclusively for self-defense. Life doesn't work that way. We're taking the fight to the Empire before they completely wipe us all out, even if they don't know it's us. If a Blazing Dancer gets caught during a mission, we're usually either dressed as another clan or we're done up in ways that no one would take us as a serious threat anyway. The Grasping Shadows is one of our favorite clans to impersonate as a matter of fact, but we save those costumes for special occasions. In all honesty, we love to have the world's attention while we stab them in the back, and that's where expert training comes into play.

Lift your leg higher.

Let's think about what happens without enough training. First off, we die as a clan. The Odoriko ceases to exist and our legend dies. Then, because we're not around to bring joy to the masses, spirits sink and the citizens of the Empire are left as hopeless dregs. The whole world will cry, "Where is Odoriko Minori and his amazing feats?" while I lie bleeding on the end of an Imperial spear. The other clans, not having the great distraction of our tricks and plots, get



embroiled in their bickering and start another stupid war amongst themselves, while the Empire takes everything from under their noses unnoticed. Whole clans would be wiped out and what few ninja survive would be bound to the Emperor to serve obediently as his slaves.

This is why we train. We train to inspire others, to make people look at us and to teach others to think for themselves. We train to resist occupation. We train to make all others love us as we love them. That is the way of the Blazing Dancer.

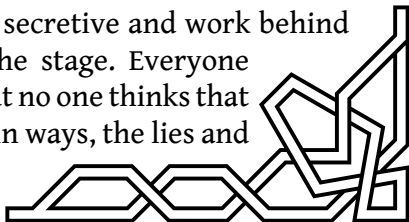
## AMONG OTHER NINJA

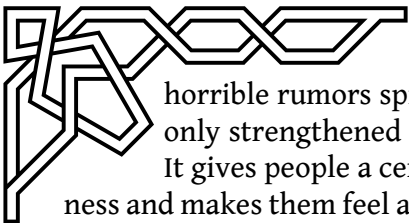
The Lotus Coalition? Well, we have a funny place within the organization. Most clans think of us as buffoons and thieves of whatever isn't bolted down. That suits us fine. It allows us to get away with all sorts of things. The value of our presence there is slowly being recognized because we are doing that which no other clan seems capable of. No one else can recruit the entire populace of the Empire to their side, can they? No, just us. Ours is a long war, so other clans get irritated when we don't come to meetings with heads on spikes to show our glory. Our progress is hard to see unless you're the one behind it.

And kick. Again.

Dancers like to mingle and most clans like us, since no one can lighten a mood like we can. We get along with pretty much anyone, making it possible for us to get into places even the sneakiest Shadow cannot. We make amazing distractions, but are fully capable of holding our own if the mission falls towards the violent side of things. Other clans are so detached from the citizens that they think only of advancing their own goal. They forget the importance of socializing with the people. Not only do we do that well, the people love us for it. On occasion, they even offer us a warm bed to sleep in, food to fill our stomachs, money for a song and even company for the night.

Other clans like to be secretive and work behind the curtains. We're on the stage. Everyone knows that we're ninja, but no one thinks that we're dangerous. In certain ways, the lies and





horrible rumors spread by the Emperor have only strengthened our hold on the populace. It gives people a certain feeling of rebelliousness and makes them feel as though they are exciting and revolutionary to attend one of our performances. Of course, we acknowledge and encourage those feelings, as is our way.

And twirl.

All things aside, though, the Lotus coalition is the only thing keeping us all alive. Without them, the Empire could afford the time to take a closer look at us and maybe figure out what we're up to. Same goes for the other clans too. Any clan in the coalition might try to kill us for any number of reasons. That's all right with us though. After all, a jester relies on the luck of the fool to survive, right? We'll make them believe that's what we are.

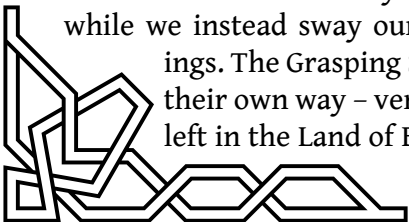
Speaking of which, there are certain expectations and weaknesses you should know about when interacting with members of the other clans. There are many clans other than the one you and I come from, and you'll be working with them when your training is complete. We get along with most as we fight in this cooperative war, but there are others that think of us as nothing more than charlatans, cowards and criminals.

## **GRASPING SHADOWS**

The Shadows, your previous clan who - from what I hear - sent you here on a fool's errand, are a perfect example of ninja with poor opinions of us. They require every new recruit to kill a specified target to become a full member, as death is their only currency. Shadows can perform amazing acts of assassination, but their masters do the research of their targets and they follow blindly. Who knows if their targets deserve to be put to the sword or they are just a beggar who offended one of the masters?

They care not that every person they kill is simply replaced by another, creating an endless cycle of death. At the most, it takes only a few days for their target to be replaced with another who is no better than the last. Their way creates only bloodstains, while we instead sway our foe's thoughts and feelings.

The Grasping Shadows are so blinded by their own way - very reminiscent of those we left in the Land of Exalted Flame who forfeit-



## **ODORIKO MINORI**

Growing up within the clan and the circus of activity surrounding it gave Minori an amazing lineage to live up to. He went on to become the premiere performer for the Blazing Dancers, mastering astounding feats of acrobatics and fire breathing, and is responsible for a lot of the attention the clan receives today. After traveling the world for a number of years as a Bellow and enjoying life to the fullest, he returned to the Wu Ji Theater and became a teacher the moment he was needed.

He is a fun loving guy, but cannot tolerate laziness or those who give up. Minori becomes the center of the party when he enters a room and works hard to make sure others enjoy his company. He knows the power of a well-placed joke or a joyful tune to turn someone around though. He has served on the front lines more than once and has amassed an impressive body count - although he doesn't like to talk about it much.

Minori keeps his mid-length brown hair in a ponytail when teaching and loose when performing. He wears loose and colorful clothing and is rarely seen without a smile on his face.

ed all things in life besides duty.

I'd feel sorry for them if they didn't keep trying to kill us off. I can't remember seeing a single one of them ever smiling before they came through our door. Their clan has never tried to compromise with any other clan - another one of their many downfalls. I'll assume I'm not offending you, since you made the inevitable decision to become a member of our clan instead. Wise choice.

## **RECOILING SERPENTS**

The Serpents have bought into the same story that we tell all of our enemies. We are nothing but simple-minded fools who would rather be singing and dancing than winning wars, right? There is nothing wrong with them believing that, as they have no loyalty to our or any other clan. Serpents keep their numbers up by convincing their children of their en-



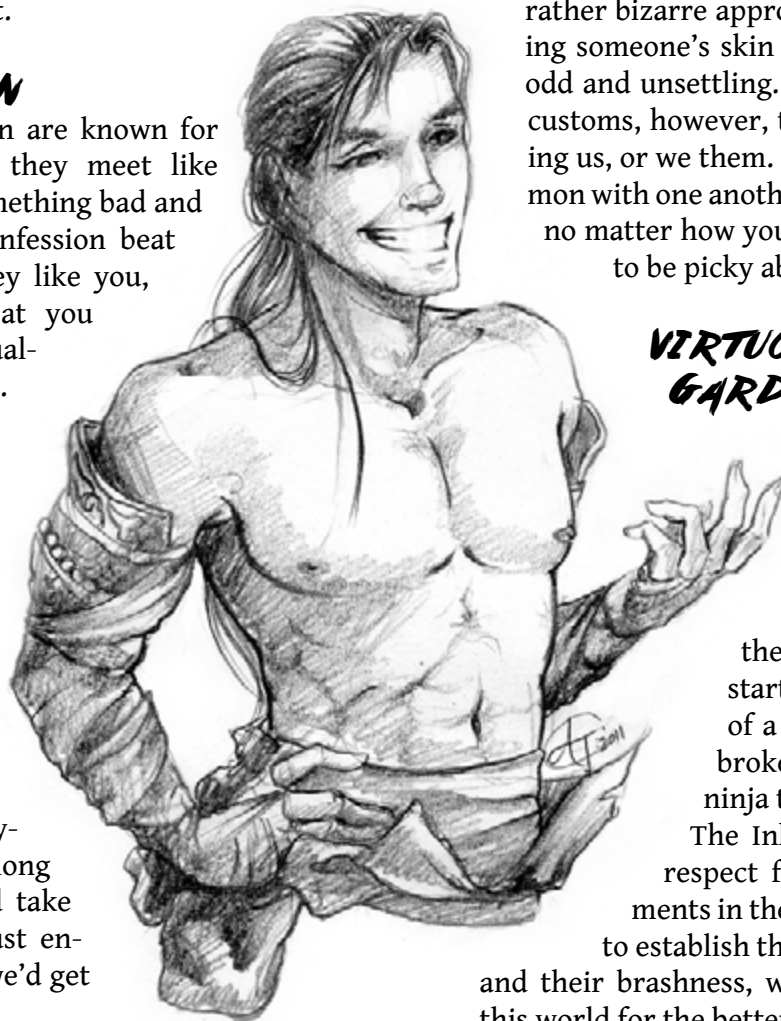
titlement to power. Most Dancers keep their distance and let the Serpents think they will change the world again someday, though we know that they are merely holding on to a memory of their own once great empire.

### **HIDDEN STRANDS OF FATE**

The Strands are such amazing liars that they do not even trust themselves. If you locked two of them alone in a room, one would be dead and the other would claim innocence while using the corpse as a footstool. We have watched them put their own interests ahead of the common good of all ninja countless times. As liars go, however, they are very good at covering their tracks and deflecting allegations. From where I stand, the Strands are not a major threat as long as the Lotus Coalition is smart enough not to trust them with anything important.

### **WILLOF IRON**

The Will of Iron are known for treating everyone they meet like they have done something bad and need to have a confession beat out of them. If they like you, they'll wait to beat you until you've actually done something. There is nothing wrong with having a sense of justice, but such a virtue means nothing without a sense of doubt to temper it with. I imagine the clan has not had a collective sense of anything like that in a long time. If they could take a step back and just enjoy life, I imagine we'd get along better.



### **BAMBOO HERBALISTS**

The Herbalists are seen by other clans as a tool to simply get their warriors back to killing more Izou. We prefer to see them as friends and comrades who need our help to acquire what they need to perfect their abilities. We help them and they help us. They yearn to lead exciting lives, and there's no other clan in the world that can help them with that like we can. Dancers live for adventure and travel. They are the first clans to jump to our defense and join in our celebrations. We try to keep them happy so that when we need the help only they can provide, they are there for us.

### **LIVING CHRONICLE**

Ninja from the Living Chronicle aren't as stuffy as they are made out to be. Most of them are shy or awkward in public, but they enjoy our shows just like the rest. Some Dancers can be put off by their rather bizarre approaches to death rituals. Saving someone's skin as history is frankly rather odd and unsettling. Regardless of their strange customs, however, they are not averse to helping us, or we them. We don't find much in common with one another, but company is company no matter how you slice it and we can't afford to be picky about our allies in this war.

### **VIRTUOUS BODY GARDENERS**

The Inks are the most like us of the other clans. Not only do they put their freedom of expression before their own lives, but they are also viewed as upstarts and rebels. They grew out of a strict set of rules that they broke free from. Sound like other ninja that you may have heard of? The Inks have won our esteemed respect for their many accomplishments in the short time they have taken to establish themselves. With our subtlety and their brashness, we can truly change this world for the better.



## **WARDENS OF EQUILIBRIUM**

The Wardens will reluctantly train with other ninja if they absolutely have to, but without others of their clan they wouldn't have friends at all. Money and power take up all the room in their hearts and they wouldn't trade it for real happiness even if they knew what that was. They are not above turning brothers against sisters if it will help to make their lives easier. I can't say I approve of what they do, but their results speak plainly enough. They are effective but incredibly disloyal. You can employ a Warden, but you should never fool yourself into believing that one is your friend.

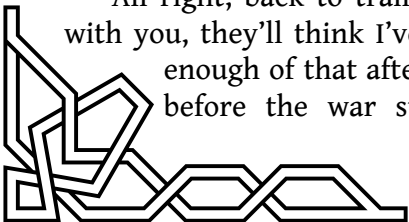
## **PACK OF THE BLACK MOON**

The Hounds are another clan we enjoy the company of. The enemy of my enemy is my friend, but when they're also such good folks it doesn't matter where their loyalties lie. They have been around for such a long time and they still have the reputation of being nothing but farmers who are too backwards to find their way around a city. If the Pack could learn how to turn that against their foes, their lives would be much easier. We would teach them, but they are unsurprisingly stubborn about changing the ways they are so used to.

## **RONIN**

Ronin are as varied as the blades on the wall over there or the tessen along the other wall. None are alike, but all are beautiful in their own way. Every ninja, regardless of clan, has a purpose in this world. These strays can run messages between clans where too much clan animosity exists for them to interact directly with each other. Ronin choose their own path in life without embracing the past failings and anger of their ancestors. With so many choices for paths to take, is it surprising when they happen to find ours after being shown a basic amount of compassion sadly lacking from other clans? Our ranks swell and the world becomes a more enjoyable place.

All right, back to training. If I'm seen chatting with you, they'll think I've gone soft. I already get enough of that after being such a rising star before the war started and subsequently



throwing it all away to train ninja like you. The people still call my name, and I sneak in a performance on occasion, but our efforts here at the theater must take precedence.

## **THE TRULY SKILLED AMONG US**

Pick up your feet. I can tell that you are getting tired, but you must fight through the pain if you seek perfection. The Blazing Dancers expect nothing less, for this is only the beginning. Several sects exist within our clan and only the best can hope to advance past the role of student into something much greater.

Sure, there are caravan drivers that get our shows to where we need to go. They know all the back roads, who to bribe in order to use a forbidden trade route and how to pack the audiences into small theaters with no problem. Without them, the Odoriko would have lost our fans years ago.

Others learn how to do exactly what I'm doing with you, becoming trainers and leaders like me. Once there was a city completely opposed to everything we stood for. A particularly gifted Dancer started small, teaching dance lessons and selling flowers while slowly spreading our way of life. She swayed people slowly, never letting them learn her true intentions. Over the years, public opinion softened enough for us to eventually lead a caravan in and start the real work. Excellent teachers choreograph our movements for the real act we perform every day. We fool everyone because we were listening when they told us how to do it.

Besides these general roles, however, there are those who perform more specific duties within our ranks. The Tamers, for instance, take care of our animals. Not a small task. The Bellows have become experts in the use of flame on the stage or the battlefield. There are also the Thousand who wear secretive masks most of the time and the Hands who work behind the scenes while we do what we do best.

## TAMERS

Circuses don't run themselves, and we keep a large number of trained birds, bears, dogs, monkeys, elephants and jungle cats. The animals have been taught the usual tricks of tightrope walking, juggling and balancing acts, but the brighter ones are even able to track, pick pockets, plant evidence and perform all sorts of other espionage. We are obviously not as attached to our animals as the Pack of the Black Moon, but they certainly serve their purpose. Hayakawa even has a monkey she's trained to pick rudimentary locks and store things in its mouth. However, Tamers spend the bulk of their time training mice to be juggled and elephants to stand on one foot. You know, the usual thing you would see at one of our circuses. Animals are but a small part in winning our war.

## BELLOWS

Bellows live a life of flame. Not only do they invigorate crowds with their fire-swallowing, flame-breathing, torch-juggling, coal-walking and practically anything else short of burning themselves to a cinder, they also know a great deal about manipulating the element of fire through jutsu. It is the Bellows who are the most well-known of our clan. They parade around towns astonishing the crowds that naturally gather when someone is throwing a bit of fire around and then proceed to live large: buying drinks for locals, gifting flowers to the women and buying coats for the men. When they leave, everyone they touched wishes to become a Bellow. They are also the most flamboyant sect we have - pun intended - and are helpful in taking the attention away from our more secretive groups.

## THE THOUSAND

The Thousand received their name one hundred years ago while infiltrating Daiwa. In the midst of an internal clan struggle of a possible spy among us from the Emperor, this group asked for autonomy from other Dancers in hopes of rooting the mole out. Their request was granted by our masters, and they headed into the city. The Informer knew only that our clan had sent in a group called the Thousand, so the guards began looking for a large group of Odoriko

to attack. Actually, there were only six.

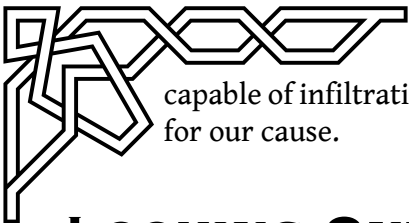
The mission in Daiwa was successful, and the members of the Thousand kept their involvement with the mission a secret, blending swiftly back into the clan. No one knows what the Thousand do when on missions and they wear fanciful masks to further hide their identities. They will not remove them in front of anyone that is not one of the Thousand; even eat together wearing those damn theater masks.

They practice the same dance completely in sync and the same martial arts forms as others in the Odoriko clan, but they remain a mystery. Only our masters know how many there are now, but I am certain it's more than six. They exist both separate from the clan, with their masks, and beside the others, living as any other ninja within the hidden villages. The Thousand are often sent as emissaries of the Blazing Dancers to the other clans if the Bellows somehow fail or our relationship is tenuous. Keep in mind that their secrecy is a necessary evil, but they are Dancers after all is said and done.

## THE HANDS

The last sect is an interesting sort. There are towns that either do not accept the Blazing Dancers or may be particularly aggressive against foreigners. When we know we're going into truly dangerous territory, we send in members of the Hand as regular citizens. They are the premiere actors of our clan, able to assume any role given to them in a moment's notice, and they are paramount to our approach to this war. The Hands enter a town and settle within, becoming a part of the town sometimes for years before any plan is set in motion. From within, they provide intelligence, entrance papers and shelter for our warriors who secretly enter the town. The Hands never fall under any suspicion, but why would they? They're just like everyone else that lives there.

The Dancers try to have one of the Hands in every major city under rival clan or imperial influence to allow for safe missions if the necessity arises. Posing as visiting relatives isn't hard - especially when we leave town days after the attention we kicked up has passed. It's rare that we ask anything other than basic information or a place to stay from the Hands, but they are ninja like any other,



capable of infiltrating castles and even killing for our cause.

## LOOKING ONWARD

After another basic exercise, we'll move on to one of my favorite tests. You'll have eight monkeys clamoring around on your body and you must discover which one is trying to stick a clay statue in your pocket. If the monkey succeeds, then this simulates you being killed by Izou guards for stealing from the Emperor's palace.

Look at the tables next to stage before you. You have ten seconds to remember where the half-full glasses are and then put on this blindfold. Now get up on stage and dance. I don't care if you've never danced before. I don't care if you're scared of looking silly. You must make sure not to fall off the stage at the same time as keeping your balance, avoiding props and entertaining the audience. These are things you'll have to figure out very quickly if you're going to make the cut here as a performer or as a nin-ja. Close your eyes and stand right here.

Now, dance!

## A MAN WHO HAS SEEN IT ALL

Everyone on the caravan! I have supplies for ten and it's going to be a great time! You though - you sit up front with me. There should be room between those boxes and Kuan there. He's shy so he won't talk much. You are so skinny that the horses won't even notice your weight along with the caravan they're pulling, but hurry on so the others won't have to wait any longer. It's a long trek through the mountains and I'm sure everyone would rather not spend an extra night in such low temperatures.

You bet it gets cold. The volcano is currently inactive and the mountains themselves seem to weigh heavily on one's soul. When we set up camp, you can make out one of many villages through the twin ridge of the Nurhaci pass that were once full of life before landslides or a volcanic eruption caused the people to flee for their

### KATSU SOFU

Sofu has seen everything the world has to offer and then some. Once a member of the Bellows, he traveled all over the empire and engaged in every type of debauchery he could get his hands on, including drugs, women and gambling. Once reported to the Dancer masters, Sofu was shamed and sent to Kokyuryu for nearly ten years to temper his emotions and tame his desires. He later rejoined the Blazing Dancers as a caravan driver and put his worldly knowledge to use. He now ferries the Odoriko's movers and shakers to where they are best suited.

Sofu is an older man who looks even more aged than he truly is. His years at Kokyuryu have dulled his passions for some things, but the Wu Ji Theater and the acts performed there put fire in his heart still. He has a beard past his knees and small, squinting blue eyes, though he is completely bald.

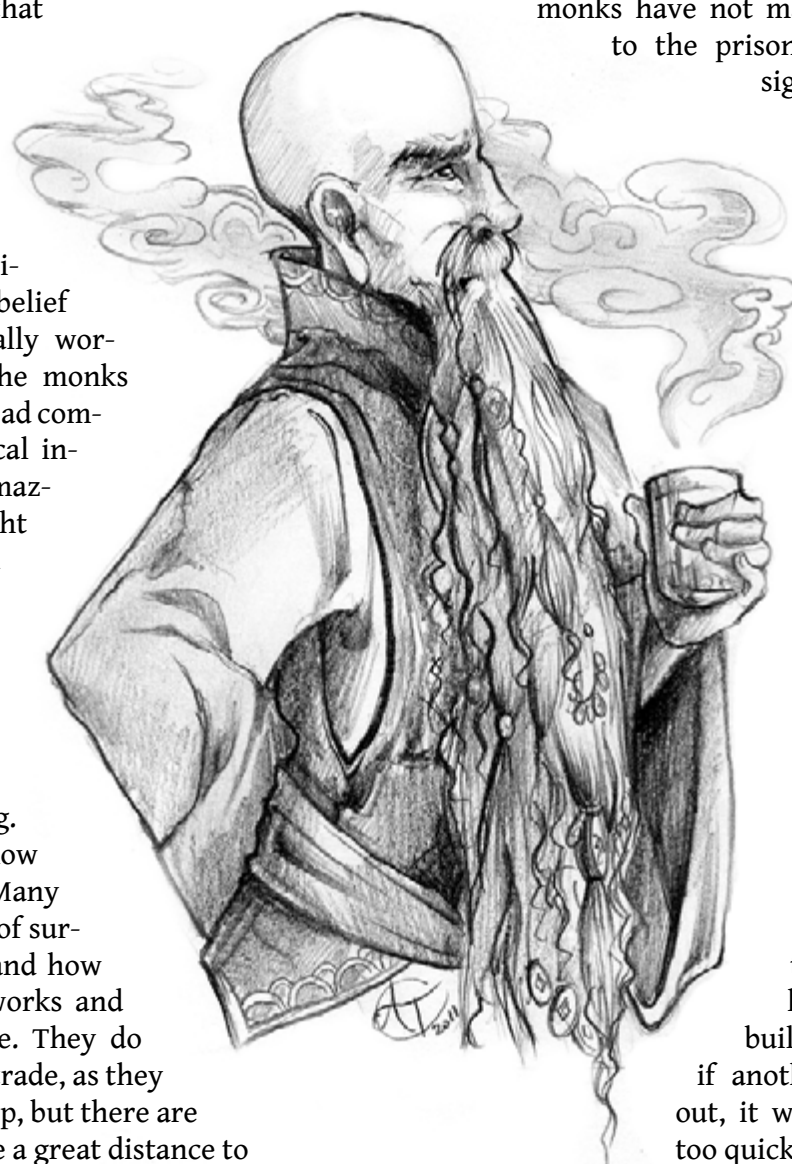
lives. There's dozens of little ghost towns scattered throughout the mountain range, but most of them are off the road we will be taking. There's a big one a few miles in that bandits occasionally hole up in, so keep an eye out. You may be called to help defend the caravan.

There is a lot of traffic through these mountains, but it is mostly made of those who must now prey on others.

## KOKYURYU

Kokyuryu is your stop? They must think you need to learn patience. My name is Katsu Sofu. I've spent years in their region of the mountains and passed over the cobbled roads many times in my life. The monks of Kokyuryu were smart to build their monasteries miles apart but still close enough together enough to be considered a single city. Taxes can be collectively paid and they can be left to their secluded lives. Things move slowly there. In fact, I grew the first two feet of my beard there. It's interesting how Kokyuryu came to be. The once powerful Lord Yamakawa desired a prison to detain those who opposed his politi-

cal views. Thus, a massive fortress was built far away from his city in the Bridge to the World Province to do exactly that. He misjudged his political enemies, unfortunately, and was overthrown long before the prison opened. His successor wanted nothing to do with a gigantic fortress and donated it to a large sect of monks whom he viewed favorably. They moved into the prison and made it their home. Although the monks are generally pacifists, they practice a form of martial arts that they use to regulate their health and perfect meditation techniques. Many of them are under vows that forbid them to speak. Those who live under such a strict oath inhabit the towers of the prison in a wing shrouded in silence. There are a few different sects among the monks, but their general belief is that through kindness, patience and an abandonment of possessions and social expectations, they can reach enlightenment. In a fascinating offshoot of this belief system, one sect actually worships human bones. The monks use the bones of their dead companions to make musical instruments that make amazing sounds. They might sound like a morbid group, but they are some of the cheeriest people you could ever meet. The gatherings they hold are filled with delightful music and much dancing. For monks, they know how to have a good time. Many of them perfect the art of surgery to better understand how their skeletal system works and what it needs to thrive. They do not usually teach their trade, as they see it as a way of worship, but there are many doctors who come a great distance to



understand their techniques. Those doctors who have been graced with their tutelage have been known to do amazing things that keep them in high demand by lords and merchants alike. The prison itself is a huge fortress. It was designed to prevent prisoners from speaking to or even seeing one another. Political prisoners can give each other too many ideas. If they were allowed to interact with each other, they would be filled to the brim with rebellious knowledge and, if they were ever released, would be incredibly dangerous. As the prisoners theoretically could have a large following who would protest their imprisonment, there are many watchtowers, rows of walls and deadfalls that were built to foil anyone foolish enough to try to sneak in. The monks have not made any modifications to the prison (aside from posting signs warning of the deep

pits) as they enjoy the atmosphere and ability to be independent of each other.

After a series of Ensen Volcano eruptions, all manner of refugees began arriving at the former prison, seeking shelter and food. The monks took in whole families and soon a prosperous town sprung up around the temple. Many of the townsfolk were superstitious and fearful of finding their home engulfed in flames again, so the city was built with lots of space between buildings in the hopes that if another fire broke out, it wouldn't spread too quickly. With neigh-

bors so far from each other, communication is sparse. This is one of the reasons why life goes so slowly there. Everyone is used to things taking time. Most have their own garden and a plot of farmland, making travel rare unless there is an emergency.

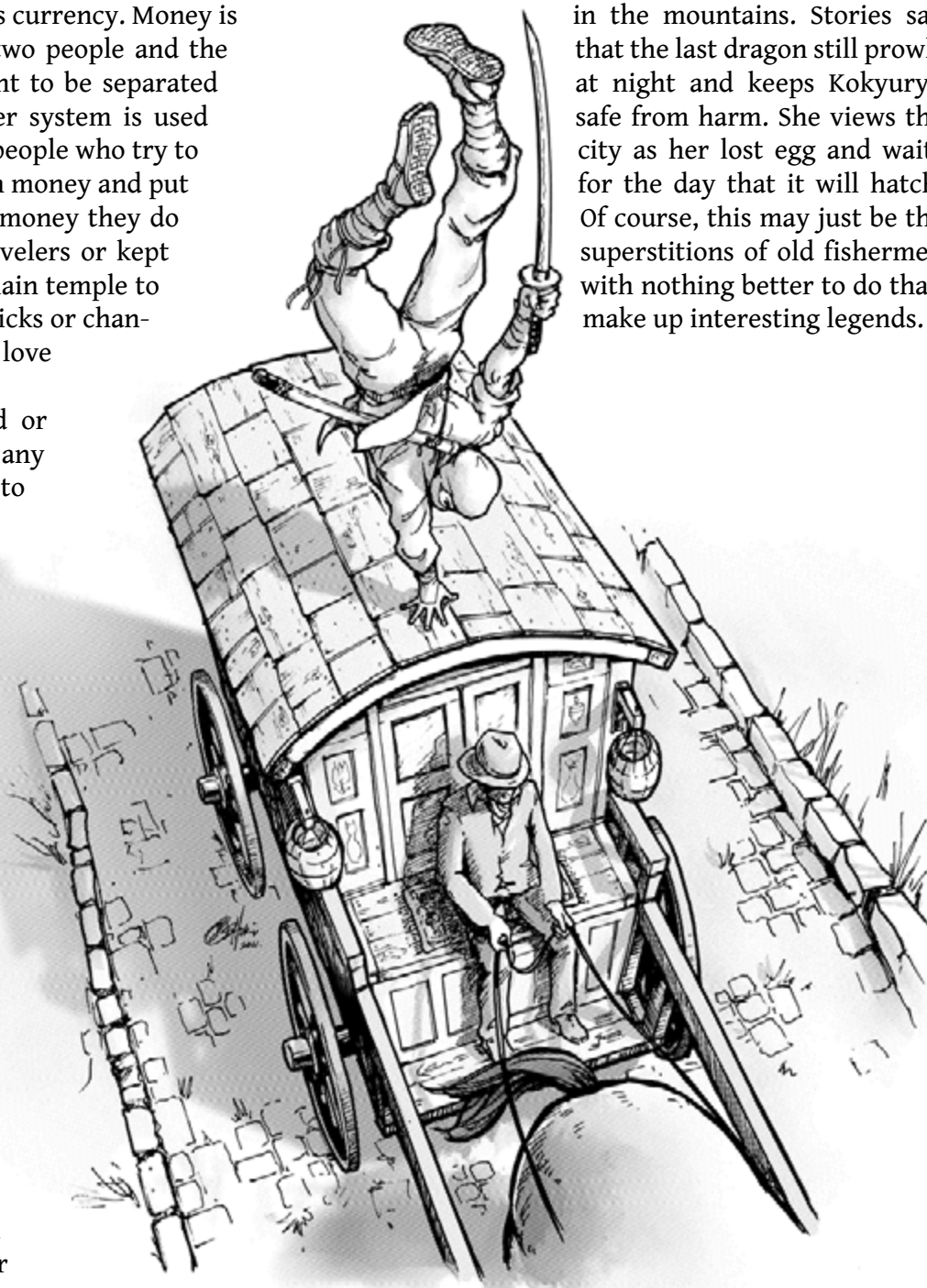
They still export their extra food in exchange for things they cannot grow themselves, but they never deal with the Empire's currency. Money is the thickest wall between two people and the Kokyuryu people never want to be separated from each other. The barter system is used heavily, and they laugh off people who try to pay for services or food with money and put them to work instead. Any money they do get is donated to needy travelers or kept in a huge room below the main temple to sculpt new statues, candlesticks or chandeliers out of. Monks do love their statues.

They have been robbed or attacked before, just like any other unlucky enough to cross a bandit's path, but the monks seem more concerned with how the downtrodden criminal ended up in the predicament of needing to steal from others to make ends meet. It's not that they fight back, they just end up showing the parasitical elements of humankind more compassion than they are used to. Many thieves have ended up joining the order instead of making off with their gold. Others get away with whatever the monks

give them, which can be sizable. After all, what use do the

monks have for it?

During certain times of the year, Kokyuryu becomes blanketed in thick, foggy air. With familiar landmarks obscured and no signposts to point out family homes in the mist, some get lost for days - especially with the distance between structures. Of course, many believe this to be caused by the rumbling of dragons that still lurk in the mountains. Stories say that the last dragon still prowls at night and keeps Kokyuryu safe from harm. She views the city as her lost egg and waits for the day that it will hatch. Of course, this may just be the superstitions of old fishermen with nothing better to do than make up interesting legends.





## QUIETING OF THE DRAGONS

The Flame River Province where the Odoriko hold power was the location of the very first ninja war, the Orime rebellion. I won't bore you with the details of the war, because every ninja knows that story. The Blazing Dancers understand the connection that our territory has to the past and we acknowledge that we owe those first rebels everything. We must show respect to this land and the mountains, because it is the very ground our ancestors died to free. If we never forget then they shall be immortal. Some clans protest this idea, claiming that a foreign clan can't know the hardships of the original Orime ninja. This is obviously full of what the horse just dropped.

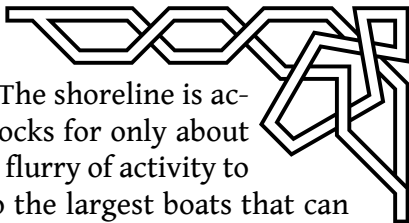
Our festival, called The Quieting of the Dragons, is held once a year to honor these ninja. We try to involve all the townsfolk as we gather up stockpiles of their most valuable but ultimately useless items. They bundle these items up in stacks that resemble human shapes and sing as they haul them outside of town.

They stop at a long rolling hill with layers of craggy rocks at the bottom and light their bundles on fire before throwing them down the ravine and cheering. People have been known to scavenge the treasures that survive, but the locals don't seem to care. The only purpose of the objects was to bring the people together during the Quieting, so why should it matter?

## KAKOU

We're stopping through the city of Kakou before we get to Kokyuryu, though. Let me say that it is a very different place. It's a sprawling city that shoots right up the side of a cliff. They ran out of room for outward growth decades ago, so they grew upward instead. The primarily wooden houses are lashed together to prevent one of them from falling into the ocean. When the wind kicks up, you can hear the whole village creaking.

Every few hours the tide disappears from the Kakou docks. The shallows stretch for nearly half a mile so the big boats have to stay fairly far out and



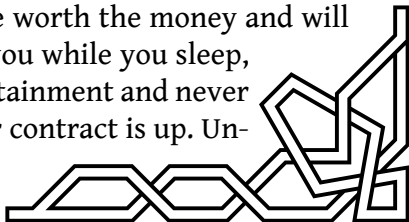
send the smaller ones in. The shoreline is actually on level with the docks for only about an hour a day so there is a flurry of activity to load crew and goods onto the largest boats that can brave the shallows. Don't ask how many accidents there are.

Being the main source of trade between the empire and the Land of Exalted Flame across the Arashi Sea, the Imperial navy spends much of its time moored just off the shore. The Empire once tried to establish a military foothold in the city to better control the trade, but the Kakou citizens rebelled. They threw much of the tea exports into the ocean or burned down entire ships as they docked. Since then, the navy has settled for watching from a distance to ensure their cargo reaches its destination. Sure, they make less money, but the people there are happier and thus more productive. At least, that's how they look at it.

Truth be told, Kakou is a rich city mostly run by criminals. The crime lords provide jobs and build boats to carry cargo across the sea. Their followers are kept well fed and bathed in enough money to be considered middle class. The crime lords sometimes act as pirates in the area, paying off the Imperial navy to turn a blind eye when needed. Only the most daring raid the Izou vessels, usually followed by another fruitless attempt by the Empire to gain more control over the city through military might.

More importantly, the city is the home to several kinds of refugees. We enjoy traveling to Kakou to put on shows for these people. Those that have escaped the Land of Exalted Flame as we did need to be exposed to our art. Without it, they are victims of the Way. With our help, they can become full beings with their own thoughts and minds. Refugees from the Land of Mountains and Valleys are even tougher nuts to crack. Their dispositions are so filled with hatred and rebellion and they need a chance to let go of it all, if for only a night.

If you plan on staying in Kakou a while, employ a registered guide to show you around - they are as handy with a map as they are with a sword. If they have credentials, they are worth the money and will protect you, watch over you while you sleep, lead you to the best entertainment and never leave your side until their contract is up. Un-





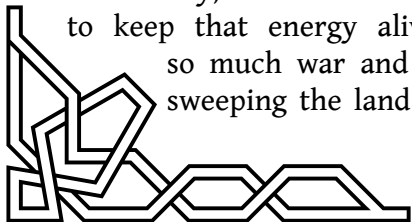
registered guides, however, are criminals of the worst sort who are as quick to take you to see the sights as they are to slit your throat and take your coin-purse.

Most Dancers love this city, as it takes the attention away from what we do at the Wu Ji Theater and provides a scapegoat for things we may need to cover up in the region. We get any supplies that we don't make ourselves from Kakou, like vibrant costumes, fantastic masks and so on. It's a great place to perform because it fills us with the energy of its bustling nights. Mind your pockets inside its walls, though.

## WU JI THEATER

We've been on the road for less than a day and you already want to go back to the Wu Ji Theater? Not surprisingly - it is the most joyous place in all of the Izou Empire. Leaving is necessary, however, in order to bring our happiness to the other provinces.

It was once a much more inhabited place. The previous city was mostly abandoned before the Wu Ji Theater was built. When the Blazing Dancers arrived, there was finally enough money in the citizens' pockets that many of the old residents moved on. The empty houses were used to board the influx of professional actors, singers and dancers to our theater. Ninja practiced their art disguised as dancing and tricks in front of others with no one being the wiser. It was a great time in our history when everyone there could simply enjoy each other's company and knowledge was freely exchanged between those who were the best of their trades. To this day, the Odoriko clan tries to keep that energy alive, but so much war and violence sweeping the land makes it a



much more difficult task.

Even our winters are continually warm due to the Ensen Volcano's heat, and the ash that falls every few years can appear as thickly as snow. Our children play in the ash and our ninjas use it to train in tracking and counter-tracking skills, so it is never seen as a burden. It is a sight that is very beautiful to behold no matter how many times you've seen it previously.

The Wu Ji Theater always has something happening. Festivals occur weekly - often for no reason at all - and this helps to drive people to our fair city. With these celebrations, we receive a steady supply of new recruits and also show Imperial spies that we have nothing to hide. Hosting these amazing events also raises funds to improve the theater, throw citywide hide-and-go-seek games, dancing or musical competitions, grand archery contests and any other excuse for people to get together and enjoy life as only the Odoriko can. We hold so many celebrations it can get hard to track: ash festivals, sun dances, fall and winter passages, spring and summer goodbyes, coal jugglers day, silent day, balancers folly, the aforementioned Quieting of the Dragons - and the list goes on. We like keeping things lively even though it takes a lot of energy. If you arrive and there are not people laughing and spilling into the streets filled with joy, then be assured there will be tomorrow. If nothing happens tomorrow, then the Odoriko must have been wiped out.



## THE OTHERS

Of course, these are not the only cities in the Fire River province, but they are the most interesting. Most of the region has the Takiyama mountain range through it, but a lot of people find that they can get accustomed to life up there easily. Every few years the volcano explodes, but only the foolish live in the path of the flame river. Some villag-





## YAMAGUCHI ASUKA

Young and itching to prove her worth, Yamaguchi is another outcast that found her new path with the Blazing Dancers... this time from the Grasping Shadows. She has no contact with her former clan, but rightly fears that they will attack her on sight. Luckily, she is now backed by her new family.

Yamaguchi has had rigorous training and meditation exercises, but still she is too quick to rely on her Grasping Shadow training in a pinch. Her patience is growing, because she realizes now that the Dancers will never give up on her. She has a new home within the clan even though she sometimes doesn't quite understand it that well. She is still undergoing her training, but soon her first mission will be underway. Yamaguchi eagerly awaits that day.

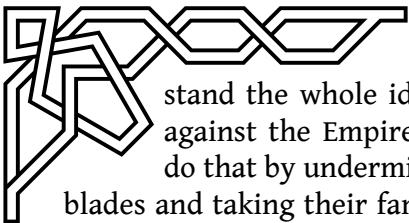

She is a shorter girl with dark hair just past her ears. She sticks to dark clothes and tries to blend in instead of standing out. She smiles convincingly, although it often feels forced.

es are forced to evacuate due to storms of ash and soot that cover everything they know and love, but some have become seasonal nomads to avoid any adverse effects. The Dancers, I more than once, have encountered poverty stricken families moving into the mountains and ignoring local lore and warnings. They move again quickly as soon as the Volcano begins to rumble.

Here we are at our first campsite. It seems unusually quiet for this time of night. I'm sure a group of brigands will crawl out of some hiding place in a moment. And there they are. Keep in mind they were probably farmers last year and are only attacking us out of necessity. Hunger can make a person do horrible things. So, try to take it easy on them. Mind the one on the left, too. He has a limp and we don't want to aggravate it too harshly. Let's see what you can do.

## A STUDENT'S RESPONSE

My name is Asuka Yamaguchi and I cannot stand what I am being taught - if taught is even the right word. I was forced to spend nearly a year up in a windy mountain town under a complete vow of silence to teach me humbleness and patience. I knew both of those things before I got there so all I did was waste my time. Well, it wasn't a complete waste. I met some interesting monks and used my time to hone my jutsu into a deadly weapon. I suppose the calligraphy lessons were quaint as well. But now? Now they have asked me to sit on a dirty street in Kakou getting to know the locals and learning to hate them. Three groups have already tried to mug me, I've been mistaken for a prostitute twice and a dog attempted to urinate upon me once. The only thing keeping my wrath in check is the meditation training from Kokyuryu and the fact that my blade would be wet with the constant humidity here. That's how I used to be trained. I would be faced with a force far more powerful than myself and I was to kill it. This was under Jae-Kwang with the Grasping Shadows. He understood what real training was about. I once had to defeat 3 men armed with swords on a raft during a storm. I ended up bleeding and nearly dead, but I accomplished the task set before me. I don't even know what my goal is anymore. Sitting here in the muck doesn't compare to having to remain unseen and unheard for an entire week in my master's dojo. I had to steal food from the plates of my own teachers to survive all while they kept a watchful eye out for me. My life hung in the balance constantly. They would use those who did not show promise for Breaking Practice - showing initiates how to break bones precisely. Once I heard a displeased master had used a handful of truly awful students as bumpers on his boat. The Grasping Shadows teach how to use weapons for pretty much everything in life until one fully understands the ideal way to wield it. The Odoriko have barely taught me to fight. They have been teaching me how to be patient with those of a lesser status than I, how to be joyful while still sad and how to dance. Why would I need to know these things to topple the empire? I under-



stand the whole idea of turning the masses against the Empire, but surely it's faster to do that by undermining the ruling class with

blades and taking their families hostage. That's not, however, what the Blazing Dancers want to do. They would be more likely to hug a soldier and then dance away, leaving them to continue their crimes.

It's silly that I cannot use my good training to tear open the belly of the Empire and must instead rely on compassion. I am eager to show my masters that they are thinking about it the right way, but using the wrong ideals. Soon will be the time where I stand atop a hill of bodies and cry, "This is how it is done!" while the citizens applaud and the Dancers stare in awe. They want to fight with hugs and kisses while people die in the streets.

Maybe the best thing is to play by their rules until they realize it's not working. Then they will look for other methods and I will let them know my ideas. I don't imagine the citizens would be opposed to the idea of their masters being disposed of by us.

Look at this place. Kakou wallows in filth but still the people live here because they have nowhere else to go. Still they smile. I can even hear music from a cheaply built panpipe down the road. Laughter erupts from the tavern across the street as often as weeping

leaks from the slanted building behind me. Maybe these people really do just need something to smile about. Maybe the Dancers are not totally wrong.

I suppose my training has not been a total waste of time. If I only had a companion for this journey, it could be worthwhile. Instead, I am sent here to learn an impossible and unknown lesson. I want to show Hayakawa that she was right to bring me in. That I can bring a great change to the Blazing Dancers that they didn't even know they needed. I'll be the best Dancer there ever was. Maybe Minori will write a song about me. Maybe the Shadows will kill me first.

I suppose I need to figure out what I'm supposed to be learning here. Picking pockets and robbing people doesn't seem like it falls in line with the Dancer philosophy, even though that seems like how most people get their money here. I don't even have enough to rent a room tonight, so I suppose I am to dance for a few coins in front of a crowd. Then again, I could also just break into the room as well.

Hold on. I'm a better Dancer than everyone on this street and I haven't even been doing it all that long. It won't be a humiliation - I'll make these people amazed that anyone could do such moves and put on such a show!

All I have to do is dance and believe.



# CHAPTER TWO: PIERCED WITH BEAUTIFUL NEEDLES

## THE TALE OF TALES

Sit down, please. Would you like some tea? I am pleased you have come, but I must warn you to be more discreet. We are almost literally under the noses of the Emperor's men, and you are asking for audience with outlaws.

You may call me Tomo. I am certain that you were expecting someone else. I apologize that I do not live up to your expectations. Here, you have seen the wanted posters of the Blind Bandit, with his ink-stained skin and all those piercings.

Yes, I do have tattoos. No, they are not for you to see. Not here, and not now. First, you must understand us. We are more than the stories the peasants tell of the Bandit and the things he does to the caravans leaving Commoner's Dream.

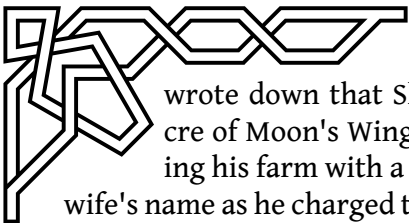
You need to know our story before you can continue your journey to our garden. Only once you understand will we decide if you are worthy of joining us. So please, enjoy your tea, and pay attention.

## THE TWINS

Once, there were two siblings, born only seconds apart. These siblings lived in a land shattered by constant war. They made their way through the world in awe of the unending changes, the upheavals and reversals of conflict. The twins navigated the shifting alliances and betrayals together, staying clear of the war itself, acting only as witnesses.

The brother, older by moments, was named Rekishi. He recorded everything. Rekishi knew that he was watching history unfold. Rekishi was no warrior; his weapons were the Four Treasures of the Study: the brush, ink, paper and ink stone. He wrote down the names of combatants, the number and names of those who lived and those who died. He worked late into the nights, while others slept. The sound of his brush on rice paper was comforting to his sister as she slept, but she was not so interested in the names and numbers and dates that he recorded.

The sister, who was known as Sumi, watched the chaos of war and saw things that her brother did not. He focused on the events happening, the dry and true facts that could be verified and proven. She saw the same battles he did, but to her they were whirlwinds of emotion and passion. Where he



wrote down that Shigeru died in the massacre of Moon's Wing, she saw Shigeru defending his farm with a pair of kama, shouting his wife's name as he charged the Orime soldiers. She felt his relief as the last soldier fell, his pride and love when he saw his wife safe.

To Sumi, the idea of the moment was more powerful than the facts. They experienced much as they traveled: tales of heroism and sacrifice, villainy and tragedy. But when Rekishi wrote them down they were academic treatise, devoid of emotion.

She loved her brother, and she helped him at his task. Rekishi fondly called her his Fifth Treasure. She mixed inks from soot and egg and carved the resulting inksticks into convenient sizes for travel. While he wrote, she ground the inksticks against wet stone, made tea and retrieved new brushes when his old ones wore out. As time passed, her hands were stained black by her efforts.

## THE LIVING CHRONICLE

Over time, the twins built up an enormous library chronicling the history of the land. Other historians traveled from faraway lands to study the scrolls Rekishi had made. They gathered together and learned from Rekishi's vast store of knowledge. Rekishi welcomed the scholars with open arms. He only asked that they bring their own histories to augment his own.

The academics formed a school, then a family. The Rekishi clan gathered knowledge to their breast, but their focus was still only on the facts and figures before them. Though they learned powerful jutsu, they were used only in the service of learning. They were unprepared when a clan of ninja known as the Rolling Fire unleashed a torrent of destruction that tore through the Land of Crashing Waves and left the Rekishi and their work in shambles.

Sumi went to her brother in the aftermath of the cataclysm. He stood in the waterlogged ruins of his once-great library, despairing over the loss of his great work.

"My life's work has been undone, sister," he said. His hand gripped the hilt of his katana.

Sumi placed her delicate, ink-stained

hands over his. "What has been gathered once may be gathered again."

"It would be foolish to waste our energies creating more scrolls that can be so easily destroyed," Rekishi said. "It is hopeless."

"Rice paper is fragile, my brother," she said, and then held up her hand. "But we are not."

The twins went on a sabbatical together, while the rest of the clan recovered what they could and rebuilt the library. Eventually, the two returned and decreed that the scholars of the clan should travel far and wide in pairs, as they had in their youth. One member, known as the Gakusha, would act as historian and record keeper. The other, known as the Horishi, would then engrave that history directly into the Gakusha's skin.

The twins became the first Gakusha and Horishi, with the story of the library's destruction engraved into Rekishi's skin by his sister. The ceremony involved a combination of protective jutsu developed by the twins during their sabbatical, designed to imbue the flesh with preservatives that would keep the histories from fading and blurring over the course of the Gakusha's lifetime or beyond. The scholars' work became immortal after their death, stretched and hung in a new library hidden away in the mountains. By the time Rekishi and Sumi died, they did so knowing that their work was restored, and safeguarded.

## SEEDS OF REBELLION

But all was not well among the Rekishi clan. The immortality and honor afforded the Gakusha monks was denied to the Horishi. They were not allowed to bear the histories on their flesh. The rites were considered a sacred honor, and the elders of the Living Chronicle deemed it enough that the Horishi were afforded the privilege of engraving the histories on the Gakusha. While the youth revered the very flesh of the Gakusha, the whorls and strokes of the great Horishi were treated as mere functionary information by dry scholars in dusty halls.

In addition, some of the Horishi felt as their mistress Sumi had so long ago, that the facts were not all there was to the story. They feared that by remaining distant, in the monastery or as observers, the Rekishi

would become disconnected from life, unable to understand the context of what they recorded. And they tired of being observers, flowing like water around the events of the world, rather than affecting them.

Separated from life, they burned to experience it.

To further delineate the two castes, the elders forbade the Horishi from bearing any tattooed calligraphy whatsoever. They were not allowed words on their skin beyond the artist's signature. The artists approached rebellion with every stroke, every shakki of their needle puncturing skin. In the name of practice, of perfecting their craft, they began to tattoo one another in the night, drawing forth fanciful pictures. Pictures that told the stories they were forbidden from describing with words. They learned to harness their chi in ways their more traditional teachers never imagined, limited as they were by their focus on academics.

The rebellious Horishi chafed, even at their clan's name. They went so far as to abandon it, behind closed doors, canonizing their caste's founder and declaring themselves Sumi, in her name. They gathered in their own studios and retold their own versions of history. Where the Gakusha would not record anything that did not lead directly from the facts and would scrupulously scrub themselves from the narrative, the Sumi took pleasure in embellishing events and describing how the experiences felt.

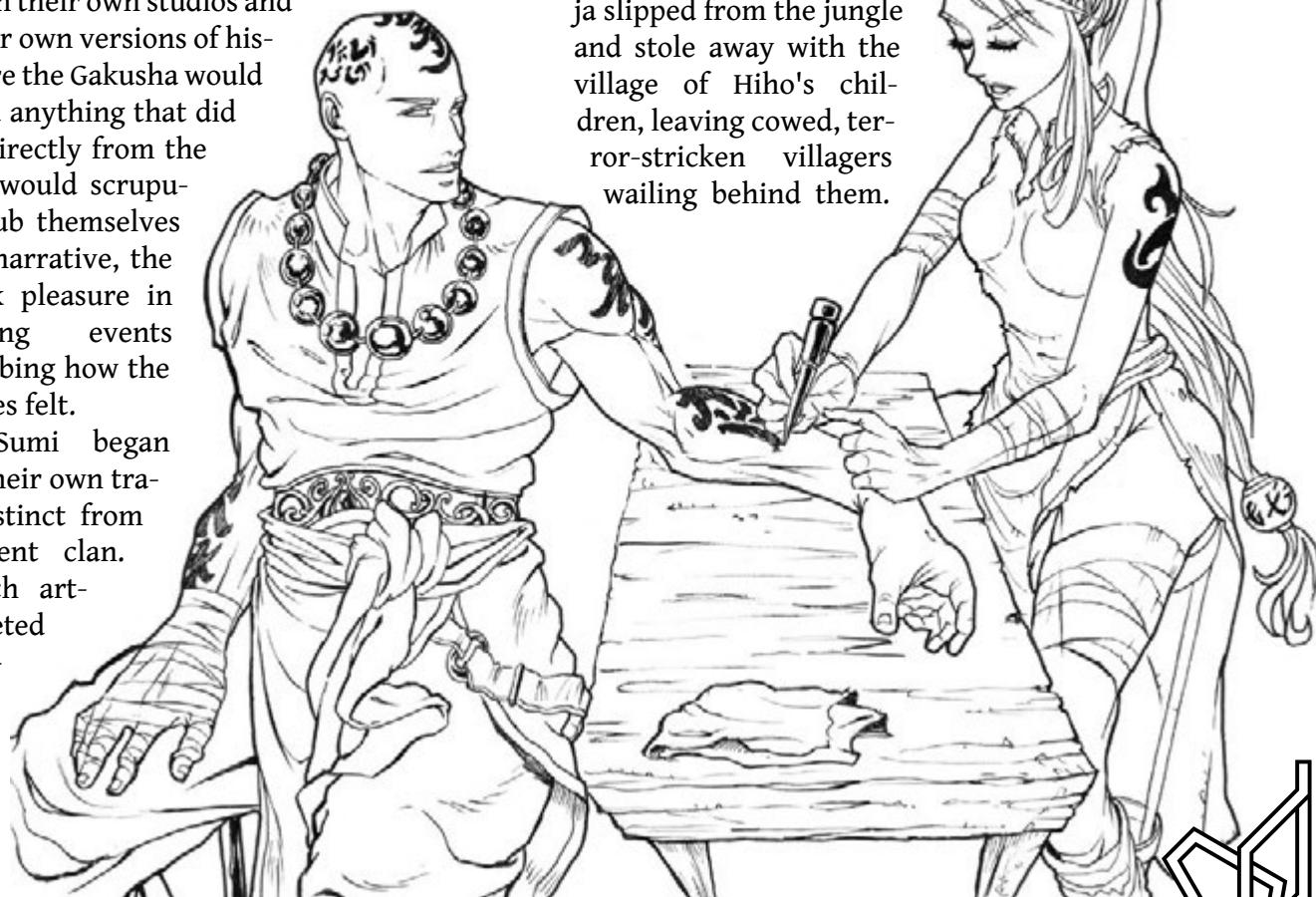
The Sumi began building their own traditions distinct from their parent clan. When each artist completed her training and became a master, she took on a crafter's

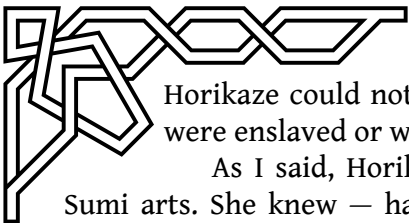
name. Rekishi Katsumi, for example, took the first syllable of her given name, 'Ka,' along with the final syllable of her teacher Oraze's name, 'ze.' When she was inducted as a master, she became Horikaze.

The Horishi collected tattoos as symbols, souvenirs of the things they experienced and gathered with their partner Gakusha. Rather than simply assisting with the preservation of documents and notes, as was their duty, the Horishi snuck out of the dry halls and explored how events were affecting the people for themselves.

## REVOLUTION'S BLOOM

During a small border dispute in the Bridge to Battle province, things changed. Horikaze, a master and one of the rebellious followers of Sumi, could no longer merely observe. As her Gakusha partner, Tasuke, watched and took notes, a cadre of ninja slipped from the jungle and stole away with the village of Hiho's children, leaving cowed, terror-stricken villagers wailing behind them.





Horikaze could not stand by as the children were enslaved or worse and she intervened.

As I said, Horikaze was a master of our Sumi arts. She knew — had helped to develop — a number of jutsu that had not been revealed to her Gakusha or even to the elders of the Chronicle. Tasuke was completely unprepared when she exposed her arm and a sword tattoo emerged from her flesh as a solid and deadly blade.

She charged into the jungle and, spurred by her example, the frightened villagers found their courage and joined her. Together, they drove back the ninja and rescued the children. The encroaching ninja retreated and the border was held. It was a great victory for the villagers, and they honored Horikaze with a large parcel of land.

Tasuke was furious. The Living Chronicle maintained access to the territories of nearly every clan of ninja by following an oath never to interfere. The Gakusha promised to be observers only, neither helping nor hindering their hosts. By breaking that accord, Horikaze invited the anger of the Recoiling Serpents upon the Living Chronicle. The Serpents called upon the Chronicle to make an example of their wayward child, and a council was called.

The elders decided unanimously to give Horikaze the opportunity to regain her "lost" honor by committing seppuku, with a second provided by the Recoiling Serpents should her courage falter. The Sumi were outraged. Every member of the council was a scholar. Not one of the Horishi was asked to sit on the council, nor were they ever consulted when the original neutrality accord was put in place. As far as they were concerned, Horikaze was not a party to the accord in the first place. But none were allowed to speak in her defense, including Horikaze herself.

When the time came for her punishment, the Rekishi clansmen were dispersed equally. Each Horishi stood with his or her Gakusha rather than clumping scholars on one side and artists on the other. The procession led Horikaze into the great square. It was a solemn event, even for the Gakusha. Though the scholars did not know how deep the discord went, even they knew there was a growing tension between the two castes. Horikaze stood in the center



### SUGIYAMA TOMO




Also known as Akai Hime, the Red Princess, Tomo is one of the deadliest deep cover agents of the Black Masks. He transgresses traditional boundaries, taking advantage of his feminine features to get close to his targets by masquerading as a geisha.

Sugiyama Tomo was born and raised in Daiwa's Flower Town, where he learned the hidden power that the geisha held in society. Confessors and confidantes, they were trusted and allowed an independence that fascinated the young boy. Influential men would share things with geisha that they would never say to their wives or their male acquaintances. When he became one of the Virtuous Body Gardeners, he remembered that power, and used it to his advantage.

Even when Tomo is not actively engaged in a mission, he often dresses as a woman and even when he doesn't, he is usually taken for one anyway.

Tomo is currently on assignment in Commoner's Dream, gathering information from officers and imperial VIPs who visit the tea houses.



of the square, wearing a simple monk's robe. She stood proudly, not bowed or shamed by her imminent punishment.

She approached the Serpent representative, a man named Keiji, and the elder Rekishi without fear. When she stood before them, she bowed.

"May I be permitted one request, honorable teachers?" she asked, loudly enough for the crowd to hear her.

The elders glanced at one another. Their grasp of the dissent in the ranks was only slightly better than the scholars. They were old, and after a life dedicated to pure academic fact, they were incapable of understanding the depth of the Sumi's passion. Finally, Ryuugi, the eldest among them, nodded.

Horikaze bowed again and turned to the crowd.

She disrobed, revealing a body covered in a beautiful mural. The story was clear, the triumph of common villagers over a cadre of ninja kidnappers escaping with the village's future. Among the villagers fought Horikaze herself. The tattoos swirled and shifted, showing a silent and stylized pantomime of the battle. When the battle finished, it began again and again.

None present had ever seen such a thing. Horikaze's control of her body and the chi-infused ink was completely new even to the Horishi she had trained. As the pictures changed, she spoke.

"It is my hope that you find my humble attempt at retelling the events that led us to this moment educational." She held her arms out, and met the gazes of those nearest her. There was no fear, no shame in her eyes.

The most observant among the Rekishi clan slowly became aware that each iteration of the story was slightly different. The villagers always won and the ninja were always driven back, however the casualties were different. The fights were not fixed.

"The truth of a moment has nothing to do with the lists of the living and the dead," Horikaze said. "It has nothing to do with where the sun sits in the sky or what date is on the calendar. You see the koi swimming and record that the koi swam. You don't understand why it swam, or what it feels like to swim.

"I stood when others faltered, and though I existed before that moment, I lived because of it.

"I have done nothing wrong. We Horishi were not

a part of your accord. We were not asked, and we were not present when the oath was taken," Horikaze said. She nodded to Keiji. "With all due respect, honored guest, your agreement was with Rekishi clan, and it has been a long time since I left their fold, in my heart."

"I am a member of the Sumi clan," said Horikaze. The rebellious Horishi in the crowd roared in approval. It was the first time they had publicly heard those words.

Horikaze's supporters streamed forward into the square, surrounding their leader. They recovered her fallen robe and helped her to dress. The elders called for order, but the Sumi did not listen.

"We are the Sumi, honored elders and illustrious guest," she said. "And we owe you nothing."

In the attempt to defuse the rebellion, the elders made it necessary. The elders were out of touch, but they were wise. They saw that it was futile to fight their now-former brethren. Ryuugi called for the gates to be opened. He nodded to Horikaze and wished the Sumi a fruitful journey.

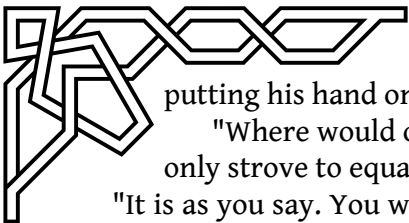

Keiji stepped forward, and many of Horikaze's supporters moved to intercept him, weapons unfurling from the tattoos on their arms. The Serpent held his arms wide, palms outward. Horikaze waved the others back.

"Mistress of the Sumi," he smiled. "You have nowhere to go, and you have made many enemies this day."

"As they say, honorable Serpent, a tall tree catches much wind," she replied.

"Then is it not better to grow only as tall as your brothers and sisters?" Keiji asked,





putting his hand on Horikaze's shoulder.

"Where would our empire be if each of us only strove to equal our siblings?"

"It is as you say. You will pay for your transgression, Lady." Keiji looked at the Sumi who stood at the ready. "But it will not be today. May your journey provide everything you deserve."

Horikaze bowed to the Serpent and again to the elders, then she led her people from the square.

## THE NEW CLAN

The Sumi set out for the Bridge to Battle province, to the land given to Horikaze for her heroism. As they traveled, Horikaze grew sick. She told no one, since the journey was fraught with danger. She wanted everyone to stay ready and did not want to distract them with her illness. The Serpents could attack at any moment, and they had to pass through the territory of at least two major clans on their way.

They encountered representatives from one such clan who shall remain nameless near Tennokiba and negotiated passage without much trouble. Word had already traveled from the library, and the Sumi were treated as one might treat a child, but they were allowed to pass. Near Daiwa, the Wardens of Equilibrium sent warriors to attack the Sumi, but they were repelled quickly and without loss of life on either side. The next night, a runner arrived with a gift from the Wardens. The attack had sated their curiosity about the newly minted clan, and they restored the balance by providing fresh horses and food for the weary travelers. Finally, the Sumi reached their new home, on the outskirts of Hiho. They settled on the land and began to build. The villagers helped their new neighbors, and the village itself grew to support the clan. Horikaze's condition continued to worsen. She called upon her closest friends and revealed her illness to them. They called upon the village's healer late in the night, but he could not find a cause. The healer asked if it were possible that she had been poisoned. She thought back to Keiji's hand on her shoulder, but she did not answer. A war against the Recoiling Serpents would be too costly for the newborn clan to endure, and she knew her friends would not rest until they had avenged her if they even

found out. So she remained silent. Though she had no desire to be the clan's leader, she knew the others looked up to her. After all they had been through, she could not bear to treat them as her subordinates. She called each member of the clan 'friend' and asked favors rather than assigning tasks. As the Sumi grew in strength, their mistress weakened. She watched as they erected buildings and mingled with the villagers. She saw supply lines grow and battles waged to cement their place in the world. One morning, her friends found her dead. On her arm, the last ban of the Living Chronicle had been broken. She had not tattooed a history there, but a haiku.

*Life follows the sun  
As it rises so it sets  
Remember to live*

Over time, the villagers of Hiho and the ninja of the Sumi mixed and became one people. We call Hiho home, even those who have only visited for training. It is the garden where people are planted and ninja bloom. That is the story as it was told to me, when I was initiated. Is it true? Yes. The facts and details may not be accurate — you would have to speak to the Rekishi to be sure. Truth and fact are not always the same thing, and a fiction may contain more truth than any bland recitation of events. You will go to Hiho soon enough. Here, take this scroll and this inkstick. Enter the forest to the east, and once there, write the name "Kayanwe" on the scroll. Do not mix the ink or mark that paper before you enter the forest or it will fail. You will not be given a second chance. Of course you are worthy. If you were not, I would have already killed you.



## NOT JUST BANDITS

Oh, stop struggling. You're really very lucky, you know. My men were following you from the moment you set foot in our forest. If you hadn't called for me when you did, you'd be dead.

I'm serious, stop struggling. The ropes will only tighten as you squirm. You'll be free when I choose to free you. It'll only hurt more if you keep wiggling around. If you stop swinging your head back and forth, I'll take the sack off your head.

There.

Isn't that better?

What? Well, I'm not surprised. I imagine that the wanted posters in Commoner's Dream are wrong. Look at my face, cousin, how can I be a bandit? I am quite obviously blind. At worst, I inspire others to fight back against the Emperor's men and his misguided crusade against the ninja.

I told you not to struggle. You can't feel your hands, can you? They're quite purple. Are you willing to lose them to escape? Excellent! Pain is, at worst, an impediment to your goal. Better, it's a way to see things that normal people will never understand. Pain is life, cousin. Never listen to anyone who tells you not to do something just because it will hurt. Now hold still and I'll loosen your ropes.

Don't bother, there's nothing to see but forest. I chose this place precisely because there are no landmarks. In answer to your unasked question, that was before my eyes were sewn shut. Besides, the same guys who knocked you out are just outside. Mitsuro is cooking dinner. You can tell by the smell of burning rice.

I know, you're ready to start your training, ready to become one of the Gardeners. But you still have much to learn before you visit with Rika. You've heard where we come from, but you still don't know who we are now. Now sit down before the wagon starts moving. We have quite a journey ahead of us. No, I'm not going to tell you another fable. You've had story time.

## TATTOOS

The images inked into our flesh are the only stories you need. Read one of us, and you know who we are. Even in the most fanciful tattoo on our bodies, you can see a symbol of our identities.

Tomo told you about the old ban on words, right? Even now, this long after the fact, text tattoos aren't popular among the Sumi. It's not out of any lingering respect for the old ways or anything like that. It's because to most of us, text is boring. The sinuous line of a dragon scaling your back can tell the story as well as words ever could, and more truly capture the experience on an emotional level. Writing down exactly what happened is banal. A tattoo can be so much more than that, a symbolic key that triggers a vivid memory. The Horishi embeds the ink in your skin while the pain from the process embeds the memory indelibly in your mind.

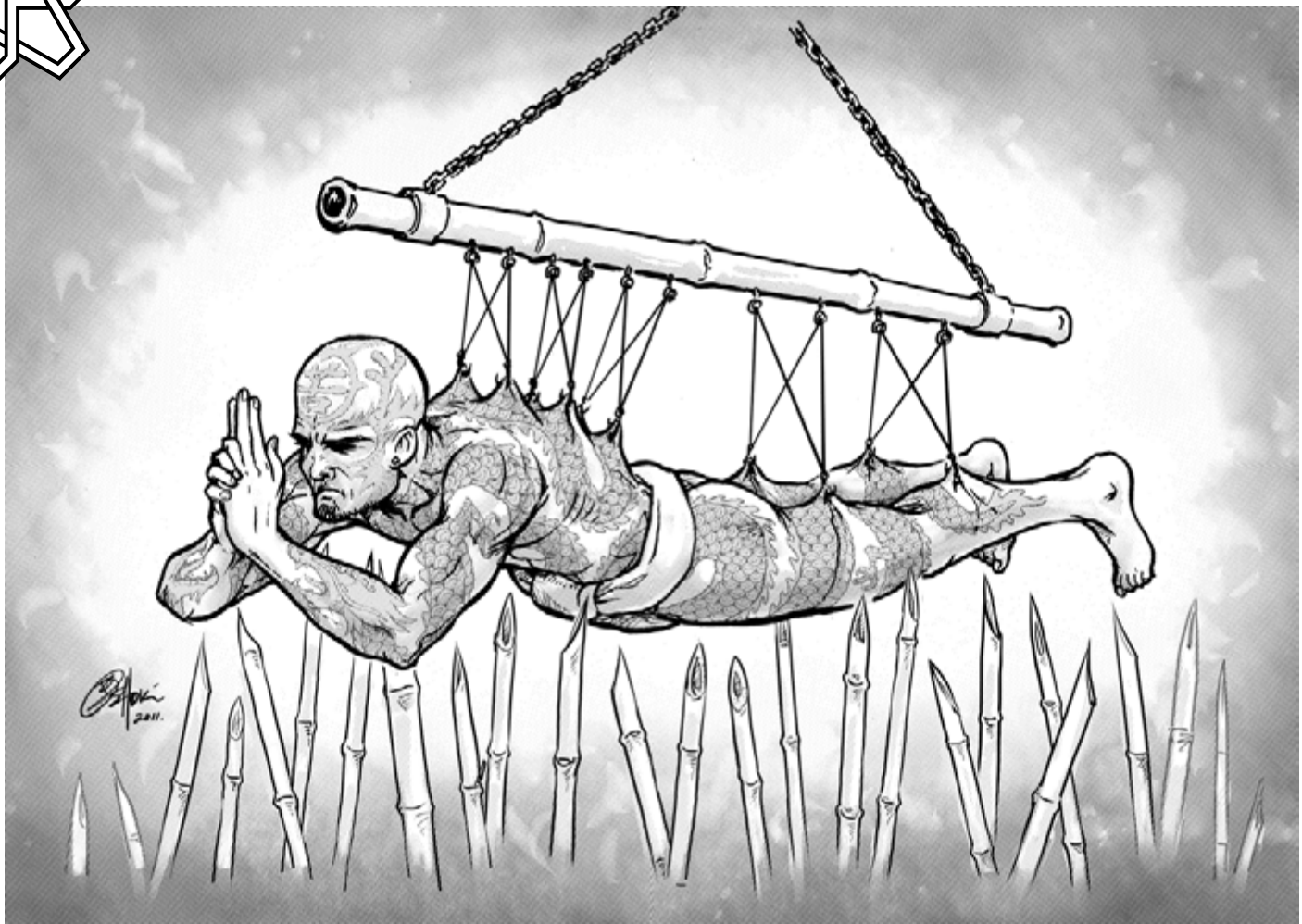
I've heard stories of people who build memory palaces, rooms upon rooms of mental imagery. Close your eyes. Now picture the room you lived in as a child. Look around, take it all in. Now, reach out to touch one of your favorite toys. See how that toy unlocks a multitude of memories? How you got it, why you kept it, the games you played with it, where it went when you outgrew it... All of these things are inextricably tied to the image of that toy for you. As I understand them, memory palaces are a similar principle.

You build a palace in your head, and decorate it with items. In each item, you invest a memory. The item becomes the key to extracting that memory. When you need to recall, you visualize yourself browsing the halls of your memory palace. You pick up the jade tiger and remember.

Our tattoos serve essentially the same purpose.

Well, yes. It's true that the Historians use similar methods to preserve histories. But here's the big difference, cousin. They preserve the histories they observe. We commemorate the history we create.

There is a difference between a regular tattoo, the kind we call irezumi, and one of our tattoos, or horimono. The Horishi and the canvas intertwine in a ritual that blends the chi of both artist and subject. The ink is infused with the artist's chi, and the subject's blood is infused with



their own. The final result is a powerfully significant symbol that binds a memory forever.

Your first tattoo will be part of your initiation into the clan, cousin. I know you have irezumi already, but those are transient tattoos that will fade with time. Only horimono are truly permanent. You will see that many of your soon-to-be clansmen are covered in tattoos, but only a few of the pieces on their skin have the energy and vibrance of a horimono. The irezumi may have meaning to the bearer, but the horimono are milestones, moments that changed their lives and their status within the clan.

With the proper application of chi, irezumi can be wiped away with a whim, but horimono can only be hidden by those who know how. Even then, it's only a temporary solution.


Did you see a single tattoo on Tomo? While he's hiding in Commoner's Dream, he has to conceal that part of himself. A geisha with the

odd tattoo here and there would surprise—probably even delight—an imperial officer, but in this time of war Tomo can't be too careful. Oh. I'm sorry; did you think Tomo was a woman? We'll get to that eventually.

## BODY MODIFICATIONS

Tattoos aren't the only way we express ourselves. The name "Inks" has never adequately expressed the breadth of our clan. We are the Virtuous Body Gardeners, we prune and perfect, augment and change our bodies. Tattoos are the root of that, yes, but they're hardly the extent of our explorations.

This jewelry of mine is not simply affectation. Each hoop, each bar that pierces my skin does so for a reason. My skin is punctured in precise locations; a constellation of pressure points intended to ease the flow of chi through my body.



If you ease the flow of chi, you ease the flow of thought. You ease the flow of enlightenment. These scars are not merely hazards of a warriors' life, they are as dams to the river. They reroute, slow or even halt the flow of your chi. In this way, the scars you receive in battle can actually affect the extent to which you can focus and direct your abilities. Ritual scarification has the opposite effect, it is used to clear the pathways, to release and focus the dragon's fire that burns within each of us. Your parents were farmers, weren't they? Think of it as irrigation.

Lest we forget, cousin, ours is a clan of rebellion. As clans go, of course, the Gardeners are adolescents. In fact, many of the other clans' elders treat us as exactly that. But above everything else I've told you, you need to understand this. We are, each of us, individuals. We are like-minded individuals of course, but for every one of us who follow the philosophy of pain, there are three who think that pain is collateral and passion rules our lives, or that believe the body art is a means to an end, secondary to their exploration of the outer limits of some other societal taboo.

So keep that in mind, as you move ahead. My way is not your way is not Tomo's way. We are travelers on our personal journeys. We just happen to be taking the same road, and we might as well travel together as far as we can.

I must ask you again to submit to the hood and bindings. We have reached our destination, and it is time.

## THE SPIDER'S THREAD

I lied to you, cousin. I will tell you one story, since we have such a long ride.

Not so long ago, after the first Horikaze died, but before you or I were born, there was an Ink who travelled far and wide, climbing the highest mountains and delving into the deepest caverns. He hunted the foulest bakemono he could find. Fujiwara the monster slayer, he was called.

For every monster he ended, he engraved his flesh with a horimono. As he catalogued the creatures, he also built an encyclopedia of the monsters' tactics. He was feared throughout the Bridge to Battle and beyond as a wily and versatile general when

the Inks found themselves at war.

He bested the ohaguro-bettari, a demon woman whose face is featureless but for a black and vast maw. He slayed the centipede Seta, and was rewarded by Ryujin, the dragon god for his efforts. But when he fell in love with a beautiful young woman named Otsuya, he was lost.

He knew how to wield a blade, how to flank and crush his enemies. But he had no idea how to approach a maiden with love in his heart. He meditated and made offerings to his ancestors, and finally, he set upon an idea. He would hunt the yokai that preyed on Otsuya's village, a giant spider known as Nanimatsu the Fisher, and he would dedicate its slaying to her.

So brave Fujiwara set off into the mountains to destroy the vile kumo that nested there. After days of travel, Fujiwara began to see the signs of the spider's presence. Desiccated animal corpses were strung between trees by thick, sticky webbing.

In a grove of cherry trees, Fujiwara came upon a beautiful maiden lighting candles and setting out what appeared to be a meal.

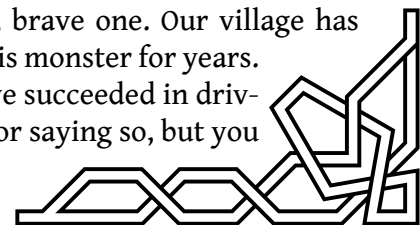
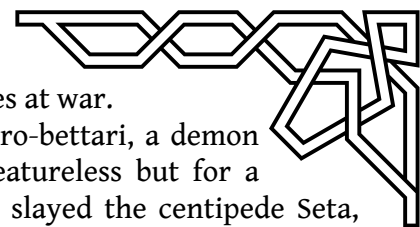
"Forgive me for intruding," Fujiwara said, bowing to the maiden. "I seek the spider Nanimatsu. I have followed its spoor to this grove, and I fear you may be in danger, little sister. Do you not see the webs between the trees?"

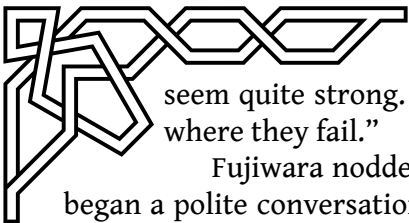
The maiden bowed prettily, her raven hair spilling over a spotless white kimono.

"Thank you for your concern, honorable hunter. You need not worry about me, the spider only seeks prey at night, and my fate is already sealed. I come from a nearby village that has made a kind of peace with the yokai. I must prepare this feast for Nanimatsu before it awakes," she said, waving her hand over the selection of livestock Fujiwara had noticed.

"Please, continue. A thousand apologies for interrupting, little sister." Fujiwara considered quickly. The feast would make wonderful bait, and he might lie in wait for the monster, ambushing it while it gorged itself. "Would you mind company while you prepare?"

"I would welcome it, brave one. Our village has been paying tribute to this monster for years. None of our warriors have succeeded in driving it away. Forgive me for saying so, but you





seem quite strong. I'm sure you will succeed where they fail."

Fujiwara nodded his thanks, and the two began a polite conversation while she went through the motions of preparing the feast. While they talked, Fujiwara took stock of the terrain and looked for the perfect spot from which to ambush the giant spider.

The girl was smart and eloquent, polite and respectful. She was as pure and beautiful as the snowy kimono she wore. As the conversation went on, Fujiwara found himself wanting to impress her, not Otsuya.

Then, the feast set, the girl bowed to Fujiwara. "I am sorry, Fujiwara-sama, but I must ask you to withdraw. My family's safety depends on the truce our village has with Nanimatsu. I fear that your presence will anger the spider when it comes."

"Surely you should leave, little sister. The sun is setting, and it will be here soon," Fujiwara said.

"I cannot leave, honorable hunter. It is my honor to be the main course." She lay down in the center of the feast she had prepared.

Fujiwara burned with anger. He would not let this beautiful girl be devoured by the creature! But he did not betray his feelings. He bowed to the girl, and acted as if to leave. Instead, he slipped into the trees and found the spot he had decided would make for the best ambush, and he waited.

In time, he heard a rustle in the bushes.

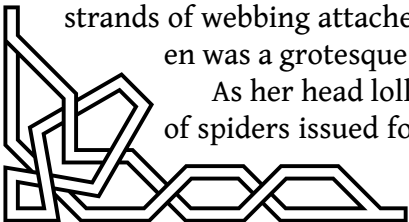
He drew his blade silently, ready to strike, but stopped when he saw that it was the maiden.

"Lord Fujiwara, I am frightened," she whispered. "It shames me, but I cannot go through with it. Please take me with you, before cursed Nanimatsu comes for me!"

Fujiwara hesitated, and the girl ran into his arms. Her hand, cold against his flushed and exposed cheek was enough to make his decision. Her red lips touched his, and he forgot Otsuya completely.

But even so distracted, his ninja training remained. He noticed that her shadow cast strangely, long and thin, behind her. But it was too late, and her arms wrapped around him. Finally, he saw the thin strands of webbing attached to her joints. The maiden was a grotesque puppet!

As her head lolled back, a swarming mass of spiders issued forth, each of them dumbly



## NAKATIMA KAYANWE

The Blind Bandit is wanted throughout the northern region of the Bridge to Battle for leading raids on imperial caravans carrying ore and minerals from Commoner's Dream back to the Middle Province. Kayanwe is well on his way to becoming the youngest Horishi in the clan's history.

He views life as an adventure in sensation. Kayanwe experiments with pushing the limits of his own pain threshold, hoping to achieve ever greater clarity and insight into himself and the world around him.

Kayanwe resembles some kind of wood spirit. His wiry frame is wrapped in tight muscle and darkly tanned skin. His hair has been bleached nearly blonde by the sun. The Blind Bandit wears a blindfold to cover his eyeless, sewn-shut sockets. Sharp eyes will notice that he has mobile eye tattoos that slip from one part of his body to another. These eyes allow him to see despite his handicap.

echoing words in the maiden's voice. They swarmed over Fujiwara, and bore him along, carrying him to their mother.

The spider waited for Fujiwara in a grove of cherry trees. It was enormous, easily larger than the wagon we're in now. Its abdomen swayed precariously above the treetops, a bloated black sac covered in bristly hair. Its legs, long and spindly, were still as thick as the trunks of the trees surrounding it. Most horrifying was the face. The brave ninja found himself staring into the face of an oni. The spider's extra eyes lined the forehead of the demon like jewels on a crown.

"Welcome, honorable hunter," said the spider, in the same voice with which the maiden had spoken. "I have heard your name spoken with fear, and I see my cousins vulgarly drawn on your flesh. I have gone to some trouble laying out this feast for you. Did you enjoy my puppet show?"

One of the great beast's long legs swung out, carrying the maiden swaying on slender strands of silk

below it. Now empty of the spiders that helped to animate her, she was obviously dead.

Fujiwara touched the horimono on his arm, the image of a kappa river demon, one of his oldest. He recalled his companion rushing to attack, and the monster dragging him underwater. It took patience and grace to defeat the thing. So too, would he use that tactic here. The spider wanted him to be rash, to attack without thinking.

Instead, he approached the feast laid out in the clearing, only a few paces from Nanimatsu the Fisher. He bowed to the great beast.

“This feast is surely too sumptuous for a mere hunter such as myself, Nanimatsu-sama. I must compliment you on its quality, as well as the quality of your deception. I must admit to being completely fooled by your maiden.”

The creature’s oni face smiled. Where a spider’s chelicerae should have been, a pair of wiry human arms hung. The creature brought those hands together and bobbed for a moment, in a grotesque approximation of a bow.

“You are too kind, hunter. Especially to one you have set your murderous sights on. Am I not your chosen prey?” the monster asked.

“Am I not yours?”

The spider’s oni-head nodded.

“And yet, you have prepared this feast in my honor. It would not do for me to be rude to such a gracious host,” Fujiwara said, seething inside.

“You are an honorable and well-mannered man, Fujiwara-san. You are a credit to your people.

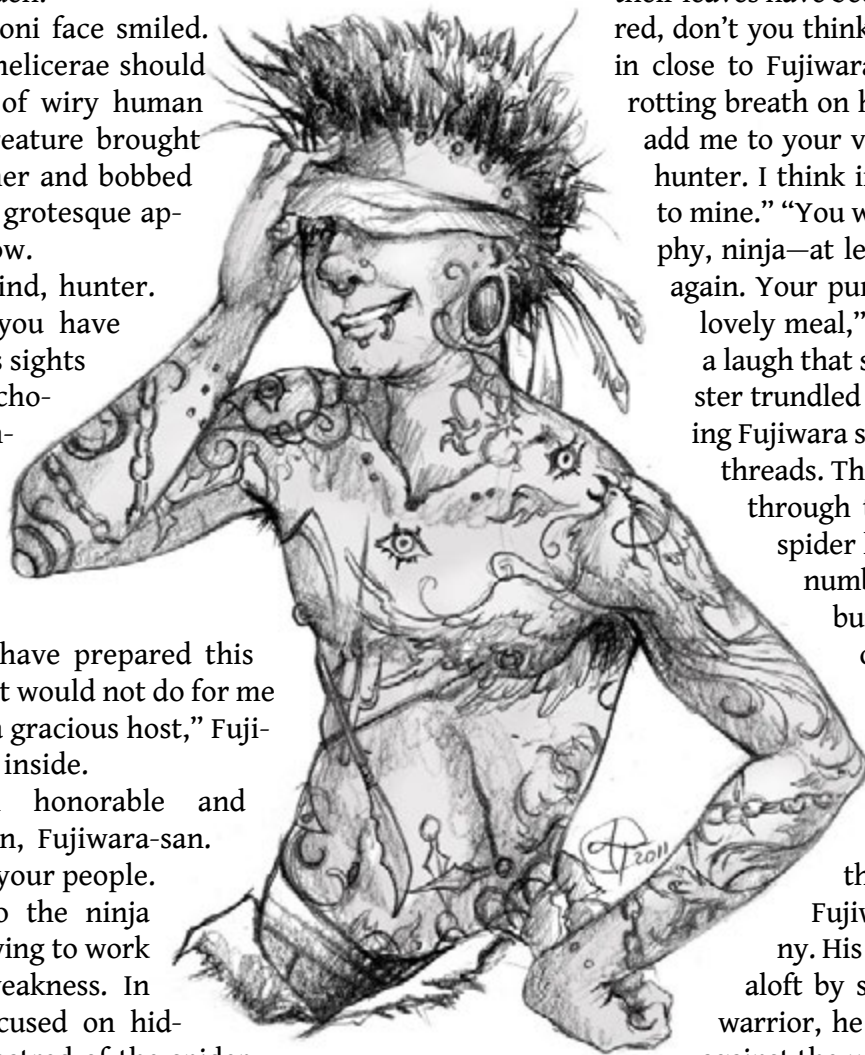
Please, eat.” So the ninja ate, all the while trying to work out the spider’s weakness. In fact, he was so focused on hiding his anger and hatred of the spider, along with his study of Nanimatsu that he didn’t

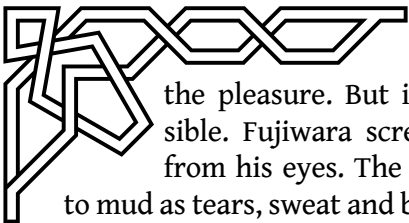
even notice the smaller spiders crawling on his back until it was too late. “I’m afraid your dinner is over, shinobi. It is time for me to prepare mine,” said the giant spider, nodding. Behind him, the small spiders did as their mother asked, and Fujiwara found him-self pulled backward and up. He hung suspended between two trees, ambushed by small monsters while the large one held his rapt attention. Nanimatsu laughed, and its entire body shook. It juddered forward, its speed belying its great bulk. “Did you know that cherry blossoms were once pure white? This grove is ancient, and its purity was once beyond compare. When I came here, it seemed to snow when the blossoms fell. Over time, I have buried the remains of my prey in this grove. Their blood— what little I leave behind — feeds the trees, and over time,

their leaves have become quite beautifully red, don’t you think?” Its oni-face leaned in close to Fujiwara, breathing its fetid, rotting breath on his skin. “You will not add me to your vulgar little collection, hunter. I think instead, I will add you to mine.” “You will hang here as a trophy, ninja—at least until I am hungry again. Your pure little maiden was a lovely meal,” the spider said. With a laugh that split the sky, the monster trundled off over the hill, leaving Fujiwara suspended, hanging by threads. The threads were woven through the ninja’s skin; each spider had used its venom to numb the flesh and then burrowed beneath it,

only to emerge inches away. They spun silk as they went, threading Fujiwara as a seamstress threads a needle. As the venom wore off, Fujiwara experienced agony. His entire frame was held aloft by skin and muscle. As a warrior, he tried to fight against the urge to scream.

He did not want to give Nanimatsu





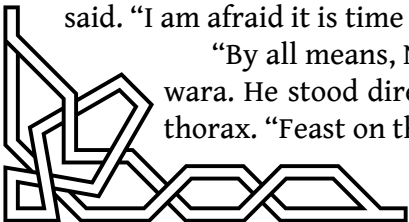
the pleasure. But in time, it became impossible. Fujiwara screamed, and tears dripped from his eyes. The ground below him turned to mud as tears, sweat and blood fell from the warrior. Hours passed. Fujiwara's pain turned to delirium, to fever and hallucination. The maiden came again, and Fujiwara knew her for the ghost she was. She prepared a tea service on the ground below the ninja. When the tea was ready, a pair of ninja rose from the bases of the nearest cherry trees. They came to Fujiwara, and were served tea brewed from his blood and tears. The maiden spoke, but Fujiwara could not hear what she was saying. He could only assume she was begging their help. Fujiwara tried to speak, but only groans would come. The pain was exquisite, and Fujiwara wondered how much longer until his flesh simply gave way, and he tumbled to the sodden ground. The maiden bowed to the ninja, and they stood. Each in turn whispered into Fujiwara's ears. Suddenly his head was clear. The pain— though still there —faded to the background. He knew what must be done. Fujiwara concentrated on the horimono that recalled his battle with the Monkey Princes of the Circle of Heaven's Providence, and their vine-fighting techniques. He wrapped his arms around the silk, steeled himself, and pulled.

Using his own flesh as safety, Fujiwara rolled up the cords into the trees. The spider was not familiar with the Virtuous Body Gardeners. He did not know our secrets. Concealed in the trees, Fujiwara concentrated his chi on his left arm, his hand over the ornately detailed tattoo of a katana. Within moments, the katana had slipped from inked engraving to real weapon, and Fujiwara had freed himself from the webs.

He crept from the tree to the ground and, apologizing to her spirit, dressed the poor maiden in his clothing. Then, he tied her to the silk and suspended her. Wrapped in her white silk kimono, he camouflaged himself in the cherry blossoms littering the ground. There, he waited. Eventually Nanimatsu the Fisher came, his enormous legs a paradox of lumbering and grace, and approached the hanging decoy.

"Are you awake, shinobi?" The thing's demon-face said. "I am afraid it is time for dinner."

"By all means, Nanimatsu-san," said Fujiwara. He stood directly under the creature's thorax. "Feast on this."



Fujiwara drove the katana upward, into the beast. Nanimatsu struggled, but it could not reach the ninja. When the battle was done, the yokai was dead. Fujiwara stood triumphant, bruised and battered, in the maiden's white kimono. The blood from his wounds had bloomed and dyed the fabric red as the blossom from the cherry trees.

He took his trophy from the spider, an enormous amount of the finest spider silk, and had a new kimono made for the young woman, Otsuya, who had once so captivated him. They were married, and had many children. But for the rest of his life, when the sun shone on the mountainside, he thought of the nameless maiden in the white kimono.

## INITIATION

It is time, cousin.

For you to become one of us, you have to commit yourself to our ways. You have to experience life, its pleasures and its pains. There is no happiness without sadness, and no light without darkness. It is time for you to see the whole picture. It is time for you to be suspended.

With these chains, I will free you.

Do you feel that, the insistent pull of the hooks? Breathtaking, isn't it?

Hold on to that pain. Focus on it, feel it burn through you. It is cleansing fire, raging through your every fiber, purifying you and making you virtuous. This is a new beginning, cousin. What you were before is gone now. Honor your past as you would an ancestor, but do not let it dictate your path. The person you were no longer exists.

I see you trying to bite back the agony. I understand. You think it is weakness to show pain or cry. You are wrong. Only the weak hide behind the stoic face, and fail to experience life. Crying— hurting— is as necessary to life as laughing or loving.

We are reborn through pain. Your past is washed away by your tears, leaving only a blank slate. Cast aside your accomplishments, your regrets, and prepare to forge a new life.

Burn bright, cousin. You are one of us now.



## LET'S HAVE A DRINK

You're the new one? Sit down and don't talk. Don't draw attention or we'll never get out of here alive. You aren't from around here, are you?

Another round here! My friend is paying.

You're a bold one, I'll give you that. If you aren't careful though, you're going to draw out the Emperor's men. No, no, by all means. Beat them, kill them, run them out of the village. I'll watch.

Thank you. No, leave the bottle.

You do have coin, don't you?

What? Why would you visit a place like this without money? Me? I assumed you were paying.

Because you're the initiate.

Nothing to be done for it now. Oh well, we might as well enjoy our evening. Have another drink, and then we'll see if you're as ready as you think.

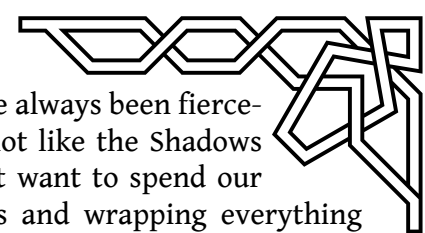
When I give you the signal, do your best to keep up! You've got a lot to learn before we get where we're going.

## THE BRIDGE TO BATTLE

Sounds impressive, doesn't it? The Bridge to Battle! Tatakai no hashi! It makes war sound so amazingly grand and glamorous. But it says pretty much everything about how the Empire feels about this province. Nobody builds bridges because they want a bridge. You build a bridge because you want to get to the other side of the river. Nobody cared about this province at all until the snakes reared their heads. Then it became a means to an end. A buffer and a staging area. Even then the Empire didn't care about this land or its people beyond their value as strategic assets.

And why should they? The land is a veritable melting pot of annoying transitions. On one side it's scrubby pre-swamp, on the other it's rocky, barely fertile land leading to cliffs that destroy any hope of building a port town. To the north, it's somewhat tolerable, and to the south it's beautiful, but it borders an incredibly dangerous rain forest. The people who live here have to be stubborn just for a chance to survive.

That's why we love it here. The people know they can't depend on anyone to help them along, so they



do it themselves. They've always been fiercely independent. We're not like the Shadows or the Strands; we don't want to spend our time mediating disputes and wrapping everything up in pretty red tape. We don't govern this territory. We are part of it. We do more to protect it than our neighbors because we can, not because they expect us to. The Inks are accepted here because we have earned their respect. If we hadn't, they'd have run us out years ago.

After the War of Withered Fangs, it seemed like the Emperor would have just gone back to ignoring the entire province. It would have suited everyone here just fine. But then some fool struck iron and the Emperor realized he could exploit this province and its people in yet another way.

A lot of us grew up in this province. Most of the Inks are artisans, but you'll find members from nearly every class. And don't think you can tell an Ink just because we have tattoos. It's mostly a safe assumption if there are tattoos on the face, but otherwise, all bets are off. For one thing, a lot of crimes include tattoos as punishments here. A thief might find himself with his hands tattooed, or a con man might have "liar" tattooed on his face.

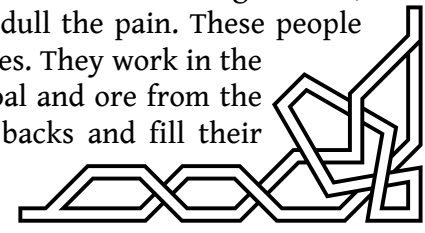
Beyond that, the richer classes have begun to use tattoos as art or status symbols. Merchants can't be seen to flaunt their wealth without insulting the Emperor or the nobles, so they spend it on irezumi that can be tastefully covered in polite company. Soldiers and sailors like to get tattoos to show how tough they are, and the nobles mostly just do it because they feel like it's daring and edgy. Or because they're jaded. I don't know, I don't spend much time with nobles.

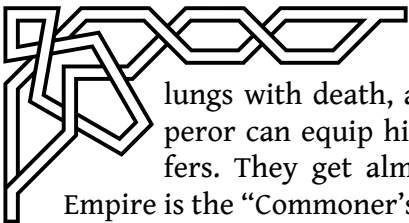
## HEIMINMU,

## THE COMMONER'S DREAM

This is the heart of the problem. It's also the difference between us and the other clans. They see their problems and they fight to save themselves.

Look at these people. There's drinking for fun, and there's drinking to dull the pain. These people are hiding from their lives. They work in the mines all day, pulling coal and ore from the rock. They break their backs and fill their





lungs with death, and for what? So the Emperor can equip his soldiers and fill his coffers. They get almost nothing. Serving the Empire is the “Commoner’s Dream.”

We fight for them. This village—this province—is a daily reminder that the Lotus Coalition is doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. Forget our problems. Forget that if we were drinking in the grunt bar down the street, the soldiers there would string us up just for being ninja. They hate us because we’re special. They hate these people because they can. We can defend ourselves. These people are being crushed by the Emperor’s greed.

The Lotus Coalition wants to take down the Emperor to protect the clans. Freeing these people would be a nice side-effect to them. For us, it’s nearly the whole point. Yes, I’ve heard Kayanwe’s lecture about personal freedom being everything. We each have our own path, our own reasons for doing things, blah, blah and blah. Your freedom to follow your own path means nothing while these people live in bondage. If you believe that people should be able to create their own destinies, it’s your duty to help other people gain that freedom. Anything else is selfishness.

You saw the state of this place. It’s a fortress. These people aren’t workers, they’re slaves. There are two main reasons the Izou army keeps its primary training camp here. One, because this is a huge target for us. This is the hub of most of the Empire’s mining operations. Resources are the lifeblood of a nation. If the Lotus Coalition shut this place down, it would strangle the entire nation.

Now, are you ready to run? The barkeep here gets crotchety when you can’t pay.

## THE DROWNED FIELDS

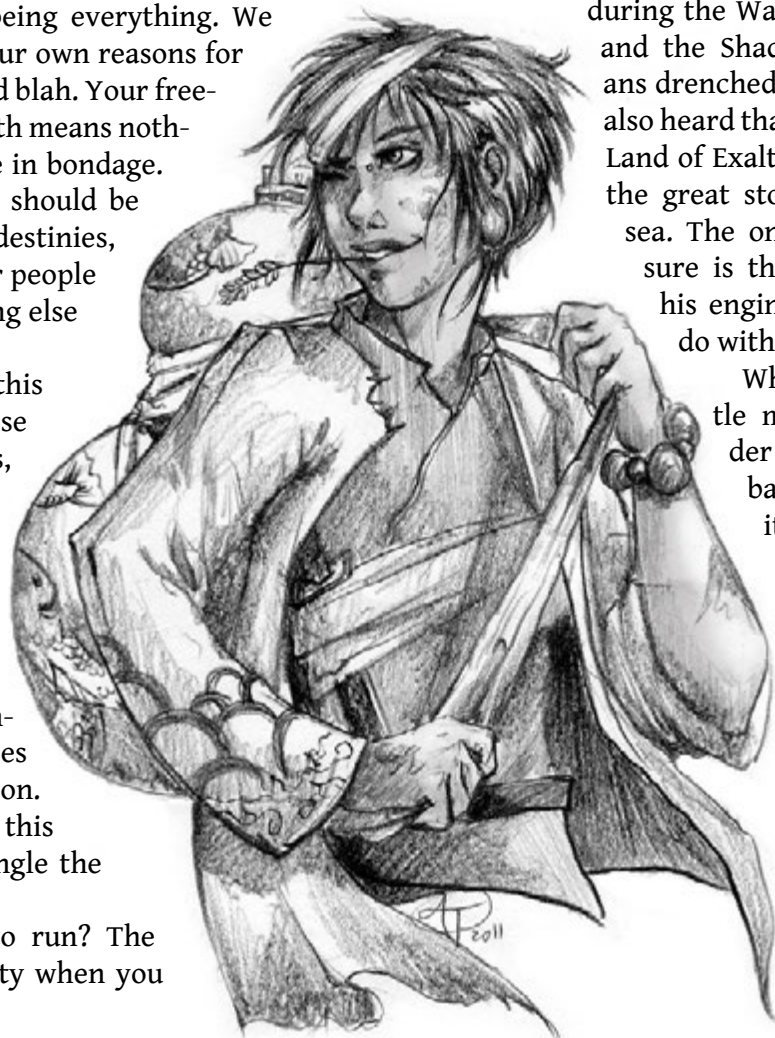
Oh, the look on your face. That was classic, you scrambling out of there like that. The barkeep’s son is one of ours, kid. Which is not to say you shouldn’t listen to me when I tell you to run. What’s worse, looking like a fool, or being wrong the time I’m serious?

Anyway, forget it. Or don’t. But pay attention.

Look out there, at the workers tending to the rice fields. More commoners living the dream. But here’s the thing. That entire field shouldn’t exist. Do you know how many resources it took to irrigate the fields and turn this dry, scrubby land into something you can grow rice on? No, that’s not natural, and the Emperor didn’t do it, even though he takes credit. That was some powerful jutsu that did that.

I’ve heard that a huge battle went down here during the War of Withered Fangs, and the Shadows or the Historians drenched this entire area. I’ve also heard that it flooded when the Land of Exalted Flame summoned the great storm over the Arashi sea. The only thing I know for sure is that the Emperor and his engineers had nothing to do with it.

When you’ve got a little more experience under your belt, come back here. You’ll feel it. There’s this subtle echo of the chi that was expended here, like a vibration in the back of your head. It’s not exactly comfortable, but you can tell something big happened here.





## TANAKA (SAKE) SAKURA

A constant wanderer, Sakura is known in nearly every bar and port of call in the Izou Empire. She stumbles from adventure to adventure; usually with a flask of rice wine in her hand. She is a master of Drunken style. Many enemies have fallen after deciding to teach the rude drunkard in the corner a lesson.

Her best friends are a Blazing Dancer named Kaida and her fellow Ink, Sumi Rika. The three of them drink and cavort together, drawing down the wrath of the Izou army and the local ninja before they blow out of town as quickly as they arrived.

Sake is a force of nature. She's relatively short, but solidly built. Her lean, muscular frame gives her a hungry look, and her chopped hair and dusty clothing lend her the air of a vagrant. The gleam in her eye belies a cunning, insightful intelligence, however, and those around her often find themselves caught up in her current, doing things they never imagined.

## TOKATSU, THE PIRATE'S PORT

This is such a sad town. It used to be bustling, but like Arashi Port to the northeast, it lost its purpose when the great storm tore across the sea. I know, we're hours from the coast. But I'm not kidding; this was a port town once. You may have noticed that I enjoy a drink now and then. Let's just say it's amazing what you find out when you pass out in a bar and wake up on a pirate ship.

There are warehouses and homes here with doors secreted away in their basements. Those doors lead to a series of tunnels that wind their way through the earth and stone, and come out in a huge cavern. Seafaring ninja disguised the ocean-facing entrance with illusory jutsu, and they had built a sizable har-

bor down there. Smugglers and pirates used to slip in and out of the city through those tunnels, before the Arashi Sea became nearly impossible to sail.

It's still a pretty rough and tumble place. Remember what I told you about the people around here. Stubborn really doesn't begin to cover it. But it's useless for a pirate to sail in seas other ships don't frequent, no matter how stubborn they are. Smugglers still come through. I'm told they still hold Black Markets here, bazaars where you can find just about anything, if you can get an invitation. But be careful, people here can be a little... abrasive.

Once, I was here with Rika, who you'll meet soon, and another friend named Kaida. We were sitting at that table over there— well, Rika and I were sitting. Kaida was dancing on the table. This pompous Grasping Shadow came over and told us to show some respect, since he was guarding some powerful merchant or dignitary. Really, he came over for two reasons. One, he wanted to brag about his mission. Two, he wanted to throw his weight around. It's sad, really. The Shadows should just hire two assistants to follow them around all day validating their egos. "No, really, you're the only true ninja. We worship you!"

Anyway, so he called us names while another Shadow and a Serpent stood back by their boss and giggled like the bullies they were. I grinned to let Rika know things were about to get fun.

"You're just jealous she's dancing for us," I said. "We could send her over to dance for you boys if you'd like. But only if you promise to tip. It's only polite."

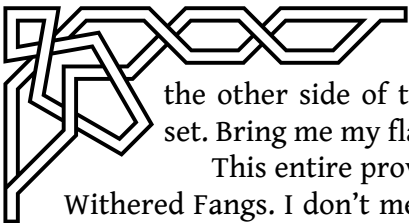
"Don't call me 'boy,'" the Shadow said. "Perhaps you need to be shown what real men are like."

"Oh," I said, looking around. "Will one be arriving soon?"

Come to think of it, that's probably not the same table. I don't think it survived the fight.

## FIELDS OF THE ENDLESS FRAY

We're stopping here for the night, kid. See that marker there? The "XXXX" carved into the base of that rock. You're going to have to take my word for it, we don't want to be caught on



the other side of that hill after the sun has set. Bring me my flask and I'll tell you why.

This entire province served in the War of Withered Fangs. I don't mean its people, I mean the land itself. The Empire used every inch of it for barracks, supply lines, command posts, and more. That means that it suffered incursions from the Serpents and their forces. Even the regions of the Bridge to Battle that didn't actually make up the front lines saw their share of bloodshed and pain. In some places, the war left its mark, like the earth itself has a horimono that won't let it forget.

Every night, when the sun goes down, the battles begin anew. I don't know if the dead rise from the ground or if the spirits manifest to continue their eternal battle, or if they're the nightmare-echoes of the earth, tormented by the atrocities that happened here. It doesn't really matter. I wandered into that battlefield once, and I got swept up in the fight. Whatever they are, if one of them kills you, it's for real.

The soldiers I ended up fighting with were wearing archaic armor, carrying weapons like I've only seen on display in very expensive houses. The kind of weapon a nobleman shows off as proof that their grandfather was a great warrior. They were as solid as you are, and I'm pretty sure they wouldn't have liked it if I'd told them that no, I'm sorry I won't help you fight, because you've all been dead for decades. So yeah, I fought.

There are other weird pockets like this scattered across the province. I suggest you keep an eye out for the markers we've put up. They're subtle, I admit. We don't exactly mind the idea of outsiders like the Emperor's soldiers accidentally finding their way into a century-old battle.

## KUMO GROVE

Try to keep up. This isn't the time or place for you to fall behind. See those webs? No? Come to where I'm standing. There, now you see them. If the stories are true, Nanimatsu the Fisher once kept his lair near here. I'm sure Kayanwe told you his story. The blossoms aren't blooming now, but it's beautiful when they are. Whether Nanimatsu was here or not, there are spider spirits roaming these


woods. Be careful not to attract their attention. Don't disturb their webs or we'll have to fight our way out. I've heard stories of Inks who made deals with the spirits here and learned to summon them, but that's way too much trouble for me. Besides, I don't like spiders. And I can't imagine what the kumo spirits would demand for their part of the bargain.

## TENGOKU SPRING

This isn't the harshest place in the world to live, but it surely isn't the easiest. When you find a little piece of comfort, hold on to it. These springs are my second favorite place in the entire province. That bar back in Tokatsu is my favorite. I've had more fun there than anywhere. Turn around until I'm in the spring. The waters here are magic, kid, or they might as well be. Aches and pains disappear. Wounds seem to heal faster, and stress just melts away. I've seen the Bamboo Herbalists out here taking samples of the water, but as far as I know, they haven't actually figured anything out. I tried to take some of the water with me, but it doesn't hold up to travel. It's just as well, though. The last thing I need are some brewers setting up shop here and ruining the peace of it. Now shut up and let me rest. Traveling with you is stressful.

## MASAKI SHRINE

Oh, the shrine. You see it there? Avoid that. I know it seems like I'm taking you on a tour of things you shouldn't touch, but really, that's kind of how it is around here. Besides, it's helpful to show children what not to touch when they come to your house. The Masaki Shrine used to be a place of peace and meditation. The story goes that a rich woman was waylaid by a group of bandits as she traveled near here. The bandits sent a ransom note to the rich woman's husband, but he had no intention of paying away his hard-earned fortune. He concocted a plan and sent word to them that he would pay them their asking price. They responded quickly, telling him to meet them the following day at Masaki Shrine. They met, and began the exchange. But he double-crossed the kidnappers. In the chaos, the woman was beheaded by one of her husband's men. The husband went through the motions of grieving, but soon married his children's tutor. Since then, the shrine



has been tainted by the woman's death. At night, they say she still roams, transformed by her desire for vengeance and closure into a krasue spirit. Her head floats freely, trailing her dripping, viscous organs behind her as she hunts for those who wronged her in life. I don't know about you, but I don't think a maddened spirit shrieking for vengeance is going to care if I'm actually her husband or not. I'd rather just avoid the shrine entirely.

## HIHO

This is it, kid. End of the line. We keep this place as secret as anything known by an entire clan of ninja can be. Look around you. Each and every one of these people owes their life to the original Horikaze, in one way or another. The village was almost taken by the Serpents back when they were the bad guys, and she stood up when her Historian partner wanted to just sit back and watch. She rallied the villagers and fought with them, and she turned a quick raid into an unexpected loss for the Serpents. That's why we're here now.

But don't think they're our servants because of that. You'll have to earn their respect, kid. Some of the best tattoo artists in the Izou Empire come from Hiho, and not all of them are Sumi. They're as fierce and independent as we are, and we like it that way. A lot of people will suck up to you and tell you only what you want to hear. And that turns you into a pompous ass. Someone who calls a spade a spade is infinitely more valuable. You will always know where you stand with the people here, and that, my friend, is priceless.

If the Emperor's men find this place, it won't just be the ninja fighting to protect their way of life. We're all in this together.

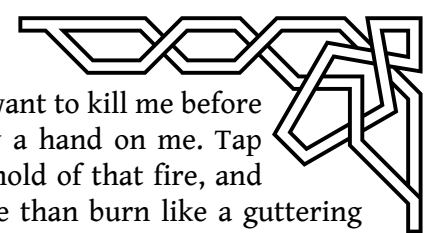
## THE TEACHER

Really? You're the one Kayanwe sent word about? He must see something I don't. But here you are. Come on whelp, let's see what you've got.

Hit me.

I'm serious. I want you to hit me.

That was pathetic. Let me explain how this works, whelp. You'll never hit me if you keep hesitating. Don't hold back; come at me with everything you have.



You're going to have to want to kill me before you're even going to lay a hand on me. Tap into your passion, grab hold of that fire, and use it. I would rather die than burn like a guttering candle. My fire shines bright, and so will yours. You'll learn to embrace your passion.

Or you won't survive among the Body Gardeners.

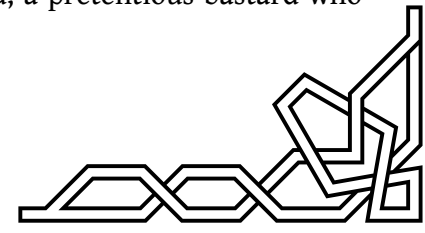
## LEARNING THE ART

Here, this is yours. The tools in that case will be your closest friends as you go through your training. Eventually, you'll carve your own handles for these needles, but you have a long way to go before you're ready for that.

The needles here should never pierce the flesh of anyone but you. They will be bathed in your blood and chi every time you get a tattoo, whether you engrave it yourself or have another artist do it for you. You will come to know them completely, and they you. Think of it like a properly seasoned wok. Sure, you can use unfamiliar needles, but the results won't have the proper texture, the right flavor.

If I gave you a tattoo, I would use your needles and my handles. This is why we design the handles with interchangeable needles in the first place. The wooden handles will absorb your chi, and shape themselves to fit your hands perfectly. You will be more capable and effective using familiar tools without breaking the sacred bond between needle and flesh.

I will teach you the basics of tebori, the process we use to engrave both irezumi and horimono. But I will not be your master. You will find each other when you are ready. Mastering tebori can take years. Most of us are still students. When you have completed your training and become a master, then you will be permitted to choose your artist's name. Traditionally, this name is a combination of "hori," a syllable from your given name and a syllable from your master's name. In extremely rare cases, a student takes on their master's name and becomes next in the line of a horishi "dynasty." Aside from the Horikaze, which isn't quite the same thing, I've only met one Ink from such a dynasty, Horisuki the Third, a pretentious bastard who can't hold his sake.



## CLAN STRUCTURE

I know what you're thinking. "I don't need you to tell me what to do," and "you think you're better than me." Well, you do and I am. But don't worry; I'm not offended that you feel that way. We all do, at first. Comes with the territory, when you get a bunch of free-thinkers together, running the show is like herding cats. Rebellion is important, questioning authority is vital. Even the best of us get complacent if everyone agrees. But ignoring a good course of action because someone else told you to take it is childish. Choose your path, whelp, but don't take the left fork just because someone suggests you take the right.

Even we have a structure. There's no official clan vote to decide who is appointed to certain positions, though. It's organic. The best candidates rise to the top, take charge and others listen. Eventually, it becomes obvious. When a group of Inks bands together to accomplish a task, they don't sit down and discuss who has what job. They find their rhythm as they go, or they fail. Don't be the one to get your friends and allies killed, whelp.

## INITIATES

Right now, you are an initiate. Think of it as a trial period. Yes, you've been through Kayanwe's suspension, but you still don't have your clan tattoo. When you've been chosen by one of the horishi, they will mark you as one of the Sumi. There are techniques to wipe away irezumi with a thought or hide your horimono, but you can never wipe away your clan tattoo. If you are shamed and turn ronin, our elders have jutsu which can painfully burn your tattoo out, leaving a ragged scar as a warning to other Inks. Of course, I could just be telling you stories to scare you, but are you willing to risk it?

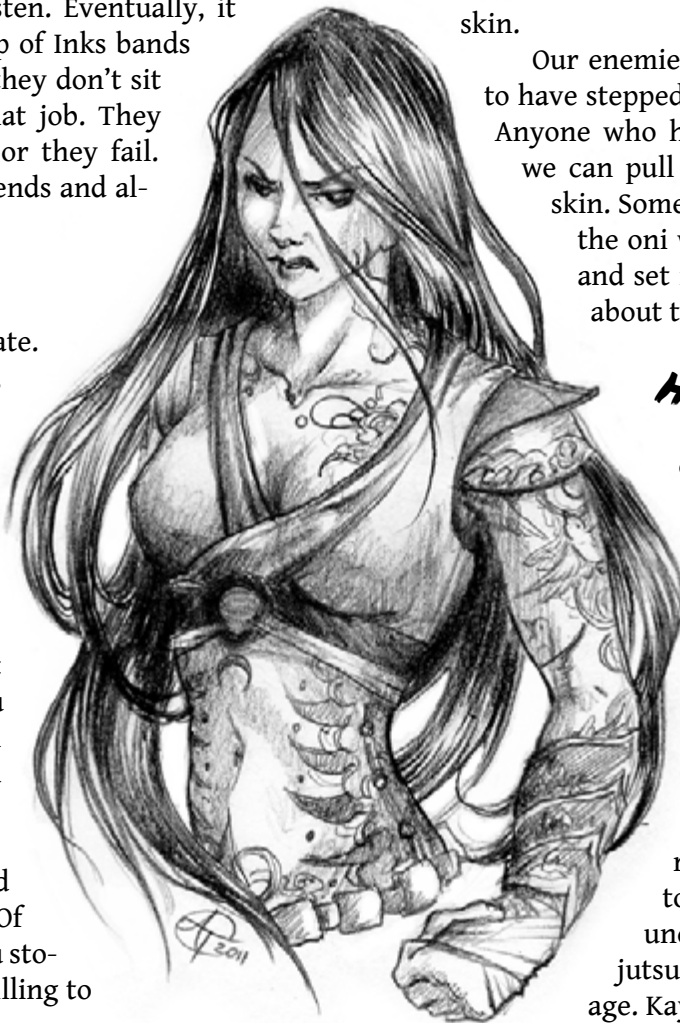
You still have to find your place. Prove your worth to the clan and someone will take

you on. When you become apprenticed, your horishi is your master.

## THE KUROKAMEN

Sometimes you need the craziest, deadliest members of the clan and there's no substitute. Deep cover, hidden assassins. A cadre of five ninja who can wipe out a battalion of the emperor's soldiers. That's when you put out a call for the Kurokamen. They're our elite, the best fighters we have. You'll know when you see them on the battlefield. When the Black Masks enter combat, they use jutsu to transmogrify their tattoos into one piece of art that covers their entire body, including their faces. Each takes on the appearance of an oni, their flesh turned the blue-green of Nara ink. The name "Black Masks," seems like a misnomer, but Nara ink turns from black to blue-green under the skin.

Our enemies see demons who seem to have stepped directly out of a tattoo. Anyone who has seen us fight knows we can pull real weapons from our skin. Some of them believe we pull the oni whole cloth from within and set it upon them. We're not about to correct them.



## HORISHI

To become a true elder of the clan, you must become accomplished—in jutsu and tebori, of course—but most importantly, in life. Living shapes you, as the rock is slowly shaped by the river flowing around it. Only those who have truly lived, who have many experiences and horimono to draw from, can really understand tebori and the jutsu. We're not interested in age. Kayanwe is well on his way to becoming horishi. Only his skill in tebori still lacks. He'll earn his horishi

## SUMI RIKA

Rika lost her parents to the Izou army in the first wave of the Ninja Crusade, filling her with a need for vengeance. She volunteers for the most dangerous of missions for the Lotus Coalition, delivering messages deep in enemy territory, fighting on the front lines or guarding the Horikaze. Rika is a monster on the battlefield, able to take out soldier after soldier without hesitation.

Rika is tall and lank, her long raven hair flowing down over her tattooed flesh. She wears surprisingly little, even in battle. She cannot abide anything that might constrict or limit her movement.

She drinks with Sake on a regular basis. But even drunk, she's still quite deadly. Rika knows first-hand why the Inks are fighting. She will take extraordinary risks to keep those who still have their families together.

name soon, so I'd listen to him if I were you. Age is only a number. Many old men have existed for long years without truly living. Many children drink far deeper from the spring of life than you or I put together.

The only way to gain the respect of iconoclasts is to show that you deserve that respect. We do not simply bow to titles.

The horishi take on apprentices, they offer council and help direct the clan like a firebreak directs a wildfire. The Sumi do not take orders well, but don't think that means we won't work together for a common goal. We would not be a clan otherwise; we would be ronin.

## THE HORIKAZE

The most respected member of the clan is the Horikaze. The title gives tribute to the spark of our rebellion from the Living Chronicle, so you can understand that it is not lightly bestowed.

When two Inks have a disagreement that must be mediated, the Horikaze is the final authority. If they choose to seek his opinion, they agree to be bound by

it. Unless you're willing to honor his decision even if it isn't what you wanted to hear, don't bother going to see him.

The Horikaze speaks for the clan as a whole when it becomes necessary. Most of his time is taken up dealing with the Lotus Coalition these days.

## OTHER CLANS

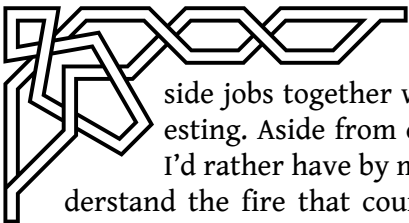
You've heard stories, haven't you? Tales told about the secret assassins that make nobles disappear. The wandering monk who wiped out an entire village just to balance the scales of some wrong the villagers had committed. Maybe you've even seen a breathtaking acrobat who called himself a Blazing Dancer, or a merchant whose guards looked like they'd been forged of iron. There are many clans of ninja. I've dealt with quite a few, but there are some I've never even heard of. You'll meet other members of the Lotus Coalition most often, but don't get too comfortable or you'll get your ass handed to you by a ninja using jutsu you've never dreamt of.

## BAMBOO HERBALISTS

A few years ago, I was working for a merchant doing simple caravan guard work. Far more lucrative than interesting, let me tell you, but I met a few members of other clans who I didn't hate. Here's the thing, whelp. Sooner or later, you're going to lose. Based on your performance earlier, I'm going to place my bets on "sooner." When you do, you're going to want one of the Ika around. Their medicine is extraordinary. Some of it will really get you hammered, too. A brewer worked for the merchant, too. I'm pretty sure most of the merchant's business was selling this snake oil the Ika makes. I know I bought my fair share. I'll never remember most of those nights. It was amazing.

## BLAZING DANCERS

The Odoriko are kindred spirits. So much of their time is spent creating art and telling stories, what's not to like? Like us, they tend to attract passionate types. One of Sake's best friends is a Dancer. When they get along, they cause incredible amounts of trouble. When they fight, they cause even more. For a time, I traveled with a tiny circus. A pair of Dancers performed each night, and we took



side jobs together whenever they were interesting. Aside from other Inks, there's nobody I'd rather have by my side in a fight. They understand the fire that courses through our veins in battle in ways that nobody else can even approach. In a lot of ways, they're just like us.

## **GRASPING SHADOWS**

Here's the thing, whelp. There's a difference between confidence and pretension. The Kumori spend their time looking down their noses at the rest of the shinobi because they've decided somewhere along the way that they're the arbiters of what it means to be a ninja. Only they pass muster, of course. The Shadows act like they're the royalty of the Lotus Coalition. I'm not big on paying fealty to people who think it's owed simply because of who they are. Besides, showing the Kumori respect won't get you anywhere. They only pay attention when it's lacking. They don't actually value it, and they definitely don't value you.

## **HIDDEN STRANDS OF FATE**

The Hidden Strands of Fate are basically the antithesis of what we stand for. They're manipulators and politicians of the worst sort. Our philosophy is liberty from the shackles of predetermination. We don't stand by and watch the world, we don't "go with the flow," and there's no way we would wish that on another person, ninja or not. The Asaito are like the goblin spider Nanimatsu. Their webs are just as sticky and their appetites just as vicious. There is bad blood with the Recoiling Serpents and the Grasping Shadows, but the Strands are the closest thing we have to an enemy in the Lotus Coalition.

I tangled with one once. I never saw him, I never met him. I never even knew his name. I was in Daiwa, before the Ninja Crusade began. I'd been hired to remove a mid-level enforcer involved in the opium trade. I did my job, and it caused the disruption my employers were hoping for. It also removed a link in the Strand's web, bringing me to his attention. He didn't do anything so crass as sending assassins for me, or thugs to beat me. No, as long as I was in Daiwa, there was a constant stream of misunderstandings. My rooms were rented to someone else. My horse disappeared. Food was cold, drinks never came. And every time someone apologized to me for my inconvenience, they

would leave a small piece of paper behind, with the word "weaver," stamped in red.

## **LIVING CHRONICLE**

There was a time when the Rekishi were our siblings. They were like the older brother everyone wishes you were more like, but they were still our siblings. The oldest Inks still remember a time when they were part of the Living Chronicle. The oldest Historians were there the day Horikaze declared our independence. If there's a feud, it is between them. To the rest of us, it's just a story. I wasn't even born when the Horikaze led her people to Hiho, why should I blame them for something I never had to experience?

Besides, they understand us in ways no other clan can. My master once sent me to lead a Historian to him, a young woman named Kaede who had requested an audience. She was intensely curious about us, but in a way that conveyed a sort of awe. She told me one night that we had the right idea. I told her she could join us, but she declined. She said that we would fill many skins with our deeds, and she would be honored to record it.

When we reached my master, she told him that she had come to ask him to honor her by recording the tale of our journey on her flesh. He declined, saying that it was my duty, not his. I think it's some of my best work.


I've heard of other Rekishi reaching out to our clan seeking artists to ink their histories. It's interesting how something that was once a horrible burden can become an honor if it is only requested with respect.

## **PACK OF THE BLACK MOON**

Have you ever been lost in the forest in the middle of the night, alone and without weapons? Even the strongest warrior is dwarfed by the primal intensity of nature. You don't know what's out there, but you can hear the cracking of twigs. Your skin crawls, and the hair on the nape of your neck stands on end. Then the howling starts.

That's what it's like running with the Pack. You always feel like they're closer to their animals than they are to humans.

I made the mistake of talking back to one of their alphas once. Modesty aside, I'm an excellent swordswoman. It was a draw, and I honestly couldn't predict



which way it would go if we ever tussled again. Show them respect and you can earn their loyalty. Trust me when I say that's worth its weight in jade.

## **RECOILING SERPENTS**

The Hebi's fortunes may have fallen since the War of Withered Fangs, but don't let their alliance with the Lotus Coalition fool you. They are not your friends. They won't be your brother in arms, they will watch you with cold eyes and fill your head with poison the moment you let your guard down.

This is not me being cute. They are vengeful and patient and I have no doubt that they are waiting and watching to destroy the winner of the crusade when they are wounded and exhausted from the final battle. So do what you have to, work with them, but do not trust them, whelp. They will cut you down the moment you are no longer useful.

## **WARDENS OF EQUILIBRIUM**

I once asked one of the Chuushin what he did with the money he made. He told me stories of his home, the wonderful art and the sumptuous feasts he provided for his family and guests. He invited me to come enjoy his hospitality, so I did.

We rode through a village that had just been burned to the ground by the Emperor's men. I offered our services to the village elders, and he tried to negotiate for some form of compensation. They didn't hire us, and he moved on without a thought. We had a lovely meal that could have fed the razed village for a month, and I was dazzled by the art he collected. That night, I burned down his house. They're all about balance, right?

## **WILLOF IRON**

Don't ever think that the Hagane care about doing the "good" thing. They care about preserving their view of justice. If that means cutting down a villager who was desperate to feed his family, so be it. Their idea of right and wrong is precise and unswerving. The ends never justify the means, and it seems to me that they get their idea of justice from a higher source. The Emperor should be the one who defines the law, correct? Then why are they siding with us?

They make amazing swords, and they know how to use them. Think very, very carefully before you cross

one, and keep on your best behavior when you're around them.

## **THE EMPIRE**

A while back, Sake, Kaida and I were in this bar over in Tokatsu, a town a little south of Arashi Port. You've heard of it? Excellent. Well, there we are, having a little fun in one of the bars, and this Shadow named Akahata takes exception to Kaida dancing on a table. He comes over and warns us, "Show a little decorum," he says.

Kaida smiles, and mimes a little geisha bow, but we were well into our cups by this point.

"It's polite to tip your dancers," Sake says, grinning that annoying grin that always means I'm about to need stitches. I can tell you've seen it.

Anyway, Akahata grabs Kaida by the arm and pulls her down. He nods toward an old man in the corner—a real grim looking guy, guarded by another Shadow and one of the Recoiling Serpents. "My employer prefers calm," he says. "Therefore, I prefer calm. No matter how difficult it may be for children to behave, I expect you to do so."

Sake is unamused. She shouts for more wine, and the Shadow leans in close.

"I am not surprised," he says. "Perhaps I will show you how true ninja behave."

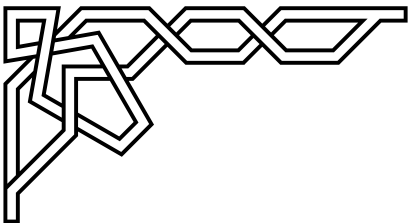

"Oh," Sake shifts her eyes, and I can tell Kaida's tensed for action. "Will one be arriving soon?"

Yeah, that pretty well started things off.

So there we were, two Inks and a Dancer in a bar brawl with two Shadows and a Serpent. I'm not going to say it was a friendly rumble, but nobody was really out for blood. That is, until a squad of the Emperor's men showed up.

The door burst open, and the soldiers rushed in to apprehend or kill the vile ninja menace. Sake and Akahata rolled apart and launched into the soldiers like they'd practiced it a thousand times. The Serpent spun around me and stood, back-to-back, ready for our common enemy. Kaida and the other Shadow leapt into the rafters and took turns attacking from above. Together, we took the entire squad in less than a minute, and made our way out of town in less than five.

We may snipe and pick at one another, but never forget that the Emperor and his men are the true enemy.



# CHAPTER THREE:

## BUILDING FLAWLESS FIRES

The following new Choices can be integrated into the normal character creation steps. While these choices fall within the theme of either the Blazing Dancers or Virtuous Body Gardeners, many of them can be selected by any character with the right concept and background. Some are marked as Dancers Only or Inks Only, so keep note.

### NEW TEMPERAMENTS

#### *CHILD OF THE WUJI THEATER*

**Element:** Fire

**Gift:** Dancers Only. Being raised in a theater that brims over with joy puts color on the cheeks of children. Growing up in the Wu Ji Theater means the character has drilled over and over in the skills needed to bring joy to the world. They receive +1 Perform when there's an audience to entertain.

**Trigger:** The character doesn't handle a failed performance well, staying on stage longer than the crowd would like them to. Gain 1 Karma when they overstay their welcome and bring shame to themselves or their clan.

#### *KAKOU BORN*

**Element:** Water

**Gift:** Spending too much time in Kakou is not generally good for one's health. Those who grow up here become hardened to the harsh surroundings, though. They receive +1 Survival or +1 Deception (choose one) to stay alive on the streets.

**Trigger:** If someone knows the character hails from Kakou, there is an instant air of distrust that permeates any interaction. Gain 1 Karma whenever their city's reputation hurts them.

#### *KOKYURYU BORN*

**Element:** Earth

**Gift:** Being born in a city of monasteries isolated and far away from most other cities makes for an abundance of patience. Those born (or who have spent a significant time) in Kokyuryu are known for their even temperament and receive +1 Discipline for meditation and focus.

**Trigger:** Kokyuryu is secluded from most of the Empire, so residents are cut off from everyday society. Gain 1 Karma when the lack of societal knowledge hurts the ninja or their group.



## NEW FOCI

### BELLOWS

**Profession:** Dedicant

**Gift:** Dancers Only. The Bellows enjoy a life of luxury as part of their role within Dancer machinations. They hold onto their fame and fortune, gaining +1 Persuade when they can leverage their fame in their favor. They are a household name, after all.

**Trigger:** Bellows typically give most of their money to the common people, rather than indulging themselves. Gain 1 Karma when they do not have the resources to get something important.

### TAMER

**Profession:** Entertainer

**Gift:** Working with animals great and small, Tamers create magnificent acts for the Blazing Dancers. They are usually behind the scenes, but some take center stage and perform amazing feats with their four-legged students. They receive +1 Performance when utilizing animals.

**Trigger:** These characters find it hard to act alone in many cases, leaning on a companion for performances and everyday life in general. Gain 1 Karma when they fail at an important task because they acted alone.



## NEW

## AFFLICTIONS

### JOYLESS

**Tragedy:** Tormented Mind

**Ki Balance:** Yin

**Gift:** The character has a hard time feeling joy from anything they do, no matter how beautiful their dance or expertly their art is crafted. Being surrounded by happiness while they cannot muster a single

drop of joy can grate on their soul. Onlookers suffer -1 Empathy to sense any emotion other than apathy from the character.

**Trigger:** Having such a disposition makes the character hard to get along with. Gain 1 Karma whenever social interactions are ruined by their joylessness.



## SMOOTH SKIN

**Tragedy:** Ravaged Body

**Ki Balance:** Yang

**Gift:** The ninja, regardless of how skilled they are, shows no outward scars. Their body also has no tattoos, no piercing and no other sign they have endured any hardship. They receive +1 Speed to avoid physical damage, keeping their smooth skin intact.

**Trigger:** When surrounded with hardened warriors and rough ninja, appearing weak is never an asset. Gain 1 Karma if social interactions fail due to their untouched appearance.

## NEW TITLES

### HERO OF THE COMMONER'S DREAM

**Wartime Role:** Foot Solider

**Gift:** Inks Only. The ninja has captured the hearts and minds of the people, becoming more than a mere ninja; they are the embodiment of freedom itself. They receive +1 Persuasion or +1 Empathy (choose one) when dealing with commoners of the region.

**Trigger:** Everyone knows the ninja... including the Empire. Gain 1 Karma when the attention they garner works against them.

### HANDS

**Wartime Role:** Scout

**Gift:** Dancers Only. The Hands are everywhere. A character who belongs (or used to belong) to them has a knack for blending into entire communities. They range from small children to elderly grandmothers, and the Empire is completely unaware of their existence. Hands gain +1 Persuasion with other permanent citizens of their chosen town/city, including any guards or soldiers.

**Trigger:** Hands suffer from a crippling curiosity that can get them in trouble. Gain 1 Karma when they ignore obvious danger to get another juicy secret.

### TEACHER

**Wartime Role:** Villager

**Gift:** The character lives to help others understand the world around them. By pass-

ing on their knowledge they shape the world, and sometimes the changes they push are monumental. Everyone wants to live forever and teaching brings one closer to this ideal by leaving their legacy of knowledge. They gain +1 Knowledge during teachable moments.

**Trigger:** Teachers can sometimes overstep their bounds, and attempting to help comes off as patronizing. Gain 1 Karma when interference with someone's task causes problems instead of helping.

## NEW FIGHTING STYLES

### ARTIST'S EYE (INKS ONLY)

The Virtuous Body Gardeners have a flair all their own, on and off the battlefield. They see every battle as a test of their art, and overcoming obstacles has become a specialty. Some of the most fearsome opponents the Empire has to throw at the Lotus Coalition have met their end by the blade of an Ink. This Fighting Style is a third option that Inks may access during character creation.

### BATTLE IS BEAUTY

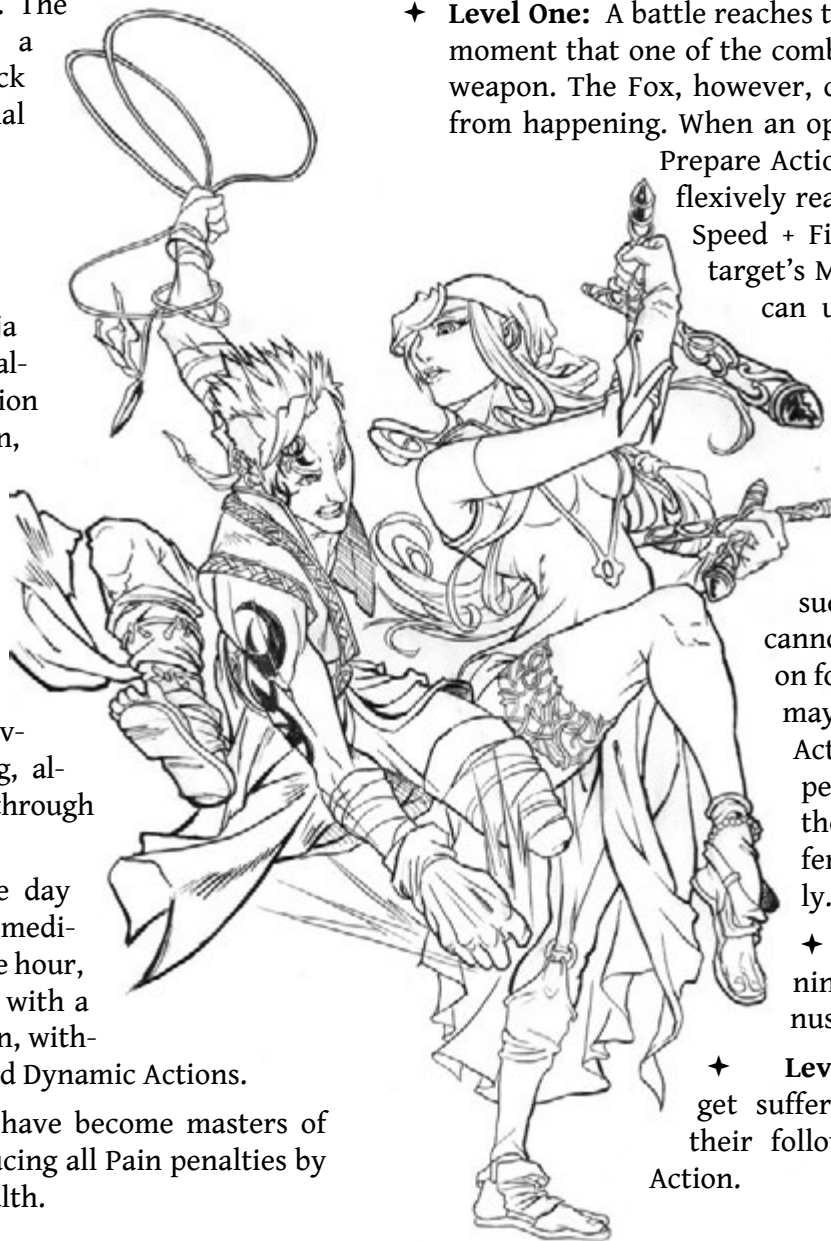
- ✦ **Level One:** An Ink becomes a hurricane of death and destruction on the battlefield. On a Boost, while attacking, they may immediately make another attack on a separate target within Close Range.
- ✦ **Level Two:** Range is extended to Near, and the follow-up attack receives a +2 bonus to hit.
- ✦ **Level Three:** The ninja receives a bonus to attack equal to the number of Conditions their target currently has. For instance, attacking a target suffering from Pain 1, Bleeding 2 and Dosed 1 would give the ninja a +3 bonus.

## IMPOSSIBLE TARGET

- ✦ **Level One:** Inks are known for being quicker than their opponents; in many cases, outmaneuvering them at almost every turn. Opponents attacking the ninja suffer a -1 penalty for every level of Armor they possess (up to Level). For example, an enemy with Armor 2 would suffer a -2 penalty, as long as the Ink also had Impossible Target 2 or higher.
- ✦ **Level Two:** Opponents suffer a -2 penalty when trying to initiate a Grapple with the Ink.
- ✦ **Level Three:** If the Ink Defends with a Boost, they deflect the attack and send it to another target within Close Range. The new target makes a new Defense check against the original attack roll.

## SUSPENSION EXPERT

- ✦ **Level One:** The ninja has learned the value of using suspension during meditation, allowing them to reach levels of enlightenment unheard of by other clans. Pain penalties are reduced by 1. They also receive +1 Discipline (per Level) while suspending, allowing for clarity through pain.
- ✦ **Level Two:** For one day after suspending in meditation for at least one hour, they may mold 2 Ki with a single Mold Ki Action, without the need to spend Dynamic Actions.
- ✦ **Level Three:** They have become masters of their own pain, reducing all Pain penalties by 2 and gaining +1 Health.



## FOX STYLE

Fighters use this style to turn their opponent's expectations against them in order to quickly escape or deal a wound more serious than anticipated. To take down a foe quickly while avoiding their attacks is the purpose of Fox style. It is, understandably, one of the preferred styles of the Odoriko clan. Ranged weapons, however, can exploit the lack of Fox Style's projectile defenses, so Foxes should be cautious when fighting these enemies.

## BACK TO ONE

- ✦ **Level One:** A battle reaches the next level at the moment that one of the combatants draws their weapon. The Fox, however, can often keep this from happening. When an opponent attempts a Prepare Action, the Fox may reflexively react to stop it with a Speed + Fighting roll vs. the target's Might + Speed. They can use their hands or feet to shove a sword back in its sheath, or they can wrest arrows from an archer and return them to their quiver. If successful, the target cannot use their weapon for that Action. They may take a different Action, but suffer a -1 penalty. On a failure, the attack and Defense occurs normally.
- ✦ **Level Two:** The ninja receives a +2 bonus to use Back to One.
- ✦ **Level Three:** The target suffers a -2 penalty to their follow-up, non-weapon Action.



## ADVANTAGEOUS STRIKE

✦ **Level One to Level Three:** When in a defensive stance, the Fox-stylist is still as wily as ever. If the attacker rolls any 1s on their roll, even if they are successful, the ninja may receive a +1 bonus per 1 result to their next attack on the attacker. This bonus cannot be higher than +2 per Level. For instance, a ninja with Advantageous Strike 2 could have up to a +4 bonus if the attacker rolled that many 1s.

## GRACIOUS EXIT

- ✦ **Level One:** While in a Grapple, the fighter pulls themselves up and over the opponent's body to land behind them. Just before dismounting, still clinging to the opponent's back, the Fox uses both feet to push their foe in the opposite direction so that both fighters end up facing away from each other and are now a full Movement Action apart. The target takes +1 damage per Level and makes a Moderate (2) Athletics + Speed check or they fall to the ground.
- ✦ **Level Two:** Even on a failed attack, the ninja and opponent are still separated and no longer considered in Close Range.
- ✦ **Level Three:** Target's Difficulty to resist falling is raised to Tough (3).

## SCORPION STYLE

Scorpion fighters hail from a rare school. They are taught to fight primarily using close punches and kicks, although they also receive training in rope weapons for distance fighting. They learn the value of constant movement and well-placed attacks, attempting to take opponents down quickly through strategy and stealth. Their training doesn't prioritize body hardening, which means they are in trouble if they cannot take their opponent out quickly. They utilize the Rope Dart like masters.



## BLOOD STRIKE

✦ **Level One:** Scorpion fighters push themselves beyond what other styles can do, allowing them to strain themselves to

hit harder. The ninja may sacrifice Health (up to Level) to increase their damage on a one-for-one basis. This must be applied before rolling for the attack.

- ✦ **Level Two:** The ninja may now apply Blood Strike after their attack roll. They receive a +1 bonus to attack when using it beforehand.
- ✦ **Level Three:** If the character sacrifices 3 Health, they add +4 damage (instead of +1 per Health). If they Boost on their Blood Strike attack, they may regain 1 Health.

## SCORPION KICK

- ✦ **Level One:** The fighter takes the position of a scorpion, falling to their hands and the lifting their strong leg over their head to strike their opponent's heart directly. This attack suffers a -2 penalty, but is debilitating to their opponent, causing +1 damage and the loss of their Standard Action for the Round. If the target already used their Action, they instead suffer a -4 penalty to their Initiative for the following Round.
- ✦ **Level Two:** Penalty to attack is reduced to -1, and Scorpion Kick now inflicts +2 damage (instead of +1)
- ✦ **Level Three:** The target loses a Standard Action and 1 Dynamic Action for the Round. If they have neither, they will act last in all future Rounds of the Battle.

## WRAP AND LAUNCH

- ✦ **Level One:** Must be using a weapon with the Chain Quality. During Battle, the fighter expertly wraps their weapon around themselves, but not all attacks are equally effective. With this technique, every third attack from the fighter receives a +2 bonus and deals +1 damage.
- ✦ **Level Two:** Bonus raised to +3 to hit and +2 damage.
- ✦ **Level Three:** Bonuses are applied to every other attack (instead of every third).

## CHAPTER THREE - BUILDING FLAWLESS FIRES

### NEW WEAPONS

#### **BRUSH BO**

Utilized only by the Gracious Illustrators (pg. 62), the Brush Bo is similar to a normal bo, but has a large painter's brush at one end. Special paint is kept inside the staff, and can be released with a simple motion, allowing the ninja to use their jutsu with ease. Due to its special design, it doesn't have as long of a reach.

#### **KATAR**

The katar is similar to other hand claws, with a handle for the fighter to wield the blade in a forward punching or slashing motion. This weapon is special, however, because the fighter can switch from a single blade to a triple-bladed weapon at will (different stats apply based on its form).

#### **KUKRI**

The kukri is a curved knife, highly effective in both close and ranged combat. Its curved design makes it perfect for throwing at a target's vitals.

#### **METEOR HAMMER**

The meteor hammer is similar to the rope dart; however, it is often made of metal, and uses much heavier weights and a slightly shorter length. Users are slower, but can inflict horrible damage on their opponents.

#### **ROPE DART**

The rope dart is, simply put, a rope with dart-shaped weights at either end. This weapon doesn't have a handle; instead, the user wraps the rope around their arms, legs and waist with each attack, wielding the weapon with their entire body.

#### **WAR FLUTE**

The war flute is the signature weapon of the Winds of Aion (pg. 70). It is a metal flute made of triple-folded steel, lending it durability and strength for offensive uses.

Brush Bo	Blunt, Skilled (Way of 18 Strokes)
Katar	Sharp, Disarming
Kukris	Sharp, Skilled (Throwing)
Meteor Hammer	Heavy, Brutal, Chain, Slow
Rope Dart	Chain, Piercing, Reach, Unwieldy
War Flute	Blunt, Quick

## NEW 99 STYLES

### HORIMONO

#### (INKS ONLY)

The tradition of horimono is one that hails from the Inks' days as servants to the Living Chronicle. It is a special tattoo that infuses ki into the ninja's body and cements a moment in their life that they can call upon for additional strength or focus in times of need. It is a tool that the oldest Inks use as symbols of honor and victory, and younger Inks strive to acquire their own one day. It is the most sacred of practices this young clan has created for themselves, and tells their story beautifully.

#### **ACQUIRING HORIMONO**

To have horimono means the ninja has lived an exciting life they wish to not only remember, but revel in. However, horimono must be earned. The number of horimono an Ink possesses is limited by their Rank, as well as their Horimono level. Level One is available to all ninja, but it requires Rank 3 to reach Level Two and Rank 5 to reach Level Three.



## LEVEL ONE

✦ **Rank 1 - The First:** The ninja receives their first horimono, dedicated to an important point in their life. They may raise the bonus gained from a Gift of their choice by 1 (not subject to the same limits as spending XP), and gain a +1 bonus to all jutsu activation checks equal to their Horimono level.

- ✦ **Rank 2 - Crossroads:** The ninja gets a second horimono, encapsulating a time when two parts of their lives crossed paths. They may select two Gifts and raise the bonus received by 1. Again, these are not subject to XP limits.

## LEVEL TWO

- ✦ **Rank 3 - Epic Failure:** Receiving their third horimono, the ninja now gets a tattoo to remind them of their worst failures, a reason to keep fighting on. They select a Trigger and raise the Karma gained from it by 1. Again, this is not subject to XP limits.
- ✦ **Rank 4 - Epic Victory:** They are tattooed with the remembrance of their greatest achievement. This horimono increases their vigilance and bravery. They automatically succeed against any fear or Intimidation checks and they may increase the technique level of any of their existing Fighting or Weapon styles.

## LEVEL THREE

- ✦ **Rank 5 - The Future:** Their final horimono is a swirl of mutable, ki-infused ink that does not depict a past event. Instead, it can be used to look into the possible future, as the tattoo will take the shape of clues to what events are still to come. It is believed that the horimono itself makes the ninja's future brighter by possessing it. By spending 1 Yin, the Ink may reroll a check up to (Intuition) times and take the best result. By spending 1 Yang, they may gain a +2 bonus to any roll.



## PERFORMING TROUPE (DANCERS ONLY)

This ability is an extension of Master of Spies, from the 99 Styles (NC2E, pg. 77) and is obtained in the same fashion. The player writes Performing Troupe as an Ally under Contacts.

- ✦ **Level One:** The ninja has a well-trained group of performers with them who all get along and know how to put on a show together without any problem. When performing alongside their group, the character gains +1 Performance per level. If they push their troupe to their limits, utilizing them as an Ally, this bonus is raised to +2 per level.
- ✦ **Level Two:** Not only can they perform well, but the troupe knows of the character's ninja leanings. This makes them the perfect cover for any espionage missions in an area where a show can be put on. The troupe may be assigned an area to distract for the Scene and are assumed to do so without anyone noticing the ninja slipping off to perform their mission.
- ✦ **Level Three:** Their Performing Troupe becomes so well known that they are invited into areas they could never go before. This could include being invited inside a high-security Izou fort or even putting on a show for the most important nobles in the Middle Province. If the ninja wants to force an invitation, it takes (10 - successes) days for the troupe to go plead their case and requires a Persuasion + Performance roll. The Difficulty for this check varies based on the security of the location, from Simple (1) for a normal village to Legendary (5) for a performance for a very well-guarded daimyo's fortress.

# NEW JUTSU

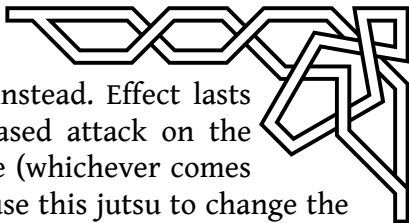
## WAY OF FIRE

### BASIC JUTSU

- ✦ **Blinding Flash (Yin + Persuasion):** Must have Bright Star. The ninja gathers ki energy in their palm and releases it in a flash (+1 Marksman) that temporarily blurs a single target's vision. The victim suffers a Sensory Loss 2 Condition for one Round, fading by 1 per Round (i.e. -1 for the second Round and then removed in the third Round). It may seem like a small ability, but it has saved more than one ninja's life. On a Boost, the penalty starts at -3 (instead of -2).
- ✦ **Heat Palm (Yang + Fortitude):** The ninja learns to heat their palms and strike with an intense burning flame. For a number of attacks equal to successes gained, the ninja receives +1 Fighting and deals +1 damage. Any damage done to a non-living target is doubled.

### MEDIAN JUTSU

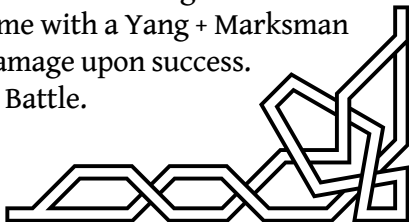
- ✦ **Burning Blood (Yin + Fortitude):** Must have Cauterize. The ninja heats their entire body to such a high degree that it becomes dangerous for others to touch them. Opponents' skin burns and weapons melt against this jutsu. This adds +1 damage to all the ninja's attacks and automatically inflicts +1 damage, ignoring up to (Yang) Armor. On a successful Block against a weapon, the ninja takes no damage from the attack and the weapon is destroyed. Lasts for a number of Rounds equal to successes gained.
- ✦ **Deflect Flame (Yin + Speed):** If targeted by fire (whether caused by a jutsu from the Way of Fire, the product of an Izou soldier's flamethrower or an out-of-control bonfire), the ninja may deflect the flame away from themselves. The fire must go somewhere, of course, and the most opportune place is toward another combatant. The new target suffers a -1 penalty to Dodge against the attacker's original roll. On a Boost, the new target



suffers a -2 penalty instead. Effect lasts until the next fire-based attack on the ninja or for the Scene (whichever comes first). Dancers often use this jutsu to change the course of lava that could destroy something cherished, like their theater.

- ✦ **Flame Sigil (Yang + Discipline):** The ninja learns the mystic sigil of flame they can then write upon a tag. At will, the ninja can activate the sigil, creating an explosion that inflicts 3 damage, ignoring up to Armor 2, to everything within Close Range and 1 damage, ignoring up to Armor 1, to everything at Near Range. On a Boost, all Armor is ignored. Some add these tags to kunai they throw, while others place tags on their enemy with a Touch Action.

### ADVANCED JUTSU

- ✦ **Fiery Flight (Yang + Fortitude):** Must have Fire Mantle. The ninja with this jutsu learns to propel their body into the air with the power of fire. When in use, the ninja's feet resemble fiery balls of energy, propelling them upwards, and their palms burn brightly, used to steer themselves towards their destination. The ninja travels at triple their Movement, gains a +2 bonus to Dodge while in flight, and receives a +1 bonus to any Fire Element jutsu activation checks. This is a power obtained by only the most powerful ninja in the land, only teachable by a handful of masters.
  - ✦ **Dragon's Spirit (Yang + Discipline):** Must have Burning Blood, Fire-Breather and Fire Mantle. Unique to those who practice the Way of Fire, this jutsu allows the ninja to embrace the spirits of the long-dead fire dragons who once existed in the Izou Empire. The ninja's skin peels away to reveal red scales, and flaming spires topped with enraged dragon heads extend from their body. The Dragon's Spirit is mainly a defensive jutsu, providing the ninja with (Yang) bonus Health, a +2 bonus to all Defense rolls, and +2 Dynamic Actions (for defensive use only) per Round. For offensive measures, however, the ninja can aim the dragon heads to fire a large burst of flame with a Yang + Marksman check, which deals 4 damage upon success. The effects last for the Battle.
- 



## WAY OF THE IMMACULATE SHOW

### **BASIC JUTSU**

- ✦ **Deadly Music (Yin + Speed):** With this jutsu, the ninja can turn any musical instrument they touch into a deadly weapon: cymbals become sharpened discs, flutes become wooden stakes capable of stabbing through thick armor and drumsticks may become a giant mace. The instrument loses its deadly properties after it has left the ninja's hand or after hitting their target, if thrown.
- ✦ **Distance Whisper (Yang + Empathy):** Although it is a subtle jutsu, Distant Whisper has toppled its share of Imperial strongholds. While singing, dancing or doing other types of artistic performance in front of an audience, the ninja sends a hidden message to one individual in the crowd that they alone receive. The recipient makes no roll, even if they have never had any prior contact with the ninja. Those who are blind or deaf may have trouble receiving the message. The information sent can be no more elaborate than a sentence, such as "There is trouble in the north from your son's men" or "Don't trust your advisor." With a Boost, the ninja may send the message to another who can then pass it to the target without the ninja's involvement.
- ✦ **Rhythmic Blending (Yang + Perform):** Must have Perfect Show. The ninja steps into any rhythmic formation with others: an army on the march or in training, dancers on the street, monks praying, musicians playing instruments or any other group of people in a synchronized act. The group must be four or more members, and the ninja quickly pilfers small amounts of clothing from various members of the group to make a rudimentary disguise that can stand up to a few quick glances, but not under close scrutiny. Most ninja use this ability to infiltrate different levels of society or to make a quick escape. On a Boost, their disguise is spot on, requiring a Tough (3) check to be detected.

### **MEDIAJAN JUTSU**

- ✦ **Proxy Dance (Yang + Perform):** Must have Perfect Show. Once a ninja has a strong emotional connection with someone, they can take their place in battle as a proxy through this dance. The ninja must maintain line of sight to the intended target of this jutsu and must also keep the dance going or the jutsu ends. While active, the target takes no damage even when their opponents' hits connect in ways that would otherwise cause grievous harm. Blood spills, but no serious injury occurs - all damage is instead taken by the ninja. If they take enough damage, the ninja can die, but can also stop the jutsu at any time to prevent further injury. On a Boost, the target can be made to take damage for the ninja instead.
- ✦ **Kicking the Nest (Yin + Empathy):** Must have Distant Whisper. If attacked, the ninja can rally a nearby crowd into a violent riot. This does not affect people who are loyal to the intended target (guards, minions, family, etc.) and the ninja must not have attacked or dealt any other form of reprisal to the target beforehand. The rioters might beat, rob or kill the offenders, or they might run them out of town or follow the directions in the chant the ninja makes from the sidelines. If the ninja joins the fray at any point or stops feigning injury (unless they were actually hurt), the crowd stops, wondering why they would defend a capable fighter. The crowd is treated as a Legion with **Damage Threshold: 16, Attack: 5, Defense: 5, Initiative: 6, Damage: +1 and Dynamic Actions: 1.**

### **ADVANCED JUTSU**

- ✦ **Stunning Spark (Yin + Speed):** Must have Blinding Flash (Way of Fire). After drawing the attention of an audience, the ninja only has to raise a hand to produce a bright flash that holds onlookers in place. The ninja then has 1 Round to disappear, swap a wine glass or any other sort of action. When the time has elapsed, as long as the ninja has returned to their original position, the audience is none the wiser. If used to start a fight, their attack is treated as an automatic Surprise Attack, but the jutsu instantly ends once struck.



On a Boost, they have 2 Rounds to accomplish their tasks.

- ✦ **Blending of Selves (Yang + Perform):** Must have Proxy Dance. When a group of Dancers fights together, they have a distinct advantage, moving as a seamless fighting force. All ninjas who activate this jutsu during the same Battle now fight as a blur of fury and fall as one. From afar, it seems as if they are going through well-rehearsed motions: springing off one another, deflecting

blades meant for their friends or swapping weapons when needed. Their total Health and Psyche is pooled together and none of them is defeated until the pool runs dry. They also gain a cumulative +1 bonus to all combat rolls and Initiative per Dancer involved (maximum of +3). A Dancer can only be involved in one instance of Blending of Selves at a time. The effects last for the Battle.



## WAY OF INKED SKIN

### *BASIC JUTSU*

- ✦ **Summon Chains (Yang + Fortitude):** The ninja summons a chain whip from tattoos that wrap around their arms, which can then be used as a weapon with the Chain and Quick Qualities. They gain a +1 bonus to attack with the chain at Close Range or a +2 bonus at Near Range. The effects last for the Battle.

- ✦ **Remove Ink (Yin + Crafts):** Even the Inks require subtlety and secrecy in certain situations. With this jutsu, the ninja removes all but their clan tattoo (located at the base of their neck). Any other tattoos are absorbed into their clan tattoo and stay there for up to one day. Unfortunately, they cannot use any jutsu from the Way of Inked Skin while their tattoos are hidden. This jutsu does not hide piercings or other body modifications.



## MEDIAN JUTSU

- ✦ **Chain Hold (Yin + Might):** Must have Summon Chains. The ninja fires a series of chains that wrap around their target, weighing them down. The victim must then succeed at a Strength check against the ninja's jutsu activation check before every Action or they suffer a -2 penalty. Lasts the Battle or until the victim makes 3 successful Strength checks (whichever comes first). On a Boost, they must make 5 successes on a Strength check before it ends.
- ✦ **Body of Vision (Yin + Crafts):** This technique was made particularly infamous by the Blind Bandit. Using tattoos of ornate eyes all over their body, the ninja projects their vision in multiple directions simultaneously. Most ninja have eyes on their chest, back and shoulders to effectively provide 360-degree vision, but others place them on their hands to look around corners. This jutsu gives +1 Perception, makes them immune to surprise attacks and overcomes any penalties to blindness, but is still susceptible to darkness and other negative modifiers. On a Boost, the eyes may leave the ninja's body and float anywhere within 300 ft.

## ADVANCED JUTSU

- ✦ **Chain Barrage (Yang + Crafts):** Must have Summon Chains. The ninja summons chains from all over their body, lashing them out (Yang x10 ft.) in all directions and leaving cuts and scars. The ninja attacks with Fighting + Crafts + 2 and inflicts +2 damage on anyone within Range. The chains provide a +2 bonus to Block for 1 Round, as well, before they are absorbed back into the ninja's skin. On a Boost, if the ninja also knows Chain Hold, they may spend 1 ki per target to automatically activate that follow-up jutsu (without a check).
- ✦ **Embed Jutsu (Yin + Discipline):** The Inks have learned the ultimate expression of their tattoos, and can lend that power to others. By blending their own ki with that of the recipient in an elaborate hour-long ritual, the ninja can embed any jutsu they know into the tattoo being applied (regardless of level or elemental). When applying the tattoo, the ninja activates Embed Jutsu and, if successful, they also make a check

for the jutsu they wish to embed. The recipient of the tattoo takes on a Tattooed 4 Condition, during which they can activate the tattoo's power any time using the ninja's original activation check. They do not need to expend their own ki, so even those without the ability to wield or mold ki can be gifted with this jutsu. When the duration ends, the power fades but leaves behind a permanent tattoo.

# NEW CELESTIAL ANIMALS

## FOXES

**Element:** Fire

**Skill:** Crafts

Foxes are masters of trickery and swift movement. They are child-like in their playfulness, but have a mind for great strategy as well. Celestial foxes are keen to play pranks on their friends and trap their enemies. Young foxes may have only a single tail, but as they grow in age and power they grow additional tails. The strongest Celestial Foxes have nine tails, becoming entities few can combat. However, many of them are hunted and killed for their tails before ever reaching maturity.

- ✦ **Trigger - Pulling One Over:** Like Celestial Monkeys, they love to pull pranks... but usually on their summoner. Gain 1 Karma if an important clue or lead ends up being a plant from the fox who just can't hold in their laughter anymore.

## KAMINARI, THE SIX-TAILED STORM (MAJOR MASTER)

Kaminari is a beautiful Celestial Fox who has survived several imperial hunting parties through sheer wit. She is roughly the size of a human, with a light red, shiny coat, sharp teeth, a crafty mind and six long tails trailing behind her. Unlike others of her kind, she stands tall as a leader of other Celestial Animals. She's outgrown the prankster mindset of younger foxes and instead holds meetings directly with leaders of the Lotus Coalition to plan battle strategies. Kaminari sees the Izou Empire as her home, rarely returning to the

Fox Realm, and believes control of the Empire should ultimately fall to the ninja when the war ends.

She is startlingly serious in her tone, and often appears to look right through people with her gaze. Kaminari is fearless and requires a summoner who shares that quality. Ninja from the Virtuous Body Gardeners and Blazing Dancers are the most likely companions. To prove their worth, the ninja must follow through on a battle strategy planned by the fox while she observes how they react when plans need to change.

**Health:** 13      **Psyche:** 16  
**Attack:** 7      **Actions:** 3  
**Defense:** 9      **Armor:** 1  
**Initiative:** 8      **Damage:** +2

**Dynamic Actions:** 1

**Suggested Skills (4 dice):** Athletics, Crafts, Deception, Empathy, Knowledge (Linguistics), Speed, Stealth, Survival, Travel

## TECHNIQUES

Intuition (++) , Crafts (+) , Fighting (-) , Perception (-); Kaminari is a crafty fighter who likes to get the lay of the land before a battle. Head-on fights are worst for her, but her appearance is rather flashy so hiding is difficult.

## MARTIAL ARTS

- ✦ **Jutsu:** Kaminari knows seven jutsu (GM or player choice) from the Way of Water, Way of Fire or Way of Movement, often combining them to the surprise of her opponents.
- ✦ **Styles:** She is quite adept at Fox Style and has Level Two in all associated techniques.
- ✦ **Ultimate Tail Strike:** Once per Battle during a Counterattack, Kaminari may attack with all six tails in different directions or focused on a single target. Targets must be within Close Range, and she gains a +1 bonus to attack per tail used. For instance, attacking the same target with all tails would be at a +6 bonus, while splitting them between two targets would be two +3 bonuses. Her Summoner may learn this as an Advanced Jutsu (Yang + Speed), growing a number of tails equal to successes gained and each tail inflicting +1 damage as well. Twist: If one target successfully defends using Stealth in their combo, all attacks fail.

## GREATER FOXES

The legendary Nine-Tails are said to be the most powerful creatures in the Celestial Realms. There are only five known today, and they often gather to discuss the future of humanity, the Celestials and existence overall. They are wise beings who young Summoners often seek guidance from, though they are very aloof. The Nine-Tails never set foot onto Earth, as their very presence can cause their surroundings to burst into flames for miles. Some believe this is how the Land of Exalted Flames truly created the Desert of Black Sand.

## PHOENIXES

**Element:** Fire

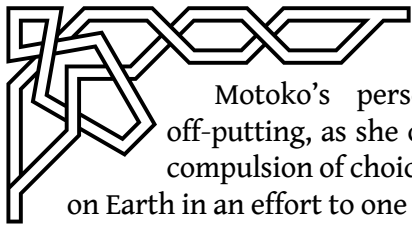
**Skill:** Holistics

The phoenix is a symbol of health and beauty, making the lesser phoenix a pleasure for a ninja to have. They are talkative, curious and can lead their summoner into trouble at times. To go unnoticed, the phoenix appears as a small red and yellow canary that flutters around the ninja until it erupts into a large, powerful fighting bird when battle commences. Of course, a large, flaming bird brings attention to a ninja, so they change only when needed.

- ✦ **Trigger - Curious:** A phoenix requires their love for knowledge to be fulfilled or they withhold their assistance. Gain 1 Karma if forced into danger to follow the phoenix into whatever catches their fancy.

## MOTOKO, CHILD OF THE SUN (MAJOR WARRIOR)

In her natural form, Motoko appears as a brilliant hawk with flames for wings and long, fiery feathers that leave a smoke trail behind her. She stays in hiding most of the time, simply waiting for remarkable individuals to arise in the world. She has an eye for picking out those who will shake the pillars of heaven and society simultaneously, taking on ninja ever since the very first ninja war. The Phoenix Realm, even though it is beautiful in its own right, plays second fiddle to Earth in Motoko's heart. She sees herself as its protector and stays to watch humans and their ever-changing emotional and societal states.



Motoko's personality can be slightly off-putting, as she comes off as obsessed. Her compulsion of choice is seeking out every fruit on Earth in an effort to one day taste them all. For this reason, she often picks nomadic summoners, traveling from province to province and kingdom to kingdom. A tribute of a rare piece of fruit is a quick way to gain her favor, but even the promise to seek them with her will gain her attention.

**Health:** 8      **Psyche:** 7  
**Attack:** 6      **Actions:** 1  
**Defense:** 6      **Armor:** 1  
**Initiative:** 9      **Damage:** +1  
**Dynamic Actions:** 2

**Suggested Skills (3 dice):** Crafts, Empathy, Fortitude, Intimidation, Intuition, Knowledge, Perception, Speed, Survival

### TECHNIQUES

Discipline (+), Speed (+), Fighting (-), Might (-); Motoko is a wandering spirit who loves to interact with people in almost anyway but fighting. She is fast, but her speed is often not enough when the Battle finds her.

### MARTIAL ARTS

- ✦ **Jutsu:** Motoko knows five jutsu (GM or player choice) from the Way of Fire or Way of Caring Hands, as well as Lightning Speed from the Way of Movement.
- ✦ **Rebirth:** She is a loyal beast and will even sacrifice herself for her summoner if they have proven to be true. Motoko can sacrifice any of her remaining Health or Stamina and give them to her summoner on a one-to-one basis, even to the point of killing herself. If she does so, the player must mark the Owes a Favor box. If it is already marked, the Celestial Phoenixes become rivals and much more demanding of their summoner's time.
- ✦ **Alchemy Assistance:** If his Summoner is an Alchemist, Motoko can gift her feathers to them and their Restore potions (NC2E, pg. 76) heal 3 damage per use (instead of 2).



## GREATER PHOENIXES

Even though phoenixes are the symbol of death and rebirth, there is a single phoenix who has managed to stave off death since the beginning of time. Keitaro speaks of times when the Earth never existed and humans were but stars in the sky before falling. He also knows how the oceans sprang from nothing and the gods were born. Then again, most of what Keitaro says sounds like gibberish to those who listen, as he speaks in an ancient, long-lost dialect that even few phoenixes know. If the ninja could decipher his words, the world could be a very different place.

## RED DRAGONS

**Element:** Fire

**Skill:** Knowledge

Dragons are rare creatures to behold and seldom hang around in their natural form. A ninja who befriends the red dragons usually receives a hatchling to protect. This baby dragon resembles a red-scaled iguana more than the epic beast it will one day become. The ninja's job is to show the small dragon the world. Although red dragons can grow wings at will and fly swiftly through the air, they are slow moving on land and require a watchful eye. Like humans, dragons have unique personalities ranging from completely enraptured by Earth to entirely bored by the mundane events that humans call blissful.

- ✦ **Trigger - Where'd You Go?:** Red Dragons do what they want and they don't care how much trouble the ninja will be in if something bad happens to them. Gain 1 Karma when the hatchling turns up missing and the ninja must choose to find it instead of doing other important duties.

## YEMON, THE GREAT GUARDIAN (MAJOR MASTER)

Yemon is the son of Enshoku, the infamous red dragon who lives within the Ensen Volcano. Many a ninja has attempted to summon Enshoku, but she's only been outside of the Dragon Realms once. Instead, Yemon is sent to meet humans, but at 20 ft. long with fiery breath and burning claws, he is no less intimidating than his mother. He is called the Great Guardian

because images of him defending the Takiyama Mountains have appeared in some of the finest depictions of the ninja's great wars. His reputation reaches back as far as the First Ninja War against the Orime.

This gruff dragon is hard to impress. Yemon's view of humanity is that we are untrustworthy ants who would quickly steal his scales or trap him in an attempt to appropriate his power given half a chance. Yemon bores easily, and a potential summoner must work hard to get him to pay even the smallest amount of attention to their pleas. Ninja who trade verbal blows with him rather than backing down from his insults seem to amuse him – unlike most other humans he encounters – they aren't scared he'll simply destroy them.

**Health:** 30      **Psyche:** 26  
**Attack:** 10      **Actions:** 2  
**Defense:** 7      **Armor:** 3  
**Initiative:** 7      **Damage:** +2  
**Dynamic Actions:** 3

**Suggested Skills (4 dice):** Athletics, Crafts, Empathy, Discipline, Fighting, Fortitude, Intimidation, Knowledge, Persuasion, Survival

## TECHNIQUES

Fighting (++) , Fortitude (+) , Speed (-); Yemon is a brute in Battle, taking on several foes at one time, but he is slow, which a clever warrior can exploit.

## MARTIAL ARTS

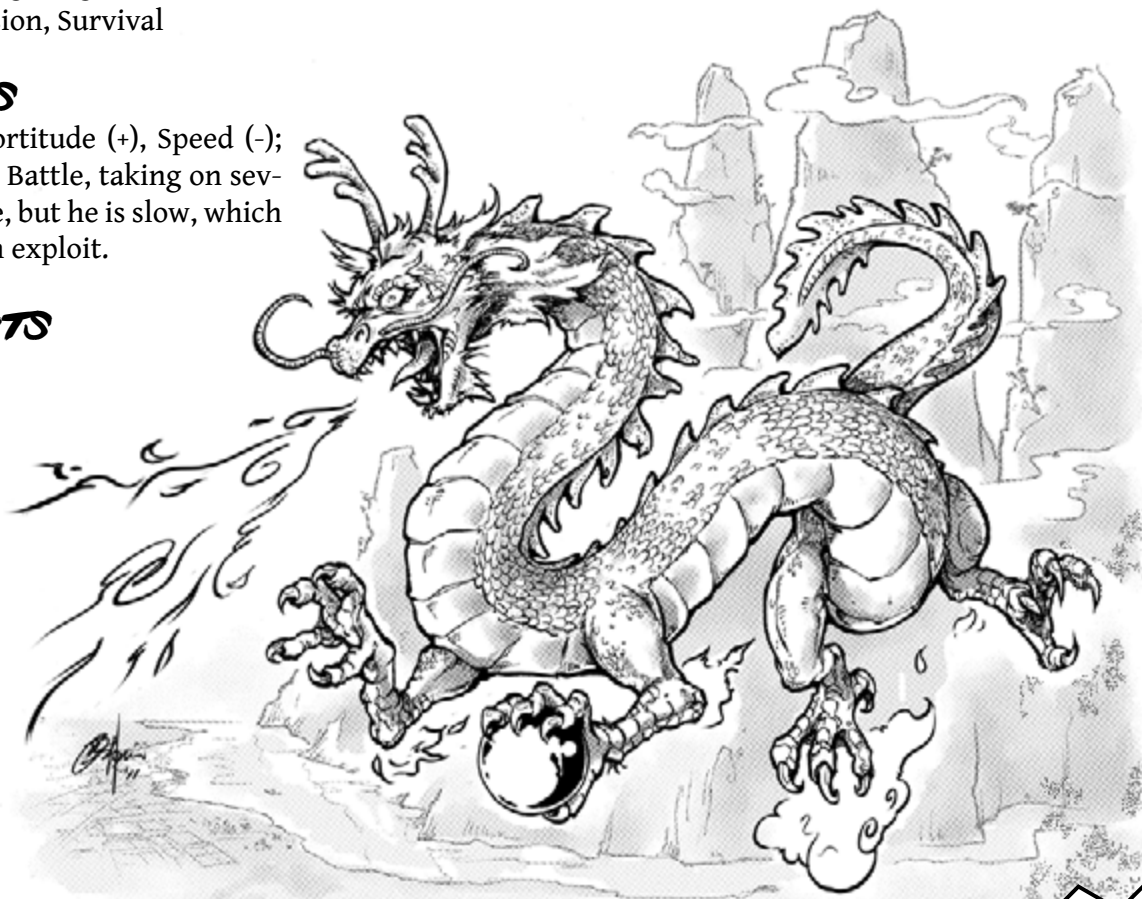
- ✦ **Jutsu:** Yemon is very old and can use jutsu from any path which the GM feels is fitting to the scene, although he primarily uses jutsu from the Way of Fire and Way of Survival.
- ✦ **Styles:** He is trained in Dragon and Tiger

Style and has (at least) Level Two in all associated techniques.

- ✦ **Fire Strikes:** Any attack Yemon succeeds on inflicts a Burning 1 Condition, as long as he gains at least 2 successes more than his opponent. If his summoner follows the Way of Fire, they also require only 2 successes to activate their Training effect.

## GREATER RED DRAGONS

In addition to Yemon's mother, Enshoku, there is said to be one other Greater Red Dragon who slumbers beneath the Bridge to Battle Province. Legend says a dragon egg was lost in that region millennia ago, and finding it would grant friendship with the Red Dragons, as it supposedly holds the prince of the Red Dragon Realms. Many heroes have lost their lives chasing this tale, and many more will follow suit if history repeats itself.





# Gracious Illustrators

- ✦ **Other Names:** Illustrators, Strokes, Kanboku Clan
- ✦ **Stereotypes:** Emotionless, Gifted, Secretive
- ✦ **Fighting Styles:** Crane, Scorpion
- ✦ **Favored Jutsu:** Way of 18 Strokes
- ✦ **Skills:** Crafts +1, Intuition +1, Knowledge +1, Perception +1
- ✦ **Ki Balance:** +1 Yang

## HISTORY

The history of the Gracious Illustrators is paved in the blood of the clans that have opposed them. While not one of the most aggressive clans out there, the Kanboku have developed special talents that pose a very real threat to their enemies. The most powerful of their clan can quite literally paint the future, but only the truly gifted in the arts could ever become members. Like the Virtuous Body Gardeners, the Gracious Illustrators once served those of higher status: painting nobles' family portraits and murals of the Izou Empire's triumphs. It is said that the stroke of their paintbrush was what won the War of Withered Fangs, as it was the Gracious Illustrators who set the emperor's fate in place. When word spread of their incredibly powerful jutsu, other clans (specifically the Hidden Strands and Grasping Shadows) hunted down many of their members. This forced the clan to keep their numbers small, creating communes where gifted artists could show off their works and share their love of the craft. Over time, they collectively created several new expressions of their art.

Individual members of the Gracious Illustrators worked hand and hand with the Living Chronicle, being contracted to assist in transcription. This is where their members crossed paths with the fledgling Sumi as they applied tattoos to countless monks. It is believed that these young ninja caught the

eye of a Kanboku leader, who spoke to his clan-mates about the tattoo artists. Together, the Gracious Illustrators painted a massive mural depicting their split, their eventual rise to power and the Strokes standing behind them on the battlefield. To look upon this artwork is to witness the beauty of their clan's gifts. This mural has been hidden from history; its location known only to the oldest living Kanboku, for the destiny can be destroyed if it is ever marred in any way.

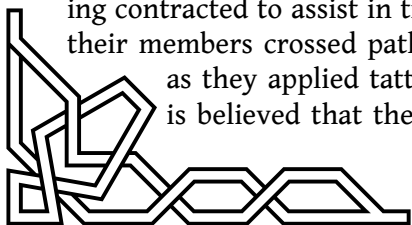
The Kanboku ninja disappeared into near obscurity for decades until the Ninja Crusade began. The prophecies set forth by their clan have started to occur and working with the Lotus Coalition gives them the ability to watch the Inks in action. They do not take a backseat, however: the Gracious Illustrators, while continually small in number, use their powerful jutsu to aid the organization, knowing that the Virtuous Body Gardeners will shape the world's future.



## LIFESTYLE

The everyday life of an illustrator is spent in the never-ending pursuit of artistic expression. Feared for their potent abilities, they are one of the first clans that were hunted down and presumably destroyed by the Izou Army before the Ninja Crusade was ever concocted. Today, the Kanboku either live in hiding (in caves or secluded mountain passages) or in plain sight (as simple street painters in the cities that can afford to pay their wages or working as scribes). Kanboku ninja are trained to blend into the background, often evading the ill will of others, but aren't highly emotional. This comes from a certain lack of enthusiasm for anything that has not been foretold by their paintings. They hold very little current territory, instead borrowing safe havens from the Virtuous Body Gardeners when necessary.

Initiates are never chosen at random. With such small numbers, every Stroke needs to be an elite artist and warrior, perfect examples of the ideals that the clan attempts to put forth. Plenty of training exercises make the ninja



ready for the field, such as hanging upside down for days while repainting a portrait from memory or combating the most wondrous creatures ever created with chi-infused ink. Those unworthy of membership are swiftly dispatched as not to give away the clan's existence to the Izou army. This is easily accomplished with the edge of a blade or by the stroke of an Illustrator's paintbrush.

## AGENDAS

The Lotus Coalition has accepted the Gracious Illustrators into its ranks for the express purpose of keeping track of their latest creations. A mystic painting depicting the triumph of the Lotus Coalition would be enough of a motivator for their warriors to go all out in pushing the Izou army back. It was easy for the Strokes to guess the Warden's reasons for accepting them so easily and have thus refused to paint any portraits for the organization. Instead, they insist that they work hand in hand with the Virtuous Body Gardeners, fighting beside the Inks in combat or taking their place if one falls prey to the enemy's blade. While not front-line fighters in general, many of their numbers are masterful weapon users. With the Izou Empire gone, as well, they can raise their numbers and take on territory, becoming a full ninja clan again.

## CLAN GIFT AND TRIGGER

◆ **Gift - Painter's Blood:** Gracious Illustrators live and die by their art, sometimes quite literally. They receive +1 Crafts whenever

it involves their paintings (including uses of the Way of 18 Strokes). The special paint they use (usually carried in a container about the size of a sword sheath) is forged through slowly bleeding themselves over days or even weeks to enchant it. However, the Illustrator may also choose a quick release of blood, sacrificing 1 Health during a jutsu activation in order to gain 2 automatic successes.

◆ **Trigger - Blank Stare:** To onlookers, Strokes are apathetic and confusing ninja who show no feelings. In reality, however, these ninja feel everything just as strongly as anyone else, but find the over-expression of emotions to so many others to be exhausting and unnecessary. Gain 1 Karma when being seen as an emotionless automaton disgraces or hurts the group in some way.

## CONTACTS

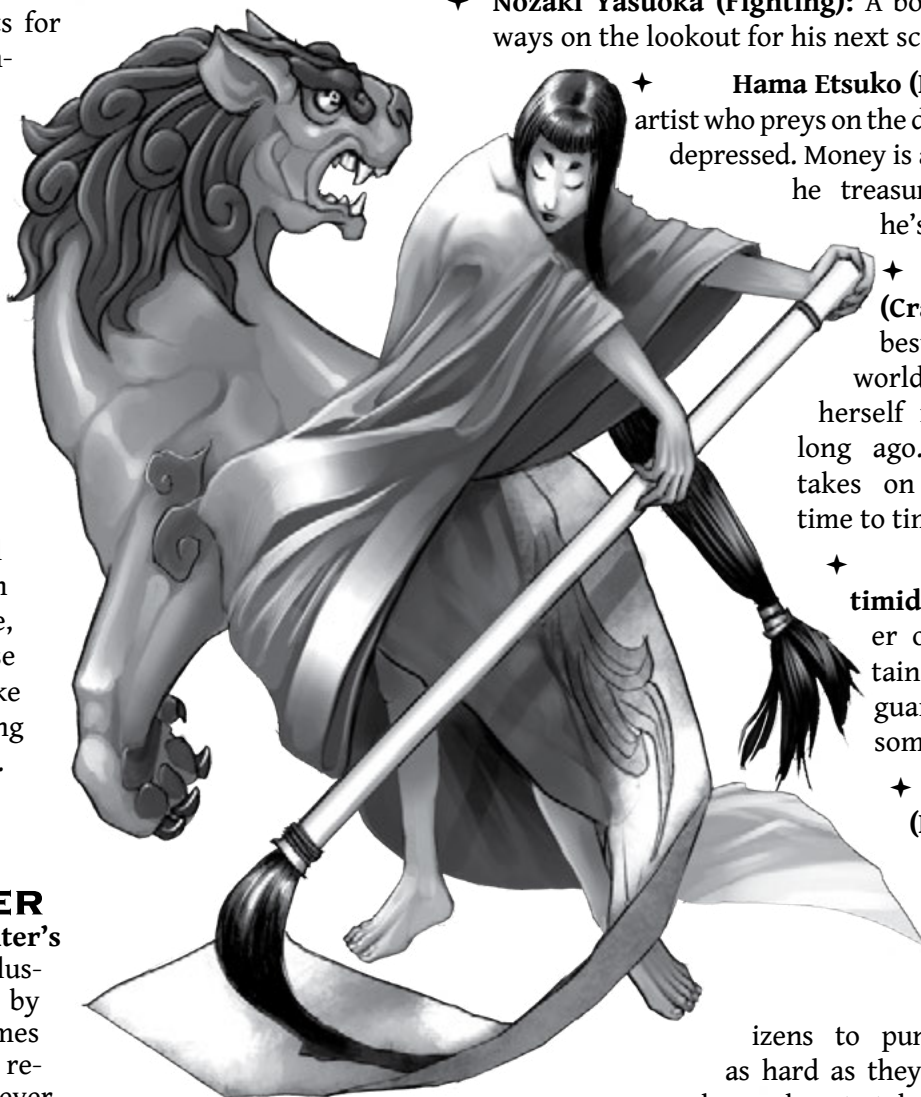
◆ **Nozaki Yasuoka (Fighting):** A bounty hunter, always on the lookout for his next score.

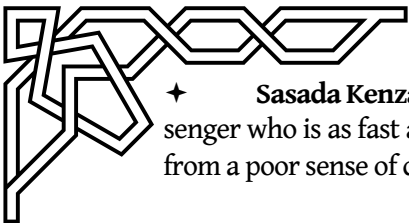
◆ **Hama Etsuko (Empathy):** A con artist who preys on the downtrodden and depressed. Money is a great prize, but he treasures every heart he's broken as well.

◆ **Kanboku Tomi (Crafts):** One of the best painters in the world who secluded herself from the world long ago. However, she takes on students from time to time.

◆ **Ohka Ume (Intimidation):** A mother of two and captain of her town guard, Ume is not someone to cross.

◆ **Shiba Bunjuro (Fortitude):** A street performer who makes the bulk of his money by daring regular citizens to punch him as hard as they can. He knows how to take a hit.





✦ **Sasada Kenzan (Speed):** He's an Izou messenger who is as fast as they come, but also suffers from a poor sense of direction. Poor Kenzan.

## BONDS

- ✦ Choose one ninja who gives you a reason to step out of your shell every so often.
- ✦ Choose one ninja who you hope to one day paint a portrait of.
- ✦ Choose one ninja whose very presence makes you downright uneasy.

## WAY OF 18 STROKES

**Element:** Earth

**Training:** The ability to paint legible art in a matter of seconds is a skill taught to every Stroke, and their paint is as much a weapon as their brush bo. When done expertly, there is no stopping the ninja. On a Boost, they may either heal 1 Health sacrificed using Painter's Blood or may gain a +2 bonus to Initiative in the Battle.

**Backfire:** Their fighting style must be practiced for years to perfect and any misstep slows them down immeasurably. On a failure, they suffer -1 Crafts and -2 Initiative.

## BASIC JUTSU

- ✦ **Iron Stomach (Yin + Fortitude):** Through years of swallowing paint (sometimes purposefully), they have grown accustomed to resisting foreign bodies. For the Scene, they gain +2 Fortitude to resist ingested poisons or drugs.
- ✦ **Lesser Zhu Beasts (Yang + Crafts):** The ninja inks a zhu beast on their scroll, summoning a stylized beast in a flash. In many cases, the ninja uses the beast to fight for them at a distance, but they can just as easily fight side by side. The lesser zhu beast uses stats for Smaller Animals (NC2E, pg. 158).
- ✦ **Painted Arsenal (Yin + Crafts):** The ninja, with only a scroll and a brush, can paint a weapon and then instantly bring it into reality. This can be useful for arming their comrades or when a weapon other than their brush bo is needed. The new weapon has the same Quality as

mundane equivalents and lasts for the Scene. On a Boost, the weapon receives one additional Quality of the ninja's choice.

- ✦ **Searching Creatures (Yang + Crafts):** The ninja inks a series of small animals on their scroll, bringing them to life to perform reconnaissance. The creatures spread out in every direction (up to 1/2 mile), and the ninja can focus to see through an individual creature's eyes to extend their senses. The type of animal varies from ninja to ninja; some use snakes or rats, while others use frogs or squirrels. Lasts as long as they remain in meditation.
- ✦ **Splash Darts (Yang + Marksman):** The ninja opens their canister of paint and splashes it in the direction of their target, each drop becoming a sharpened dagger. The activation check is their attack roll, and it deals 2 damage when it connects. On a Boost, the ninja receives a +1 bonus to the next jutsu activation check they use against that same target.

## MEDIAN JUTSU

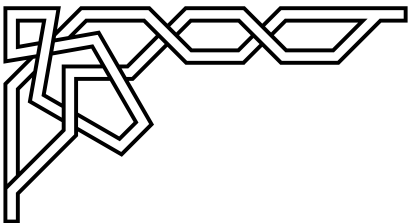

- ✦ **Carrier's Wings (Yang + Crafts):** Must have Lesser Zhu Beasts. The ninja summons a large carrier bird, capable of giving them the gift of flight. The ninja can stand upon the bird's back and be lifted into the air, which is great for scouting or avoiding rough terrain. The bird's Movement is equal to the ninja's Movement plus successes gained and it has 3 Health. The effects last for the Scene.
- ✦ **Dripping with Talent (Yin + Marksman):** The ninja throws paint on their target, covering them from head to toe. The activation is made as their attack, and every success they achieve over the target lowers their Movement by 2. If they are reduced to 0, they lose their Standard Action. On a Boost, they lose their Standard Action automatically. Penalty is reduced by 1 per Round.
- ✦ **Greater Zhu Beasts (Yang + Crafts):** Must have Lesser Zhu Beasts. The creature summoned now uses the Larger Animal stats (NC2E, pg. 159).



- ✦ **Instant Hole (Yin + Crafts):** A favorite jutsu for the crafty Illustrator. The ninja paints an opening on a wall that then becomes a doorway for them. This can be used for any wall or surface up to 5 ft. thick. On a Boost, it can be any thickness.
- ✦ **Strokes of Destiny (Yin + Intuition):** The ninja prepares their workspace and lapses into a ritualistic trance. When they awaken 6 hours later, the Stroke will have painted portraits of events that will occur in the future. The portraits, however, are never completely clear, being painted at strange angles, with plenty of shadow or in random order. It is seldom clear exactly when the events will happen either. The GM may ask for Knowledge + Intuition checks to attempt to discern their meaning over time.

## ADVANCED JUTSU

- ✦ **Altered Courses (Yang + Perception):** Must have Strokes of Destiny. Instead of painting something destined to happen, the ninja paints an event of something they desire to occur. Once the portrait is completed, it will occur. There is no telling when the event will occur, but whatever the ninja paints, down to the wardrobe, time of day and facial expression of the subject, will occur exactly as depicted. The act of changing the course of another's destiny is draining, and the ninja suffers a Confused 3 Condition as a result. During this time, they also cannot recover resting ki. It is the GM's duty to make this event happen somewhere throughout the story. Fate is a fickle mistress, however, and things shouldn't always happen the way the ninja expects. Painting the death of an enemy could end with the ninja's good friend killed instead, mistaken for their enemy due to unforeseen circumstances.
- ✦ **Dragon Scroll Attack (Yang + Crafts):** Must have Painted Arsenal and Splash Darts. The ninja unfurls several scrolls readied with Painted Arsenal, throwing them into the air as they spiral and spin. On their next Action, they then jump into the center, raining a storm of shuriken and daggers at their enemy with +3 Marksmanship and dealing 2 damage per strike. They may attack a number of targets equal to successes gained on their activation check. On a Boost, they may barrage a single target.
- ✦ **Painting Targets (Yin + Crafts):** Must have Dripping with Talent. The ninja splashes their paint on up to (Yin) targets within Near Range, creating targets for their (or an ally's) attacks. The next physical attack on each of these targets receives a +2 bonus and deals +1 damage. On a Boost, this bonus is applied to the next two attacks on each target.
- ✦ **Simple Shapes (Yang + Fortitude):** Must have Instant Hole. The ninja slams against a flat surface and becomes a coat of paint upon it, able to move along the surface in two dimensions. This technique is most often used to evade attacks or move undetected. The ninja is also immune to damage unless their surface is destroyed. If destroyed, the ninja is instantly ejected, and they lose half their current Health (rounded up).
- ✦ **Zhu Hoard (Yang + Discipline):** When activating either Lesser Zhu Beasts or Greater Zhu Beasts, the ninja may reflexively use this jutsu to summon (Yang) additional lesser beasts or (Yang-2) additional greater beasts.



# Grey Tigers

- ✦ **Other Names:** Tigers, Mouko Clan, Kittens
- ✦ **Stereotypes:** Focused, Tricksters, Without Loyalty
- ✦ **Fighting Styles:** Tiger, Wildcat
- ✦ **Favored Jutsu:** Way of Bloody Claws
- ✦ **Skills:** Athletics +1, Might +1, Persuade +1, Survival +1
- ✦ **Ki Balance:** +1 Yang

## HISTORY

The Mouko clan started off as a simple group of families living in the jungles of the Izou Empire, hoping to study the many species of feline that inhabited their surroundings. They made a humble living watching the ferocious tigers and agile leopards that they encountered in their travels. Soon their world was turned upside down, however, when they came across a specific pack of rare tigers, colored grey by unknown energies. After years of watching over the great felines and recording their lives, the Mouko could see intelligence in their eyes. They were no mere beasts, showing that they were much tougher and more agile than normal tigers. They bred quickly and often until their numbers were in the hundreds, giving the Mouko problems with keeping track of them all.

Then the Recoiling Serpents attacked, as the tigers lived within the Triumph Province. Fearing an encroachment from the northern clans or the Izou army from the south, the Serpents made it their mission to root out any threat in their territory and destroy it. The Mouko clan, living in the Serpents' domain, was an obvious target, especially since they guarded the precious secret of the grey tigers' habitat. Many Mouko were massacred in an instant, but then the tigers leapt to their defense. It seemed as though the tigers had been watching and guarding the

Mouko just as the Mouko had been watching and guarding them.

The encounter ended with both sides forced to retreat. The Mouko were left with only a small fraction of their numbers, and the tigers lost so many of their cubs that repopulation seemed almost impossible. The two groups met eyes and understood that one could not continue on without the other. This fateful event began the Grey Tigers ninja clan.

Today, they hold a small fraction of territory that rests between the Bridge to War Province and the Triumph Province as a sanctuary for their clan and their tigers.

The Mouko clan constantly fights to hold their land from vengeful Serpents and overzealous Inks hungry to claim more territory for themselves. This aggression has lessened since the Lotus Coalition approached the Grey Tigers for assistance in the Ninja Crusade. A temporary peace was struck when their clan agreed, but the Mouko primarily serve out of necessity and not because they want to see an end to the Izou Empire. If anything, other ninja are more damaging to their way of life than an army that cannot find their sanctuary.

## LIFESTYLE

The Mouko maintain a residence in the original spot where their namesake tigers were once found. Known as Neko-shi, the sanctuary has enough food to sustain their numbers (and many more), with beautiful streams and waterfalls for its residents to bathe in. The clan still maintains their original goal of recording the lives of the tigers who have become their friends, but now this knowledge is gained through first-hand experience instead of from afar. They eat together, play together and protect each other, becoming a family that no one could break up with a fight. In their years of observation, the Mouko have learned that the grey tigers



may be descended from Queen Kazuhiko herself. If this is true, their lives will only be more chaotic once she unleashes her own plans.

Beneath their serene appearance, however, lies the vicious heart of a tiger. The ninja and tiger become one unit and train together from the cub's birth. As cats, their temperaments are not always agreeable, but the duo learns to work together over time. The ninja take from their tiger a sense of timing, natural hunting skills and an unstoppable need to defend one's territory. Their martial styles emulate the cats they share their lives with and they are constantly training, without which they may have perished a long time ago. Many of them learn to master unarmed fighting before weapons are ever introduced into their training. After years of fighting with the most stubborn of animals, they also become adept at getting their way when needed.

## AGENDAS

Whatever it takes to keep their sanctuary a secret is what the Grey Tigers are willing to do. This includes fighting beside the other clans on the front lines against the Izou Empire or performing reconnaissance missions to further the Lotus Coalition's goals. The Mouko hope to gain enough power that they can move from a defensive stance to becoming a full ninja force that can take more territory. Their tigers are slowly growing in number as well, but it will still be some time before they need to move. They have purposefully removed themselves from any situation involving the Wedding Fiasco directly. Unfortunately, however, they have been caught in the crossfire between

the Pack of the Black Moon and the Recoiling Serpents too many times to count.

## CLAN GIFT AND TRIGGER

◆ **Gift - Part of the Clutter:** Each member of the Mouko clan is gifted with a grey tiger cub when they become of age (usually around 8 years old). The two are ki-bonded and work well together. They gain a +1 bonus to any task their tiger may assist with, such as an attack or leaping over chasms. This bonus is raised to +2 for the Intimidation skill. In Battle, the player has two choices for how to represent their tiger: younger tigers use Smaller Animal stats (NC2E, pg. 158), but enjoy +2 Initiative, or they may have a full grown tiger which uses Larger Animal stats (NC2E, pg. 159). They may raise the tiger's Health or Psyche (player's choice) by +1 with every Rank achieved. Lastly, by spending 1 ki (of either type) any jitsu they use also affects their tiger.

◆ **Trigger - Territorial Loyalty:** Any member of the Mouko's first loyalty is to protect Neko-shi, their tigers' peaceful habitat. They will fight to the end and vanquish any opponent who puts that at risk.

Gain 1 Karma if they ever have to split their loyalty between their group and Neko-shi to disastrous effect.

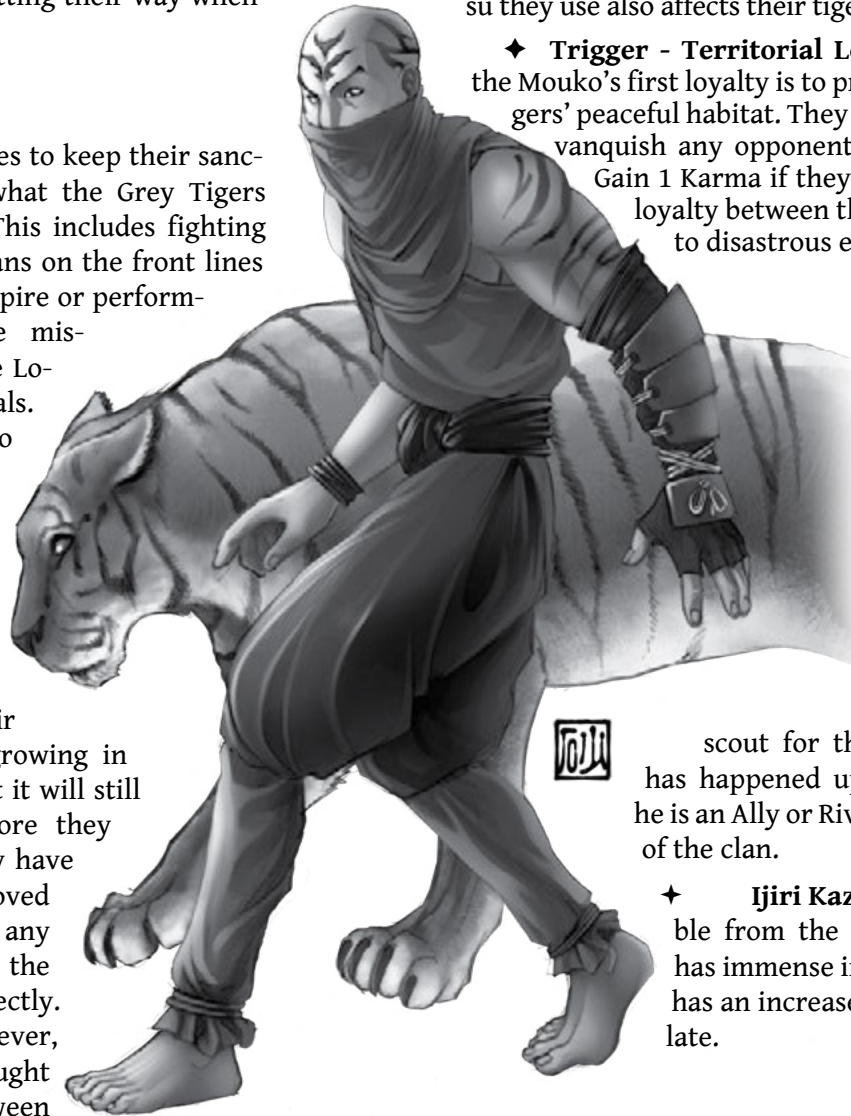
## CONTACTS

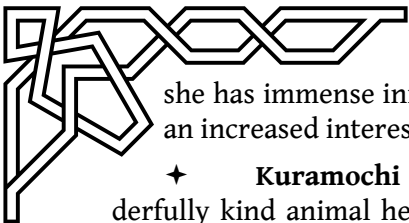
◆ **Kiski Seiko (Intuition):** A wise woman, she tells wondrous stories to the young, teaching them right from wrong and which they should choose.

◆ **Kasai Kenji (Travel):** Kenji is a

scout for the Lotus Coalition who has happened upon Neko-shi. Whether he is an Ally or Rival could spell the future of the clan.

◆ **Ijiri Kazumi (Deception):** A noble from the Triumph Province, she has immense influence in the area and has an increased interest in ninja as of late.





she has immense influence in the area and has an increased interest in ninja as of late.

✦ **Kuramochi Kyoko (Holistics):** A wonderfully kind animal healer, she is one of the few people outside the Mouko allowed to see the grey tigers.

✦ **Mouko Eien (Athletics):** This young protester has been running from one end of the Empire to the other and painting a portrait in each area to show the damage this war has done.

✦ **Tanizaki Yoshihide (Stealth):** Yoshihide is a famous hunter who wants to bag a grey tiger for his trophy case one day.

## BONDS

✦ *Choose one ninja who is the only other person you've ever shared the location of Neko-shi with.*

✦ *Choose one ninja who has dared to compare the Grey Tigers to the Pack of the Black Moon.*

✦ *Choose one ninja who you would trust by your side during a hunt.*

## WAY OF

## BLOODY CLAWS

Element: Fire

**Training:** The ninja and their tiger fight in unison, tackling any obstacle that comes before them. A piece of the ninja's soul is linked to the tiger, allowing them to extend any jutsu effects to their tiger for free with a Boost.

**Backfire:** The Way of Bloody Claws taps into the ninja's animalistic nature, and a mistake when activating jutsu can be quite troublesome. On a failure, they suffer a cumulative -1 Fighting penalty, as they lose their hunter's edge.

## BASIC JUTSU

✦ **Big Paw (Yang + Fortitude):** The ninja makes one of their hands into a giant tiger's paw, including the ripping claws that come with it. They deal +1 damage and may cause a Bleeding 1 Condition on a Boost.

## CHAPTER THREE - BUILDING FLAWLESS FIRES

✦ **Cat's Landing (Yang + Survival):** The ninja emulates a cat's ability to always land on its feet and learns to fall safely from heights up to 50 ft. high. They take zero damage and can immediately react without any delay. On a Boost, they may ignore a fall from any height.

✦ **Don't Touch the Fur (Yin + Survival):** Cats hate having anything on them, from dirt to blood to chains to sediments that would slow them down. This jutsu removes anything non-living touching their skin instantly.

✦ **Hunter's Focus (Yin + Survival):** Once a tiger sees its prey, there is no getting away. So too can the ninja connect themselves to any single target within sight, becoming the perfect hunter. The ninja receives +1 Stealth against the target for the Scene, and deals +1 damage if they ambush them successfully.

✦ **Unswayable Nature (Yin + Empathy):** The ninja steels away their emotions, making them much more resistant to attempts to sway them with sweetness or seduction. They have +2 mental Armor against Persuade for the Scene.

## MEDIAJUTSU

✦ **Cat Nap (Yin + Fortitude):** In between Scenes, it is assumed the ninja is resting much harder than other ninja would. They can activate this jutsu, and a success means they increase their recovery by +2 (NC2E, pg. 91). A failure means they do not recover more and the ninja begins the next Scene with their Backfire condition.

✦ **Double Claw (Yang + Fighting):** Must have Hunter's Focus. The ninja and cat attack a single target in unison. The activation represents the ninja's attack. If successful, they knock their target off-balance and their tiger takes advantage of this with an immediate follow-up attack, enjoying a +2 Attack and dealing +2 damage if successful. If both attacks land, the target suffers a Bruised 2 Condition and suffers a -1 penalty to their next Defense.

✦ **Feline Form (Yang + Fortitude):** The ninja takes the form of their grey tiger companion, but can change to any color to emulate other mundane

## CHAPTER THREE - BUILDING FLAWLESS FIRES

versions of their kind as well. While in this form, they lose opposable thumbs and the ability to speak, but receive +1 Athletics and +1 Stealth.

- ✦ **Grey Tiger's Leap (Yang + Might):** The ninja launches themselves into the air, using their Yang to propel them farther than even other ninja can go. They may multiply their jump distance by (Yang x2) for a number of jumps equal to successes gained.
- ✦ **Marked Territory (Yin + Survival):** The ninja using this jutsu becomes instantly adept at operating and traveling within their chosen territory. They know their way around and traverse it easily as they claim it as theirs. They gain a +1 bonus for any checks to operate in the environment, including local knowledge, finding specific locations and Journey checks through the area.

### ADVANCED JUTSU

- ✦ **All Fours (Yang + Fortitude):** Must have Feline form. The ninja assumes a form that crosses human with tiger, giving them longer arms that grow claws, sharpened fangs and a tail to help with balancing. They receive a +3 bonus to Athletics checks for climbing, jumping, dodging and balancing, +5 Movement and they now deal +2 physical damage with attacks. The effects last for the Scene.
- ✦ **Bezoar Bomb (Yang + Marksman):** Must have Feline Form. The ninja boils everything they've ingested in their stomach and then opens their mouth to release a tidal wave of grossness on everyone within Near Range. The activation check is the character's attack roll, and targets may attempt to Dodge with a -1 penalty. Those affected suffer a Slowed 2 Condition, as the concoction is gross and slimy, and Deprived 1 Condition, from the pungent smell overwhelming victims' senses. On a Boost, victims take a Knocked Out 2 Condition instead of Deprived.

- ✦ **Lion's Roar (Yin + Intimidation):** The ninja breathes in deep, summoning up the spirit of the tiger to let loose a mighty roar. If hit, their target is shaken to the bone, losing their Standard Action and 1 Dynamic Action for the Round (if they are reduced to 0 Actions, they cannot make Defense checks for the rest of the Round). The target also suffers a Sensory Loss 1 Condition from being deafened. On a Boost, the victim loses their Standard Action and up to 3 Dynamic Actions.
- ✦ **Marked Prey (Yin + Perception):** Must have Hunter's Focus. Once the ninja has drawn the blood of their victim, they may mark the target using this jutsu. Whenever the ninja comes within (Yin) miles of their marked prey, they know it and automatically succeed on any attempts to track them. While this is active, however, the ninja may not mold Yang ki.
- ✦ **9 Lives (Yin + Persuade):** Must have Cat's Landing and All Fours. The ninja begins to learn all the ways of a cat's good luck, even using it to defy death itself. In times when they know they are walking into death's door, they can prepare themselves with a one-day ritual to bring about good luck in their endeavors. For the next day, the ninja receives 9 chances to apply a +2 bonus to any check. They can even apply the bonuses in any combination they choose (even all 9 equaling to a +18 bonus on a single check). On a failure during jutsu activation, these bonuses are reduced to only +1.





# Winds of Aion

- ✦ **Other Names:** Winds, Pipers, Gachingachin Clan
- ✦ **Stereotypes:** Wallflowers, Musical Geniuses, Envious
- ✦ **Fighting Styles:** Fox, Snake
- ✦ **Favored Jutsu:** Way of Deadly Crescendos
- ✦ **Skills:** Discipline +1, Marksman +1, Perform +1, Stealth +1
- ✦ **Ki Balance:** +1 Yin

## HISTORY

To many citizens of the Izou Empire, there was no such thing as musical festivals or celebrations of movement before the Blazing Dancers arrived, but this couldn't be farther from the truth. Before the Dancers set a single foot into the then fledgling empire, the Gachingachin clan amused and enchanted the people with their mastery of music. The beginning of their clan was directly parallel to the rise of the Izou Empire. A young ninja named Aion, with a single flute, helped to usher in the age of the War of Withered Fangs. While not large in number at the time, their songs encouraged the young Izou army to crush each nation before them. Aion and his students assimilated thousands of talented ninja into their ranks at the height of their power. Their style of entertainment utilized every type of musical instruments, but their leader led them with his famous war flute and gave them their name - the Winds of Aion. Most of their songs were serene in peaceful times, but became an overpowering orchestra during wars that enveloped their people.

Then the Blazing Dancers crossed the Desert of Black Sand. They were quickly heralded as heroes among the people for performing such an act, one that no one before had the ability to survive. The Dancers began their strange and alluring shows in

Wind territory, ignoring boundaries and creating animosity between the clans. The Izou audiences started choosing energetic acrobatics and contortionists instead of the Winds' soothing songs they had enjoyed for centuries. The battle for Imperial support culminated in a heated Shadow War between the two clans, with the Dancers as the victors in the end. As a final symbol of their ascent to the forefront of the empire's love, the Dancers kept Aion's war flute as a trophy (still seen today in the main hall of the Wu Ji Theater).

Today, the Winds of Aion have endured, but their clan is in shambles.

Their hidden villages have fewer and fewer ninja: the young see the Winds as a vestige of the old ways, traveling instead to the Wu Ji Theater to learn tumbles and flips. The Winds of Aion exist for those that appreciate truly beautiful music though. Some have gone on to join the Lotus Coalition, mostly in areas without a strong Dancer presence. Others, however, have actually joined the Empire in their quest to wipe out the clans in power. Once the Dancers are wiped out, they are certain that the Winds will be considered the

top musical force once again.

## LIFESTYLE

Life within a Winds of Aion hidden village is tranquil to say the least. They play quiet songs for each other and students seen as worthy of their talents. Although they will accept it, the Winds don't play for simple coin or jade - they are true artists that perform for the sake of performing, no matter who is watching. They avoid attracting Izou soldiers with a light melody constantly played on the air. Even in the most open of areas, their flutes cast a spell on anyone that enters their territory that makes it impossible to see the ninja village, even if they are standing in the middle of it. Some of their

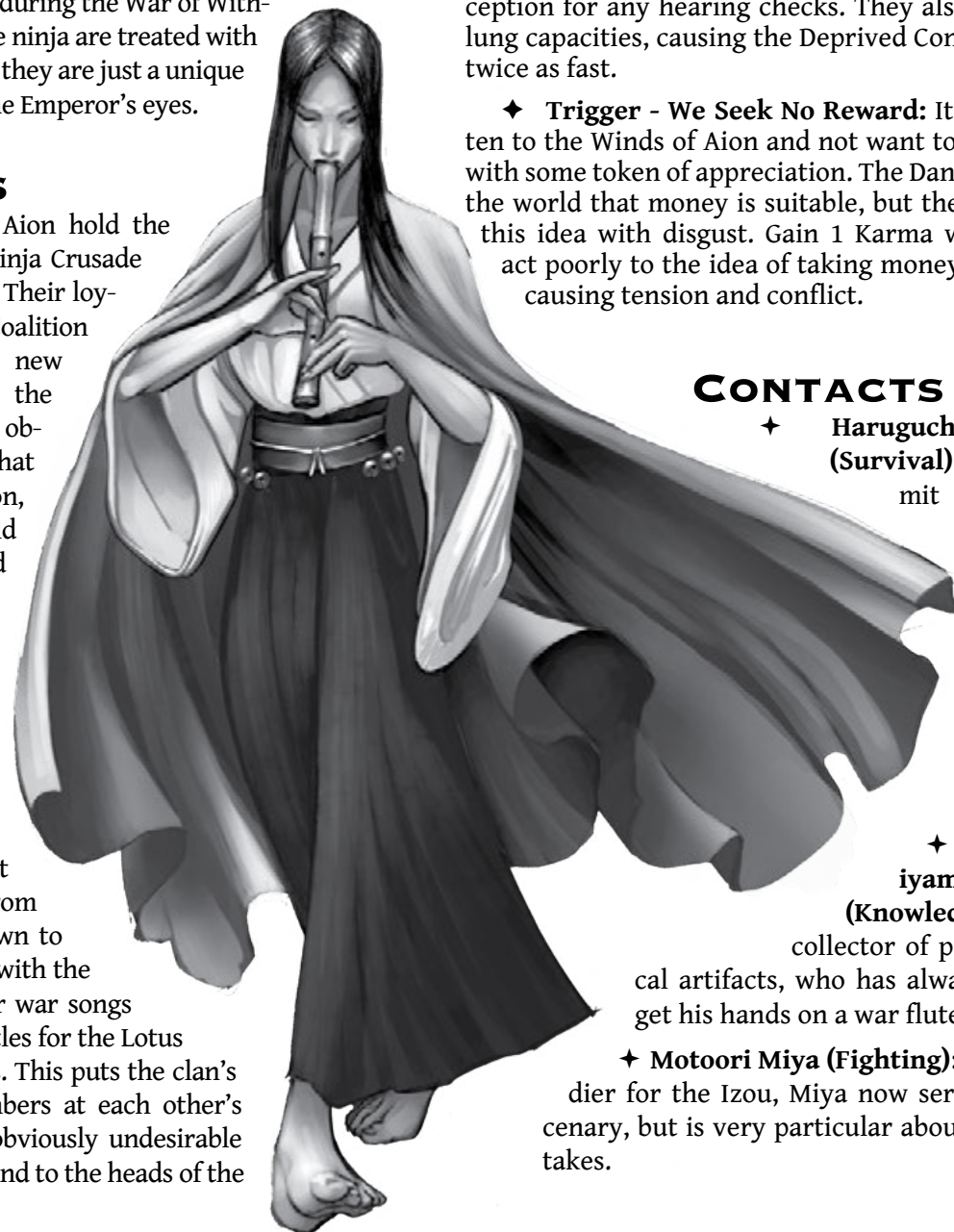


brightest students have been those who have been able to hear the individual notes of that song and use it track down the village. That is the first true test, but several others of martial prowess and music appreciation follow soon after. The initiate becomes a ninja when they create their first original musical composition that is accepted by the clan masters. Status within the Winds is determined by these standards as well.

They are natives to the Izou Empire and know the roads and waterways better than those that arrived after them. This makes ninja from the Winds of Aion quite the catch for the Emperor. The Winds of Aion led the Izou army to great wins during the War of Withered Fangs, so these ninja are treated with respect. In the end, they are just a unique type of soldier in the Emperor's eyes.

## AGENDAS

The Winds of Aion hold the power to tip the Ninja Crusade in either direction. Their loyalty to the Lotus Coalition wavers with each new Dancer that joins the organization. It is obvious, however, that without the coalition, the Winds would have been wiped out in the first wave. It stands as a shield, protecting the Gachin-gachin clan from the Izou Army, and they have no choice but to usher it forward. Or don't they? Several from their clan are known to have joined forces with the Empire, using their war songs to win decisive battles for the Lotus Coalition's enemies. This puts the clan's already small numbers at each other's throats, which is obviously undesirable to any clan leader and to the heads of the Lotus Coalition.



For the Winds, it doesn't matter who wins the war, as long as the Dancers are knocked down from their musical pedestals or destroyed entirely. Quite ironically, the two clans would complement each other quite well if they could get past their differences. Every dancer needs a good song, after all.

## CLAN GIFT AND TRIGGER

◆ **Gift - Flawless Notes:** Winds are trained to pick apart every sound as they hear it, allowing them to dissect individuals in a conversation or hear things much farther than others. To reflect this, they receive +2 Perception for any hearing checks. They also have strong lung capacities, causing the Deprived Condition to fade twice as fast.

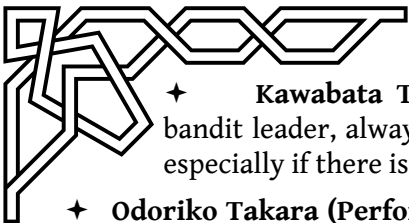
◆ **Trigger - We Seek No Reward:** It is hard to listen to the Winds of Aion and not want to reward them with some token of appreciation. The Dancers have told the world that money is suitable, but the Winds reject this idea with disgust. Gain 1 Karma when they react poorly to the idea of taking money for their art, causing tension and conflict.

## CONTACTS

◆ **Haruguchi Gennai (Survival):** He is a hermit who lives in the forests far away from civilization. Gennai is adept at many types of traps.

◆ **Kimiyama Sawao (Knowledge):** An avid collector of priceless musical artifacts, who has always wanted to get his hands on a war flute.

◆ **Motoori Miya (Fighting):** A former soldier for the Izou, Miya now serves as a mercenary, but is very particular about the jobs she takes.



✦ **Kawabata Toichi (Persuade):** A local bandit leader, always looking to make a deal... especially if there is money involved.

- ✦ **Odoriko Takara (Perform):** She is a Blazing Dancer who is always interested in learning new performance styles. She could bridge the gap between the two clans.
- ✦ **Gachingachin Akuro (Discipline):** An elder of the Winds of Aion, her mastery of focus and peace through music is without bounds.

## BONDS

- ✦ *Choose one ninja who prefers the talents of the Blazing Dancers to that of the Winds.*
- ✦ *Choose one ninja who you see as confusing fame for power.*
- ✦ *Choose one ninja who you would love to perform beside, but something is holding you back.*

## WAY OF DEADLY

### CRESCENDOS

Element: Water

**Training:** The Pipers train rigorously in subtle and fundamental breathing exercises. They form a supernatural connection with the air around them. On a Boost the ninja may re-center themselves and drop any mental Condition they currently have by 1.

**Backfire:** The ninja's breath escapes them. Each time this happens they suffer a cumulative -1 Perform penalty for the remainder of the scene.

### BASIC JUTSU

- ✦ **Fine Ear (Yin + Perception):** This jutsu may be triggered reflexively when the ninja hears a noise. On a success, the ninja analyzes exactly what made the sound, the direction and general distance the sound came from and any words spoken are clearly discernible. On a Boost, the location of the sound is pinpointed so precisely that the ninja gains a +2 bonus to find or launch an attack against the spot without even seeing it.

- ✦ **Long Breath (Yin + Fortitude):** The wind dances in the ninja's lungs. They can hold their breath for minutes equal to successes gained. For that same time, if they can breathe normally they gain a +2 bonus to resist exhaustion from Athletics or Perform.
- ✦ **Muting Technique (Yin + Intimidation):** With a wave, any sound from the target is swept far away on a gentle gust of air. This is activated as a Defense, and counts as a Parry against a mental attack using a voice (or a magical attack using sound). On a Boost, the target is silenced for the rest of the scene, unable to make attacks with their voice and speaking in a barely audible, hoarse whisper.
- ✦ **Perfect Song (Yin + Perform):** The magic of the wind flows through a flute or reed instrument creating a crisp, strong and beautiful sound. The ninja gains a +2 bonus to any combo using the instrument, including activating other jutsu, on a number of checks equal to the successes gained.
- ✦ **Sound Deflection (Yang + Perform):** A blast of sound turns blades or shunts blows. This is activated as a Defense, and counts as a Parry with a weapon. On a Boost, the attacker suffers a Sensory Loss 1 Condition for being deafened.

### MEDIAN JUTSU

- ✦ **Calm Song (Yin + Perform):** Requires Perfect Song. Soothing melodies calm ill-tempered hot-heads and aid in keeping the peace. So long as the ninja sustains the song, all physical attacks by those who can hear it suffer a -2 penalty.
- ✦ **Cutting Note (Yang + Perform):** Requires Sound Deflection. The ninja blasts out a note so sharp it can slice targets in half. The note deals 2 damage with the Sharp quality (NC2E, pg. 74) against a target up to Far Range. Targets protected by Cover still take half damage, since the notes always penetrate.
- ✦ **Shockwave Punch (Yang + Fighting):** The winds swirl around the ninja's limbs, lending them surprising explosive power to a number of attacks equal to successes gained. Any defense against the ninja's attacks suffers a -1 penalty and the target is knocked down and hurled (Yang x5 ft.) away when struck. On a Boost, the target is thrown twice the distance.



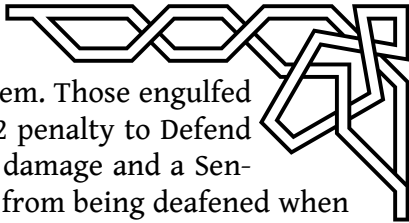
- ✦ **Sound Barrier (Yang + Discipline):** Requires Sound Deflection. A visible dome of tangible sound envelops the ninja and those nearby, up to (Yang x10ft) radius. For as long as the ninja keeps performing, they and anyone Close gain +3 Armor from attacks outside this Range. **Note:** Once an enemy moves Close the barrier no longer protects against them, and now protects the enemy from attacks outside the barrier as well. On a Boost, the barrier also stops Movement, and requires a Tough (3) Strength check to slip or push inside.
- ✦ **War Song (Yang + Perform):** Requires Perfect Song. Lively rhythms inspire the ninja's allies in battle. So long as the ninja sustains the song, all physical attacks by allies who can hear it gain a +2 bonus. On a Boost, physical defenses also gain a +1 bonus.

## ADVANCED JUTSU

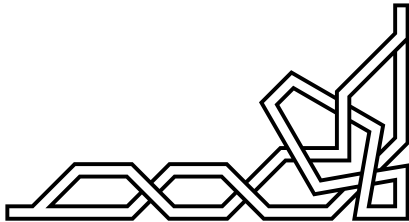
- ✦ **Breathless Note (Yin + Intimidation):** Requires Muting Technique. The target begins to drown in sound, their breath literally stolen away. The jutsu activation check is also an attack, and if it hits, the target suffers a Deprived 1 Condition. Each round, for as long as the ninja continues playing, the condition increases by 1 until it hits the maximum of 5, at which time the target begins suffering 1 damage each Round instead.
- ✦ **Crashing Note (Yang + Perform):** Requires Cutting Note. The ninja channels their magic into a single cacophonous blast. Treat the activation of this jutsu as a physical attack against a Far target

### KEEPING THE NOTE GOING

Some of the jutsu practiced by the Winds of Aion require them to keep a note going continuously for effect. Despite the imagery, this far from removes the ninja from the battle as they provide fanfare. What this requires from the character is use of their Standard Action each Round to keep the note going. Use of Dynamic Actions means they can use any number of other Actions outside of their Standard Action of keeping their note.



and everyone Near them. Those engulfed in the note suffer a -2 penalty to Defend against it, and take 4 damage and a Sensory Loss 2 Condition from being deafened when hit. A successful Defense means no damage, but the victims still suffer a Sensory Loss 1 Condition.

- ✦ **Dissonant Song (Yang + Perform):** Requires Long Breath. Surviving this jutsu is considered a rite of passage within the Winds of Aion. The ninja plays a protracted song with piercing notes. Those unfamiliar with molding ki merely find the song uncomfortable, but those who are, can hear and appreciate its finer melodies and its deadly power. Once activated, anyone Near or closer with Ki suffers 2 damage unless they beat the ninja's successes with a Yin + Discipline check. If there is a Backfire the song has no power at all and deals no damage. Anyone with Ki who can listen quietly to the entire refrain and survive earns the grudging respect of the Pipers.
  - ✦ **Puppeteer's Rhythm (Yin + Persuade):** Requires Calm Song or War Song. Insidious and insistent music gets inside the target's head, and soon they are dancing to the ninja's tune. If affected, the target loses their Standard Action, and may use only Dynamic Actions. The ninja may use their own Dynamic Actions to force the target to perform an Action, or sacrifice 1 Dynamic Action to eliminate two of the target's Dynamic Actions. This effect continues until the ninja stops the music or the target can no longer hear it. On a Boost, the ninja may affect all animals of a single species within hearing range or may affect (Yin) additional humanoid targets.
  - ✦ **Whirling Winds (Yang + Survival):** Requires Shockwave Punch. The ninja calls out to the winds, and the winds answer as a devastating storm of tornadoes. The storm lasts for Rounds equal to the successes gained. During the storm, on each character's Initiative they must make a Moderate (2) Fortitude + Survival check or suffer 2 damage and a cumulative Dazed 1 Condition.
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# ADVENTURE: SWITCHING RHYTHM

## MISSION BACKGROUND

Saya Yusada, a ninja of the Virtuous Body Gardeners, was recently captured by the Izou army and quickly sentenced to hang as an example to other ninja. Other Inks were devastated by the news, as she is a valued member of the clan with many accomplishments. To rush in and break her out would be far too risky with the number of guards that patrol her prison. The horses kept by the city guard are some of the best in the land, making escape quite unlikely. Thanks to the Blazing Dancers, however, the opportunity for a possible escape has arisen.

Among the Dancers is Kimiko Nakano, a ninja ready to commit seppuku after accidentally killing an innocent bystander of a duel, leaving two children and a grieving wife behind. Her clan requests she stay her hand, however, making a deal with the Inks for her to take their imprisoned member's place. In this way, Nakano's death provides honor for her and freedom for Saya Yusada. She agreed and the two clans began planning.

The Blazing Dancers will soon be headed to the city of Sudarak to hold a parade with the consent of the reigning politicians of the Middle Province. In tow is Kimiko Nakano, the ninja to be swapped, her appearance now a near-mirror image of the

captured Ink, Saya Yusada (a sun and a dragon tattooed on the left side of her face).

A small group of Inks and Dancers are to infiltrate the palace, disguised as dancers and merrymakers, and exchange the two women. Using the cover of the parade, they can then escape over the rooftops and blend back in with the crowd before anyone notices what has transpired.

This is where the adventure starts, and the characters are assembled, hailing from the Ink or Dancer clans (or a mix of the two). If other clans are present for this event, they should have either a strong personal attachment to either Nakano or Yusada or another good reason for them to participate. The characters are given the details of their mission so they can gather supplies, but time is of the essence since the caravan is about to leave. Once the characters are ready, they are beckoned to join the Odoriko caravan heading towards Nando Castle.

## SCENE 1: THE ARRIVAL

It is a few days travel by caravan and the weather holds up well for the journey. The characters are not only briefed on the mission, but also on the parade and the dance movements required to impress the audience

## A HIDDEN STRAND IN THE MIDST

If one of the characters hails from the Hidden Strands of Fate, this is a fine time to pull them aside and give them a message from their clans, containing an extra mission. On the 3rd Floor of the prison tower is a man the Hidden Strands wish to be set free. His name is Kisho, and that is all the character is told. It is up to the character to figure out how to pull this off, but it is worth a lot to the Strand elders if they can.

and allow them to slip away when the time is right. Their elders (possibly Nozomi Hayakawa or Nakajima Kayanwe) urge the characters to keep their infiltration of the castle as secret as possible. If intruders are detected, then those using celebrations to hide their action in this city would face harsher scrutiny in the future. Likewise, the Inks have a weak presence in the Middle Province and a reprisal against them could cost many lives. They instruct the characters to stick close to Nakano and make sure she gets into her new cell safely, as not to provoke suspicion. Details and NPCs can be fleshed out more if the players are interested in romantic side quests, finding new friends or sidekicks, fascinating locales, or learning more about each other and their respective clans.

## THE PLAN AND A CHALLENGE

When the caravan arrives, it is late in the day and the Dancers and disguised Inks make camp for the night. Plans are discussed as the elders head into the town of Sudarak to talk to Lord Ikku, who invited the Odoriko, about the parade routes. The characters are told that steel cables are being set up around the city for decoration, but also for them to use in their escape from the prison tower. The steel cable is easier to walk on than a regular rope and cannot be easily untied or set aflame. One will be set up outside the window on the top floor of the tower where Yusada is being held. Once the switch has transpired, the characters can use the wire to tight-rope walk to the other side and escape through the con-

nected servant's quarters.

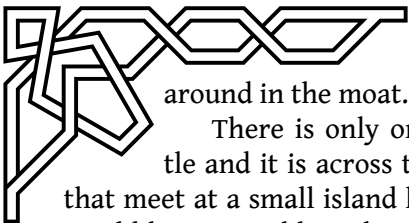
The rest of the night is spent in rehearsal, followed by a late night of stories for locals and drinking. A young man named Jayun Saihan approaches the group and offers to spar with whoever would like to test their mettle. He does so in an overly polite way, but if turned down he'll just smile and invite the group for drinks instead, telling jokes and enjoying their company for the night. If he is taken up on his offer, he'll try his best to take down his opponent while avoiding any serious injury. If he wins, he offers drinks as above. If he loses, Saihan beams with joy that he is setting up the wire for such great ninja to escape on. GM Note: This is also a great time to introduce any notable NPCs for adventures past this one as a hushed crowd forms rooting for one side or the other.

## LAY OF THE LAND

The morning before the festival, they have time to walk around the city briefly. Sudarak is a mid-sized city surrounded by a tall stone wall and filled with villagers glad to see the caravan. Their main export is wheat and the fields can be seen long before the city looms. The lower class here is a step above many other cities, but there is still a large gap between the classes. A main street runs straight up towards Nando Castle that can be clearly seen in the middle of the city. Other than the fact that everyone is excited for a parade, it is a fairly normal city for the Middle Province region.

Nando Castle is surrounded by a moat the size of a small lake. From across the water, the castle appears to be floating on its own reflection. With a stone base that slopes steeply nearly 40ft up towards the wooden walls of the structure, Nando Castle looks nearly impervious to invasion by outside forces. Gun slits line the outside walls and there are wider windows where boiling oil could be dumped upon direct attackers. There are 12 different buildings that make up the castle. It doesn't take a ninja's eye to see that the castle would be difficult to break into by conventional means.

Approaching the night of the grand festival, there are numerous small boats in the moat being paddled by servants. They are illuminated by orange lanterns that give the illusion of them being huge fireflies looking for food on the surface of the water. The boats have one couple each along with the paddler, but the boat could hold up to 5 people altogether if needed. There are a total of 5 boats meandering



around in the moat.

There is only one entrance to Nando Castle and it is across two individual drawbridges that meet at a small island halfway across the moat. It would be impossible to have a single bridge cover the moat's length while still being able to be raised. The 10ft x 20ft island has only the indents in the ground to receive both ends of the bridge, which will stay lowered throughout the festival unless an alarm is raised. If an alarm is sounded, nearby guards race to raise the bridges, and they may or may not wait for the bridges to be clear beforehand (depending on the severity). If the bridges have to go up due to an alarm, plenty of people are likely to fall into the moat where crocodiles (Larger Animals, NC2E, pg. 159) make short work of those not saved by more valiant characters.

The castle itself could be called a village, as its size is certainly comparable. The drawbridge empties directly into a large courtyard, which is filled with smiling people who bounce and dance when the parade comes in. There are hanging banners welcoming the dancers and fireworks going off constantly. Only the upper class is allowed inside the walls of the fortress to see the height of the parade. All other citizens must stay on the bridge or back in the town itself. The road into the castle opens up into a large plaza with many balconies and doors into individual compartments of the castle. There isn't an easy way to navigate the perimeter of the castle from the inside, although one could walk along the balconies on the higher floors.

## SCENE 2: THE PARADE

The brightly costumed Blazing Dancers and the disguised Inks gather in the town square to perform a brief play that explains the nature of the following parade. The 20-minute tale tells of a fish that tricks a fisherman into giving it more food than it needed. The fisherman's whole village ended up dumping their food into the sea to feed the fish (now overweight and unable to feed itself), and then both sides die out. The fish learns his lesson, and then the parade starts up in full fashion. The Dancers begin twirling and jumping motions in time with the musical accompaniment that follows along with them in the parade. The Inks move in a serpentine formation and tell the

### **SAIHAN (WARRIOR)**

As a relatively new addition to the Blazing Dancers, Saihan has yet to prove himself in the field with a mission. He was raised in the Wu Ji Theater and enjoyed many years of performing before being inducted into the ranks of the Blazing Dancers. He is eager to prove his usefulness and tries to be nice to everyone he can.

**Health:** 8 **Psyche:** 6

**Attack:** 6 **Actions:** 1

**Defense:** 6 **Armor:** 1

**Initiative:** 7 **Damage:** +1

**Dynamic Actions:** 2

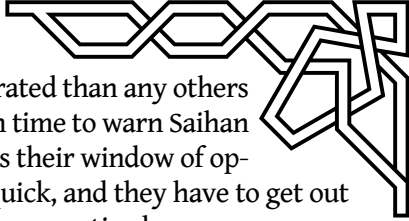

**Suggested Skills: (3 dice):** Athletics, Discipline, Fighting, Holistics, Knowledge, Marksman, Perception, Perform, Stealth, Survival

### **TECHNIQUES**

Fighting (+), Perform (+), Knowledge (-), Might (-); Saihan is a great warrior and performer, but is headstrong. Not only is he quicker than he is strong, but his intoxication makes it easy for opponents to outthink him.

story again through their movements while wearing long-sleeved robes and masks to cover their tattoos and faces. Characters that are dancing should make a Moderate (2) Performance + Intuition check to either show off to their fellow dancers or Performance + Stealth to avoid drawing attention to themselves. Some performers walk on tall stilts to conceal characters that couldn't learn the routine.

The parade continues down the main road toward the castle and the brunt of the villagers follow along singing or dancing as well. Characters have the opportunity to talk to each other as long as they make it look as natural as possible (direct communication is seen as unprofessional and could make them stand out). When the crowd hits the drawbridges, there are four guards at the beginning of them that will shove and push the majority of the lower class out so that only the performers and the social elite will be able to fit down the bridge at once. The villagers protest, but do nothing more as they are used to this behavior.



Just before the drawbridge, there are five drunken farmers who are less than pleased that the Dancers have come to their town. They are from a neighboring city where Dancers are rumored to abduct children. One of the Dancers cries out when hit in the eye with an empty bottle thrown by one of the men. The crowd gasps, but ultimately does nothing but berate the men. The characters can react how they please. If a fight breaks out with the drunken men (use Average Citizen stats, NC2E, pg. 159), the guards will arrest everyone involved (including the characters if they reveal anything that could make them appear as ninja). If the group is allowed to attack the men, the guards will only stop it when one of the drunken men is badly wounded. They apologize to the dancer with the new bruise and carry the men away. They can also be made to back away with a Tough (3) Intimidation + Might check (they are full of false courage with their inebriation, making it harder). If the characters are successful, the men frantically apologize before stumbling into the night.

When the parade gets across the moat and stops in the castle plaza, the re-telling of the fish story ends with a climax of the whole procession: fireworks go straight up and all the dancers throw their hands and hats into the air. As the crowd looks up in wonder, the characters have the chance to slip out into the crowd with relative ease. For those who are dancing, a Simple (1) Perform + Stealth check is needed to slip out of their costume, hand it to a fellow dancer and sneak away. Those under the stilts of another performer need to make a Moderate (2) Speed + Stealth check to make it out unseen. Critical failures may knock allies off of their stilts, which makes for a great distraction but also causes chaos around the characters that may delay their plan. Nakano follows the characters' lead.

The crowd makes it difficult for the characters to stay together, as every spectator is tightly packed and constantly shifting to get a better view. Moving within the crowd and staying together without holding hands (or something similar) requires another Moderate (2) Intuition + Stealth. A critical failure may draw ire from the crowd from a crushed foot or the attention of a guard. After all, they're the only people heading the opposite direction than the parade.

If any of the players make a Tough (3) Perception check, they also notice Saihan and four others also leaving the parade and heading towards the servant quarters. With a Boost, the characters also notice one of the guards eyeing Saihan and his team cautiously. This guard is well-

armed and looks more decorated than any others present. There is not enough time to warn Saihan or watch the guard closely as their window of opportunity to sneak away is quick, and they have to get out of the parade before they too are noticed.

## SCENE 3: INFILTRATION

Once out of the crowd, it's not far to the prison block. It is a tall, five-story tower off to the right side of the castle, and still within view of the parade. It has no balconies and it doesn't connect with any other buildings. There are two smiling guards standing in front of the door pointing things out to each other in the parade. They can be distracted, bamboozled, snuck past or a variation on any of those, but if they players engage them in combat and it lasts more than two rounds the soldiers on the balcony will blow their horns as they notice the scuffle.

After getting inside, the players have to locate Yusada who is on the fourth floor. There are eight roaming pairs of guards through the tower and a variety of criminals and wrongly imprisoned others (though it isn't easy to tell the difference between the two). Most of the guards are either chatting with each other, feeding prisoners, giving beatings, threatening prisoners, eating, dealing with prisoners who are yelling insults or doing other things that make a lot of noise. This makes it easy to tell where the guards, who patrol in pairs, are at any time with a Simple (1) Perception + Knowledge check. These guards can be avoided, but if encountered one will fight and the other will raise the alarm.

Once on the 4th floor, it is easy to find Yusada amongst the mostly empty cells. She sits meditating and is surprised to see someone looking just like her. She inquires about what the characters are doing and will be most pleased when told. The lock on her cell requires either a Moderate (2) Crafts + Speed check or the thought of picking a guard's pocket beforehand. Nakano and Yusada exchange a quick bow, clothing and a nod of understanding before switching spots.



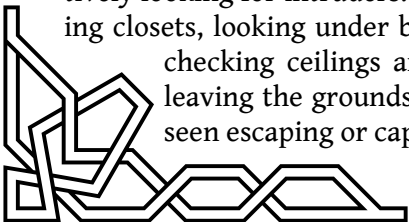
## ONE OF THE TWINS

Of course, as Nakano and Yusada switch places, the characters hear a bird chirping from the far side of the cellblock. Following the sound, they can see a man's arm sticking out of another cell. He appears worried about incoming guards and obviously hasn't eaten in days. He explains that his name is Atsuko Kyokugei, one of the famous Atsuko Twins. Any Dancer instantly knows the name. He was transferred from the prison city to bulk up the 'festivities' of tomorrow's executions. He tells of how he and his sister, Atsuko Kasai, were captured years ago and how he's trying to save her from her inevitable execution in Nanchou. He asks the characters to release him so he can continue his quest. A Simple (1) Holistics + Perception check easily deduces he is nowhere near ready for a prison break - exhaustion, malnutrition, beatings and the soul-breaking labor of Nanchou took their toll and he won't be able to escape without the characters' help. If the characters help free him, the Lords of the city will realize that a prison break occurred and are likely to blame the Blazing Dancers. It will be harder to find open doors in this city and the region. Kyokugei is also quite weak will slow the party down during their escape. The characters need to work out who will either help him walk by supporting him, or who will carry him over the shoulder.

If they opt to not help him, Kyokugei asks them to swear to do everything in their power to help his Sister escape. If they agree, he will sit down and wait for his death without complaint. If they deny his request, he'll try to convince them that the Blazing Dancers need his help to save others of their clan from Nanchou as well. He'll go as far as begging, saying that his sister's life is worth more than any sort of personal honor. The characters will hear his saddened cries as they leave him to die.

## TREADING SOFTLY

If the characters make their presence known in the fortress, escape becomes much more difficult. All off-duty guards enjoying the festival get called to action when they hear the alarms. The guards on duty in the parade area draw their weapons and begin actively looking for intruders: scrutinizing crowds, opening closets, looking under beds, pulling back curtains, checking ceilings and detaining anyone from leaving the grounds until the perpetrators are seen escaping or captured.






## KISHO



If any of the characters attempt to release the prisoner known as Kisho from the 3rd floor, this is a dangerous proposition. Finding his cell door is easy enough; it's the one with dried blood in the joints and at the base, giving the impression that he has likely killed many a guard who visits him. Picking the lock isn't an easy feat, requiring a Challenging (4) Crafts + Speed check. Breaking down the door over all is all but impossible as well, as the door has also been reinforced for additional security. However, finding a guard, the characters may be able to lift the cell key from them. The key itself has only been entrusted to a single guard, however, so upon defeating a guard the character may make a Moderate (2) Intuition + Perception check to see if they can find it. On a success, they do, and unlocking the door becomes much easier.

The man inside wears a straightjacket and a mask that protect others from his bite, but as his door opens, he bulges his muscles and breaks free of it, lunging forward at the characters. Once he gets a good look at those who freed him, he rips off his mask, revealing sharpened teeth and a sly smile and says, "Thank you." Kisho then runs to the nearest window and leaps out, but his movements are so fast that following him is not an option.

The guard squads increase from two to four soldiers and the boats on the moat are quickly paddled back to shore. Shortly after the alarm, the bridges raise and turn the possible bridge escape into a race across the moat with fifteen crocodiles released into the moat to prevent anyone from swimming to shore. The guards care little for the guides manning the boats. The crocodiles will actively pursue anything fleeing up onto land as well unless it will clearly outpace them.

The guards also start looking on the roofs of the different levels of the castle, locking doors and running instead of walking. One elite guard joins up with every squad of regular guards to give them a sense of direction.

## ADVENTURE - SWITCHING RHYTHM

Keep in mind that the guards don't know it is a jail-break. Thinking it's an attack, they are likely to concentrate their numbers on the area that the alarm was pulled and where Lord Ikku is. Once the alarm is officially raised, he will flee under escort to the treasury where he and his guards will lock themselves inside until the secret password is given.

To provide some time, the Dancers in the square below will also pull out horns that make a similar sound. With all of them blowing horns to drown out the original alarm, it takes 5 Rounds for the guards to silence the Dancers to see if there is an alarm going. Hopefully in that time the guard who tried to alert his fellows has been silenced.

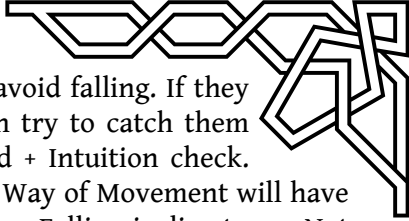
A few methods of escape include:

- ✦ **The Moat:** Swim fast as the crocodiles are not far behind.
- ✦ **Rooftops:** Moderate (2) Athletics + Might checks to leap the big gaps between roofs and Movement checks to outrun any pursuers. One big leap down can lead to a sword fight with 4 guards across the drawbridges and into the city.
- ✦ **Jutsu:** There are tons of powers that can get most ninjas out of a bind. Use them if you have them.

## SCENE 4: ESCAPE

To escape, the characters need to go upstairs to the top floor to find a room that the guards use to relax. It is thankfully empty at this point of the parade. If they open the window, they'll see a grappling hook wrapped around a support beam for the wooden awning with the wire running nearly 50ft down to the servant's quarters on the fourth floor. Saihan can be seen in the window urging the characters down the wire. The parade continues down below with smaller crowds being shown masks that have been decorated by Inks and gowns made by Dancers. Plays and jokes are being told and performed and music still mixes with laughter and cheers from the villagers.

Those who walk the wire as a tightrope need to make a Moderate (2) Athletics + Speed check to make it across while anyone going hand-over-hand needs to make a Moderate (2) Strength check instead. Whoever is carrying Atsuko Kyokugei (if they brought him) requires a Tough (3) check instead. Unless the character gets a Critical Failure, they should have a second chance



to grab on to the wire to avoid falling. If they fall, another character can try to catch them with a Moderate (2) Speed + Intuition check. Anyone with access to the Way of Movement will have a much easier time crossing. Falling is disastrous. Not only does the character fall 70ft (and take damage), but they crash into the crowd below. This alerts the entire fortress to what is going on, as they wonder where the (possibly) dead ninja just came from.

Once the first person has started down the wire, Saihan disappears from the window somewhat suddenly. Reaching the halfway point, they see Saihan get shoved back past the window by an unseen assailant. The Executioner (NC2E, pg. 163) known as Hukuri appears just as Saihan smashes the guard's horn on the windowsill before being kicked in the face. He falls to the floor as Hukuri looks towards the characters on the wire. Four guards arrive on the scene with weapons drawn.

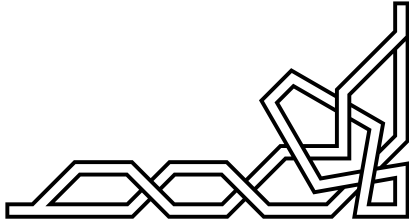
Hukuri kicks the blade embedded in the wall that is attached to the wire. Everyone on the wire has to make another check (as above) to see if they fall off once more. Once Hukuri realizes the blade will not budge, he draws his sword and comes out on the wire to face the characters, followed by four of his guards (use Trained Guards (Squad), NC2E, pg. 161).

## TIGHTROPE

### (NEW DYNAMIC ENVIRONMENT)

**Element:** Fire

The ninja and their opponents have found themselves fighting on a thin tightrope. Every step or movement has the opportunity for tragic failure or amazing success as they trade blows with one another high in the air. After the first player has confirmed their character is walking across first, they are deemed first in line. After that, the other characters are lined up behind them on the tightrope in order of Initiative. Without changing order or using special abilities, only the character at the front may exchange close combat blows, while others behind the first ninja are limited to ranged abilities.





## DYNAMICS

During the battle, Dynamic Actions can be spent to swap places with the character next to them, moving either front or back. This could be one ninja swinging underneath and landing in their new position or perhaps a leap frog over the character in front of them. In any case, this assumes both characters have achieved the proper footing to switch positions without fear of falling. Attempting a switch without a Dynamic Action requires a Tough (3) Athletics + Speed check to keep from falling. Keep in mind that position switches can also be done with opponents, but this may put you between enemies, which is very dangerous.

At any time that a character or Extra gets a Boost, they may declare the target is knocked off the tightrope. Any other character may spend a Dynamic Action to catch them and position the falling character behind them in line.

Again, only the person in front can engage in close combat attacks, and is most likely to be fighting the captain of the guard, Hukuri. Those attempting ranged attacks suffer a -1 penalty for each person in front of them they want to avoid hitting. For instance, a ninja in third position would take a -2 penalty to avoid the ninja in second and first position and strike one of their opponents. Every time damage is taken, an attack misses its intended target or an attack is Dodged, the attacker or whoever took damage must make another check to stay on the wire.

## FINALE

The Dynamic Environment ends when the ninja make it to the other side or all of the enemies are defeated. With luck, the fight ends without any bodies falling on the crowd below, which would sound the alarms and a general uproar. This may require defeating an enemy and one of the ninja grabbing them to keep them from falling. One final Moderate (2) Athletics + Speed check should be called to finish the walk across the tightrope and reach the other side.

Once the guards are out of the way, they can help Saihan to his feet and rouse the rest of his team who have been knocked out. The bodies of the guards can be hidden to prevent the alarm going off right after they leave, or they can be smuggled out using the servant's bed sheets. No one will question what the characters are carrying during the confu-

sion of the festival outside. Saihan can lead everyone outside to a large batch of Dancers who then throw colorful cloaks over them to blend them back in with the parade again. This time, however, it is moving out of the castle.

## OPTIONAL: OFF THE BEATEN PATH

Some characters may want to do more while they are inside Nando Castle. After all, they are prowling around in a castle brimming with the richest folks in the land, so a little exploring can be quite rewarding if one has the time. Of course, the clans involved would take a dim view of any character putting the mission in jeopardy just to go raid the lord's coffers or sweet-talk a chambermaid, but a wandering eye is hard to investigate if there is no evidence of it. All it takes to generate interest is a rumor from a passing ninja before the mission, an overheard guard or even just someone walking out of a door and locking it behind them to get them interested in the simplest things. Below are some places of interest in the castle for the adventurous.

✦ **Guard Quarters:** Full of standard equipment for the guards - polearms, swords, armor, helmets, whistles, personal possessions and a firearm or two if enough time is spent breaking into personal chests (Tough (3) Crafts + Knowledge). The room, however, is full of a dozen guards, unless the alarm is blaring and they have left to be on alert. In this instance, there are only two keeping a watch at the door. They won't let anyone in who is not wearing a guard uniform. The quarters are located just outside of the plaza in the center of the main floor.

✦ **Lord Ikku's Room:** Silk sheets, gold inlaid lanterns, aged alcohol, fine tea and amazing clothes are but a few things to be found in the personal quarters of the lord. This room is guarded by elite castle guards who would be executed if anything were to be found missing, so they will defend it with their lives. There are ten guards stationed outside who will enter the room when they hear the alarm and stay in a battle-ready formation until called down by Ikku himself. Royal jewelry is worth top-dollar, but is usual-



ly not worth the price of getting it. Most locals won't take the jewelry, fearing their lord's wrath for dealing with thieves, and would quickly rush to alert the guards in hopes of a reward of land. Outside the region, it could gain them a temporary Lord Ikku's Money (Persuade) Ally with a one-time use or could be donated to the Lotus Coalition to help to fund more missions. Stealing the Lord's personal possessions is more than enough to end up on a wanted poster for years to come, however. The lord's chambers are on the backside of the castle overlooking the water on the top floor. It shares the floor with the library, but is much larger.

✦ **The Library:** Old tomes and official secrets of the state wait in the library. If an alarm is raised and the players fear retribution, a Moderate (2) Knowledge + Perception check and a little time would be enough to find incriminating paperwork involving multiple embezzlement plans and bribes. If blackmailed with the information, Ikku will reluctantly pull strings for the clans. That is, until he figures out who they are and sends soldiers to ransack their homes and kill everyone they love. If the info were to come to light, Ikku would resign but manage to avoid execution. There are also detailed books on most subjects that would provide +2 Knowledge checks when consulting them. The library is on the top floor with an amazing view of the surrounding area.

✦ **The Stables:** The specially bred horses here really are some of the best in the land. They are guarded by at least five men. With one of these horses, a fast getaway is all but ensured. The stables are located on the ground floor away from the main entrance.

## SCENE 5: WRAP UP

Getting back to the caravan takes about 30 minutes. Afterwards, Yusada is reunited with the Virtuous Body Gardeners, and she thanks the characters profusely. Her master gifts a ceremonial, master-crafted katana with a stylized dragon hilt to the group to do with what they will and their elders congratulate them as well, depending on how silent they were and even more so if they managed to get to any of the other areas in the

Castle. Saihan is demoted based on his performance and putting the mission in jeopardy (if he and his team survived). The characters are free to respond as they wish.

If the characters were detected, the news of a failed assassination attempt on Lord Ikku's life by Inks circulates the upper class and the entire region. Likewise, a story of a young man avenging the death of his mother (ruthlessly murdered by the guards) makes the rounds among the lower class. The Inks are thought of as cut-throats by the rich and dramatic heroes by the poor.

Nakano is executed the next day by being hung. Her sister attends the 'festivities' and the characters are welcome to do the same. The question is: where are the ninja heading to next?

✦ **Saihan:** Maybe there is a quest Saihan must undertake to get his honor back for the clan. Are the characters interested in helping him?

✦ **Kyokugei:** The esteemed warrior must be nursed back to health, which could take weeks. Once done, however, the quest to save his sister can commence. He obviously requests the assistance of the ninja who made it possible for him to go on this mission in the first place.

✦ **Kisho:** A murderous rampage has erupted in the Bridge to the World Province, all with chunks bitten out of each of the victims. The ninja could be sent to track down the dreaded Kisho and put an end to him, but what other plans do the Hidden Strands have up their sleeves.

## EXPERIENCE

+1	Performed alongside the Dancers without issue
+1	Win Duel with Saihan
+1	Free Atsuko Kyokugei
+1	Investigate any of the side locations
+1	Get out without the alarm being sounded

# ASAHARA TENSEI

## ELEMENT: WOOD, TEMPERAMENT: PERFECTIONIST

- ◆ **Gift:** Loves to do things perfectly. +1 Speed to repeat a successful combo (non-cumulative).
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if he becomes fixated and won't stop until it's perfect.

## PROFESSION: ENTERTAINER, FOCUS: MUSICIAN

- ◆ **Gift:** He is an expert musician. +1 Crafts to write/analyze music.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when being in the spotlight proves to be detrimental to the ninja or thier squad.

## TRAGEDY: TORMENTED MIND, AFFLICTION: JOYLESS

- ◆ **Gift:** It is hard for them to feel happiness in this day and age. Onlookers suffer -1 Empathy to detect anything but apathy.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if their apathy gets in the way of a mission or causes problems.

## WARTIME ROLE: MEDIC, TITLE: BONESETTER

- ◆ **Gift:** Knows the long arduous hours of medical work. +1 Discipline to stay awake.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if a surgery fails and the character could have stopped it.

## CLAN: WINDS OF AION

- ◆ **Clan Gift - Flawless Notes:** +2 Perception for hearing checks due to their great ear. Also, Deprived Conditions fade twice as fast.
- ◆ **Clan Trigger - We Seek No Reward:** Gain 1 Karma when the ninja reacts poorly to being treated like a common street performer.

## CONTACTS

- ◆ **Ally: Motoori Miya (Fighting):** A former soldier for the Izou, Miya now serves as a mercenary, but is very particular about the jobs she takes.
- ◆ **Rival: Odoriko Takara (Perform):** She is a Blazing Dancer who is always interested in learning new performance styles. She could bridge the gap between the two clans.

## MARTIAL TRAINING

- ◆ **Advantageous Strike 2 (Fox Style):** When attacked, the ninja receives a +1 bonus to their next attack against the attacker for each 1 result rolled (maximum of +4).

## WAY OF DEADLY CRESCENDOS

**Training:** On a Boost, they may reduce any Mental Condition they currently have by 1.

**Backfire:** Cumulative -1 Perform from falling out of sync.

- ◆ **Fine Ear (Basic, Yin + Perception):** Recognize any sound, where it came from and gain +2 bonus to track it.
- ◆ **Sound Deflection (Basic, Yang + Perform):** Defense ability with sound. Boost = attacker suffers Sensory Loss 1 Condition.
- ◆ **Sound Barrier (Med, Yang + Perform):** (Yang x10ft.) radius dome of sound creates Armor 3 for those inside from attacks from the outside. Boost = No one can move through the barrier.

## WAY OF THE WATER

**Training:** +2 bonus to next Defense.

**Backfire:** -1 penalty to Movement and Defense.

- ◆ **Pull of the Deep (Med, Yin + Perception):** Increases humidity for (Yin x10ft.) radius, creating clinging mists. All Move Actions suffer a -1 penalty for the Battle.

## STATS OF NOTE

**Health:** 7, **Psyche:** 6, **Yang:** 1, **Yin:** 2, **Rank:** 1, **Initiative:** 7, **Dynamic Actions:** 1, **Dynamic Dice:** 3, **Strength:** 0, **Movement:** 7, **Weapon:** War Flute (Quick, Blunt)

Tensei was taught his craft by the world-renowned Asahara Oharu, his mother. His skill on the flute was beat into him to the point where only perfection is allowed in his mind. Tensei has traveled the world performing his beautiful music for people who would rather see dancers gyrate, and the lack of respect for the music of the Winds of Aion has crushed his soul. No amount of happiness cracks his cold demeanor now.

When the war started, he saw a place for himself in the Lotus Coalition, patching up warriors and playing them to a calm state while they heal. When called on to do so, he too has moved to the front lines, using his masterful fox style martial arts to his great benefit. He has few friends, but if someone earns his respect, he is intensely loyal.



## SKILLS

Athletics 0, Crafts 1, Deception 2, Discipline 1, Empathy 2 (What do they want to hear?), Fighting 0, Fortitude 2, Holistics 2, Intimidation 0, Intuition 2, Knowledge 2, Marksman 2, Might 0, Perception 3, Perform 4, Persuade 1, Speed 2, Stealth 3 (Shadowing), Survival 1, Travel 0

# KANBUKO JINCHI

## ELEMENT: METAL, TEMPERAMENT: METICULOUS

- ◆ **Gift:** Her eye for detail gives a +1 Marksman to hit enemies at Distant Range.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when missing a crucial detail hurts the group in devastating ways.

## PROFESSION: ARTISAN, FOCUS: ARTIST

- ◆ **Gift:** She has devoted her life to art and expressing emotion. +1 Empathy for reading/understanding others emotions.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when she succumbs to an emotional outburst that is detrimental to the group.

## TRAGEDY: CIVIL DISCORD, AFFLICTION: WANTED

- ◆ **Gift:** The Empire has her number, so she's always looking over her shoulder. +1 Athletics to evade the law.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if she gets recognized and things go badly.

## WARTIME ROLE: COMMANDER, TITLE: STRATEGIST

- ◆ **Gift:** Knows the historical significance of battles. +1 Knowledge to recall advantages or disadvantages of battle plans
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if a strategy she created ends poorly for the group.

## CLAN: GRACIOUS ILLUSTRATORS

- ◆ **Clan Gift - Painter's Blood:** +1 Crafts for creating art and may sacrifice 1 Health for 2 successes on a jutsu activation check.
- ◆ **Clan Trigger - Blank Stare:** Gain 1 Karma when her apathetic appearance is unsettling and causes issues.

## CONTACTS

- ◆ **Ally: Sasada Kenzan (Speed):** He's an Izou messenger who is as fast as they come, but also suffers from a poor sense of direction. Poor Kenzan.
- ◆ **Rival: Nozaki Yasuoka (Fighting):** A bounty hunter, always on the lookout for his next score.

## MARTIAL TRAINING

- ◆ **Portents 1:** Sense Ki and Divination. (Immune to ambush, and +1 to find/avoid traps. May interpret dreams, and significance of them)
- ◆ **Blood Strike 1 (Scorpion Style):** May sacrifice 1 Health for +1 damage on an attack.

## WAY OF 18 STROKES

**Training:** On a Boost, they either recover 1 Health spent on Clan Gift or gain +2 Initiative for the Battle.

**Backfire:** Suffers -1 Crafts and -2 Initiative.

- ◆ **Lesser Zhu Beasts (Basic, Yang + Crafts):** Creates painted beast to fight for them (Lesser Animal).
- ◆ **Carrier's Wings (Med, Yang + Crafts):** Creates a large flying bird they may ride at Movement + (Successes). Has 3 Health.

## WAY OF METAL

**Training:** +1 bonus with Metal tools/weapons.

**Backfire:** -1 penalty to use metal tools/weapons, and -1 to Block or Brace against them.

- ◆ **Magnetic Repulsion (Adv, Yin + Discipline):** +1 bonus on attack with metal weapons and -2 penalty for metal weapons to hit the ninja.

## STATS OF NOTE

**Health:** 6, **Psyche:** 9, **Yang:** 1, **Yin:** 2, **Rank:** 1, **Initiative:** 8, **Dynamic Actions:** 1, **Dynamic Dice:** 3, **Strength:** 2, **Movement:** 9, **Weapon:** Brush Bo (Skilled -18 Strokes, Blunt)

Living the life of fantastic artist ninja made Jinchi and her family well-loved by surrounding villages who enjoyed the beauty they brought to the world. The Gracious Illustrators, however, were one of the first clans hunted by the Empire. Jinchi was there to see the death and brutality of the massacre of her hidden village, but they went underground quickly to avoid being completely destroyed.

Jinchi, too, went on the run and hid among a collection of artists until the Lotus Coalition found her. They look to her for her keen eye for detail and her mind for strategy, two things that could have helped her clan if the attacks from the Empire could have been foretold soon enough. Instead of other artists, she serves beside self-centered and often childish ninja who are playing at war without truly understanding the stakes. She hopes to be able to defeat the Empire and return to her old life quickly.



## SKILLS

Athletics 1, Crafts 3, Deception 2, Discipline 4 (vs. Fear), Empathy 0, Fighting 2, Fortitude 1, Holistics 0, Intimidation 2, Intuition 2, Knowledge 2, Marksman 0, Might 1, Perception 3, Perform 2, Persuade 0, Speed 3 (Fast Art), Stealth 0, Survival 0, Travel 2

# KATSU SOFU

## ELEMENT: EARTH, TEMPERAMENT: COLLECTOR

- ◆ **Gift:** Loves to add to his trinket collection. +1 Perception to find something missing from a scene.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if he cannot resist going after an object for his collection and it brings trouble.

## PROFESSION: ENTERTAINER, FOCUS: MUSICIAN

- ◆ **Gift:** He is an expert musician. +1 Crafts to write/analyze music.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when being in the spotlight proves to be detrimental to the ninja or their squad.

## TRAGEDY: UNENDING STIGMA, AFFLICTION: ENEMY

- ◆ **Gift:** He has made powerful enemies. +1 Persuade to get time-sensitive info out of Contacts.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when his enemy catches up to him and causes issues.

## WARTIME ROLE: VILLAGER, TITLE: TEACHER

- ◆ **Gift:** He's very good at giving information. +1 Knowledge during teachable moments.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if his know-it-all interference causes tension and problems.

## CLAN: BLAZING DANCERS

- ◆ **Clan Gift - Performance Mastery (Strings):** +1 bonus to any check that can use their specialty. +2 if used with Perform.
- ◆ **Clan Trigger - Disrespected:** Gain 1 Karma when the clan's bad reputation puts them in a bad situation.

## CONTACTS

- ◆ **Ally: Takahashi Tani (Fortitude):** A star of the Empire, Tani is a champion eater despite being a tiny woman.
- ◆ **Ally: Network of Spies (Performing Troupe).**
- ◆ **Rival: Masumi Ichiro (Speed):** When messages need delivering, he is the one to call.

## MARTIAL TRAINING

- ◆ **Trap Master 1:** -1 Difficulty for making Immobilize or Capture Traps.
- ◆ **Master of Spies 1:** Gains Performing Troupe as an Ally.

## WAY OF THE IMMACULATE SHOW

**Training:** Illusions of the story they are trying to tell come to life.

**Backfire:** -2 Initiative and audience displeasure.

- ◆ **The Perfect Show (Basic, Yang + Perform):** Gains +2 bonus to next Perform check.
- ◆ **Poet's Ear (Basic, Yin + Knowledge):** Instantly memorize lyrics, instructions or even a conversation.
- ◆ **Understudy (Adv, Yang + Perception):** Pick a target. The ninja may mimic target's voice and mannerisms, and may roll any Skill at the target's level. May even attempt to use a jutsu the target has used this Scene. +2 Deception to pretend to be the target.

## WAY OF THE WATER

**Training:** +2 bonus to next Defense.

**Backfire:** -1 penalty to Movement and Defense.

- ◆ **Wind at the Back (Basic, Yang + Travel):** Grants good luck while traveling. +2 bonus for either River or Mountain stage of a Journey.

## STATS OF NOTE

**Health:** 8, **Psyche:** 5, **Yang:** 2, **Yin:** 1, **Rank:** 1, **Initiative:** 8, **Dynamic Actions:** 1, **Dynamic Dice:** 3, **Strength:** 1, **Movement:** 7, **Weapon:** Bo (Blunt, Reach)

Sofu has seen everything the world has to offer and then some. Once a member of the Bellows, he traveled all over the empire and engaged in every type of debauchery he could get his hands on, including drugs, women and gambling. Once reported to the Dancer masters, Sofu was shamed and sent to Kokyuryu for nearly ten years to temper his emotions and tame his desires. He later rejoined the Blazing Dancers as a caravan driver and put his worldly knowledge to use. He now ferries the Odoriko's movers and shakers to where they are best suited.

Sofu is an older man who looks even more aged than he truly is. His years at Kokyuryu have dulled his passions for some things, but the Wu Ji Theater and the acts performed there put fire in his heart still. He has a beard past his knees and small, squinting blue eyes, though he is completely bald.



## SKILLS

Athletics 0, Crafts 1, Deception 1, Discipline 0, Empathy 2, Fighting 2, Fortitude 3, Holistics 1, Intimidation 0, Intuition 3, Knowledge 2 (Izou Locales), Marksman 1, Might 1, Perception 2, Perform 3, Persuade 1, Speed 2, Stealth 1, Survival 1, Travel 3 (Wagons)

# MOUKA YUUHI

## ELEMENT: EARTH, TEMPERAMENT: RESPONSIBLE

- ◆ **Gift:** He helps others to live a good life. +1 Persuade to get others to do the right thing.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if he pays for someone else's mistake.

## PROFESSION: FARMER, FOCUS: HERDER

- ◆ **Gift:** Travels with cattle, keeping them hidden from predators. +1 Stealth in fields and forests.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when he sticks out in urban settings.

## TRAGEDY: CIVIL DISCORD, AFFLICTION: CONSCRIPTED

- ◆ **Gift:** He was once forced to be an Izou soldier. +1 Might when brute force will get him out of a tight spot.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if his past military record comes back to haunt him.

## WARTIME ROLE: VILLAGER, TITLE: GUARDIAN

- ◆ **Gift:** He is the defender of his village. +1 Might when defending civilians or the weak.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when the thing he protects is put in danger he cannot stop.

## CLAN: GREY TIGERS

- ◆ **Clan Gift - Part of the Clutter:** Their tiger helps out. Gain a +1 bonus when they do.
- ◆ **Clan Trigger - Territorial Loyalty:** Gain 1 Karma when forced to choose Neko-shi over anything else.

## CONTACTS

- ◆ **Ally: Kasai Kenji (Travel):** Kenji is a scout for the Lotus Coalition who has happened upon Neko-shi.
- ◆ **Rival: Mouko Eien (Athletics):** This young protester has been running from one end of the Empire to the other and painting a portrait in each area to show the damage this war has done.

## MARTIAL TRAINING

- ◆ **Flurry of Blows (Wildcat Style):** After a Boost on a close combat attack, he may attack again for free.
- ◆ **Armor of Blades 1 (Sharp Style):** Close and Near attackers suffer -1 penalty to hit him from constantly spinning blades. Defense Boost = +1 Fighting to next attack.

## WAY OF BLOODY CLAWS

**Training:** On a Boost, any jutsu also affects their tiger.

**Backfire:** Cumulative -1 Fighting as they lose coordination with their tiger.

- ◆ **Hunter's Focus (Basic, Yin + Survival):** They are granted +1 Stealth against their target and deal +1 damage from an ambush.
- ◆ **Double Claw (Med, Yang + Fighting):** The ninja attacks with the activation. If successful, the tiger also attacks with +2 Attack, dealing +2 damage. If both hit, target suffers a Bruised 2 Condition and -1 penalty to their next Defense.

## WAY OF SURVIVAL

**Training:** Heal 1 Psyche. If done 3 times in same Scene, they may reduce a Condition by 1.

**Backfire:** -2 penalty to next Resistance or Defense check.

- ◆ **Trackless Movements (Basic, Yin + Stealth):** Leave no trace of where they've been. Also, +2 Speed against traps.
- ◆ **Camouflage (Med, Yin + Deception):** Blend into surroundings, gaining Stealth bonus equal to Successes until they leave the area.

## STATS OF NOTE

**Health:** 6, **Psyche:** 5, **Yang:** 1, **Yin:** 2, **Rank:** 1, **Initiative:** 7, **Dynamic Actions:** 1, **Dynamic Dice:** 3, **Strength:** 5, **Movement:** 10, **Weapon:** Katar (Sharp, Disarming)

Yuuhi was always the responsible one growing up, the kid who helped the younger kids steer clear of bullies and the one who also fought for the side of good. Then came the day when the Ninja Crusade began. Yuuhi couldn't stand aside and watch his home spiral into chaos, and soon the Izou Army was drafting young men to fight. However, after being on the front lines of one massacre after another, his legion descended upon a small enclave with a habitat of tigers defended by a handful of ninja. He couldn't destroy these animals, so Yuuhi made the difficult decision to turn on the army and help the ninja.

He was indoctrinated into the Grey Tigers soon after and developed a close friendship with Chikuma, a large and ferocious tigress. The two of them now take the fight to the Empire with the help of the Lotus Coalition, happily sent on the most dangerous missions. Truly, Yuuhi is most comfortable protecting the village, whether it be Neko-Shi or Danketsu.



## SKILLS

Athletics 3, Crafts 1, Deception 1, Discipline 0, Empathy 1, Fighting 3, Fortitude 1, Holistics 0, Intimidation 2, Intuition 2, Knowledge 0, Marksman 1, Might 2, Perception 2 (Sight), Perform 2, Persuade 1, Speed 2, Stealth 2, Survival 3, Travel 1 (Forests)

# NARAJIMA KAYANWE

## ELEMENT: WATER, TEMPERAMENT: KAKOU BORN

- ◆ **Gift:** Grew up on the streets of Kakou. +1 Survival in urban environments.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when a rep for living in Kakou hurts the ninja's chance of successes.

## PROFESSION: DEDICANT, FOCUS: REVOLUTIONARY

- ◆ **Gift:** +2 Fighting when battling for his cause.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when he chooses his cause over the goals of the group.

## TRAGEDY: RAVAGED BODY, AFFLICTION: IMPAIRED SENSE

- ◆ **Gift:** He is blind. -1 Perception (Sight), +1 for all other senses.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when his lack of sight causes trouble.

## WARTIME ROLE: FOOT SOLDIER,

### TITLE: HERO OF THE COMMONER'S DREAM

- ◆ **Gift:** He is a hero of the people cast aside by society. +1 Persuasion when within the Bridge to Battle Province.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when everyone knowing who he is becomes a bad thing.

## CLAN: VIRTUOUS BODY GARDENERS

- ◆ **Clan Gift - Flowing Ink:** Expert artists. Gain +2 Crafts to produce art of tattoos. Pain penalties reduced by 2.
- ◆ **Clan Trigger - Prove Yourself:** Gain 1 Karma when he feels forced to act against his better judgement in order to prove himself.

## CONTACTS

- ◆ **Ally: Sumi Chimaki (Speed):** A stunning beauty but deadly with blades, Chimaki is always the center of attention.
- ◆ **Rival: Tachibana Kozue (Persuade):** A local alchemist with a penchant for selling healing and sleeping potions that only work part of the time.

## MARTIAL TRAINING

- ◆ **Horimono 1:** Gain +1 bonus to a Gift (Revolutionary) and +1 bonus to jutsu activation checks.
- ◆ **Suspension Expert (Artist's Eye):** Pain penalties reduced by 1 and +1 Discipline when suspending.

## WAY OF THE INKED SKIN

**Training:** May use Withdraw Weapon for free (no check) with a Boost.

**Backfire:** -1 cumulative Speed penalty

- ◆ **Body of Vision (Med, Yin + Crafts):** Gains 360-degree vision and +1 Perception.
- ◆ **Ink Touch (Basic, Yang + Crafts):** Create a tattoo on the target in any design the ninja can think up.
- ◆ **Needles of Agony (Basic, Yin + Discipline):** Must have used Ink Touch on target. Creates instant Pain 3 effect on target. Target resists with Fortitude.

## WAY OF THE BEASTS

**Training:** Bring out the beast. +1 Initiative and +1 Fighting.

**Backfire:** Suffers a -1 cumulative penalty to social checks.

- ◆ **Sonic Hearing (Basic, Yin + Perception):** Gains +1 Perception (Hearing) for (Yin x100ft.). Boost = Extends to 1/2 mile.

## STATS OF NOTE

**Health:** 5, **Psyche:** 8, **Yang:** 1, **Yin:** 2, **Rank:** 1, **Initiative:** 7, **Dynamic Actions:** 1, **Dynamic Dice:** 3, **Strength:** 4, **Movement:** 9, **Weapon:** Kukris (Sharp, Skilled - Throwing)

The Blind Bandit is wanted throughout the northern region of the Bridge to Battle for leading raids on Imperial caravans carrying ore and minerals from Commoner's Dream back to the Middle Province. Kayanwe is well on his way to becoming the youngest Horishi in the clan's history.

He views life as an adventure in sensation. Kayanwe experiments with pushing the limits of his own pain threshold, hoping to achieve ever greater clarity and insight into himself and the world around him.

Kayanwe resembles some kind of wood spirit. His wiry frame is wrapped in tight muscle and darkly tanned skin. His hair has been bleached nearly blonde by the sun. The Blind Bandit wears a blindfold to cover his eyeless, sewn-shut sockets. Sharp eyes will notice that he has mobile eye tattoos that slip from one part of his body to another. These eyes allow him to see despite his handicap.



## SKILLS

Athletics 2 (Jumping), Crafts 2, Deception 0, Discipline 3, Empathy 1, Fighting 3, Fortitude 0, Holistics 2, Intimidation 2, Intuition 2, Knowledge 1, Marksman 0, Might 2, Perception 2, Perform 1, Persuade 2, Speed 2, Stealth 2 (From the law), Survival 0, Travel 1

# NOZOMI HAYAKAWA

## ELEMENT: FIRE, TEMPERAMENT: CHILD OF THE WU JI THEATER

- ◆ **Gift:** She grew up performing. +1 Perform when there's an audience waiting for her.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when she pushes a show far past what is appropriate (wears out welcome).

## PROFESSION: SCHOLAR, FOCUS: SCRIBE

- ◆ **Gift:** She knows all about languages and scripts. +1 Crafts to make forgeries.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if something she wrote comes back to haunt the group.

## TRAGEDY: TORMENTED MIND, AFFLICTION: WAR WEARY

- ◆ **Gift:** She is a survivor, but the war hangs heavy on her. +1 Fighting when fighting for her life.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if she lets her memories of better times overwhelm her.

## WARTIME ROLE: PACIFIST, TITLE: RECLUSE

- ◆ **Gift:** She lives alone and rarely leaves her safety. +1 Survival for finding or creating shelter.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when her reclusive nature keeps her from asking for help when she really needs it.

## CLAN: BLAZING DANCERS

- ◆ **Clan Gift - Performance Mastery (Storytelling):** +1 bonus to any check that can use their specialty. +2 if used with Perform.
- ◆ **Clan Trigger - Disrespected:** Gain 1 Karma when the clan's bad reputation puts them in a bad situation.

## CONTACTS

- ◆ **Ally: Suzuki Hidetoshi (Intuition):** One of the oldest ninja of the Odoriko Clan, he is always there to dispense wisdom or cast doubt.
- ◆ **Rival: Ryoko Naoko (Perform):** A fellow troupe performer, she can carry a song like no one else, but doesn't like to share her fame.

## MARTIAL TRAINING

- ◆ **Alchemy 2 - Areas of Study: Voice, Dreams and Mind:** Can create the following potions: Dreamless Sleep, Lucidity, Nightmares, Truth-Telling, Amnesia, Forgetfulness, Recollection, Crowing Bird, Influential, Mockingbird, Mute

## WAY OF THE IMMACULATE SHOW

**Training:** Illusions of the story they are trying to tell come to life.

**Backfire:** -2 Initiative and audience displeasure.

- ◆ **Distant Whisper (Basic, Yang + Empathy):** Convey a secret message through a performance.
- ◆ **Kicking the Nest (Med, Yin + Empathy):** If hurt and not attacking back, they may call others in the area to come to her defense as a mob.

## WAY OF FIRE

**Training:** Boost = +1 fire damage on impact and for each Round until put out.

**Backfire:** Fire set to environment. Critical = Suffer Burned 1 Condition.

- ◆ **Deflect Flame (Med, Yin + Speed):** Deflect a fire attack to another target, who suffers a -1 penalty against the original attacker's roll.
- ◆ **Flame Wall (Basic, Yang + Intimidation):** Creates a (Yang x10ft) wide wall. Targets who go through suffer 1 damage and must make a Moderate (2) Fortitude check or take +2 damage and Burned 1 Condition.

## STATS OF NOTE

**Health:** 7, **Psyche:** 6, **Yang:** 2, **Yin:** 1, **Rank:** 1, **Initiative:** 6, **Dynamic Actions:** 1, **Dynamic Dice:** 3, **Strength:** 1, **Movement:** 8, **Weapon:** Tessen (Sharp, Concealable)

Having been around for nearly 80 years has not slowed down this still-able dancer one moment. She is one of the eight head teachers at the Wu Ji Theater, having once shared the spotlight with some of the best dancers in history. Her focus today, however, is recruiting those who have lost their way or have been ejected from other clans. This, obviously, makes other clans despise her, as she is actively taking their students. Due to her focus, she has not left the Wu Ji Theater city in years. She is cunning, intelligent, dedicated, and able to spot the smallest details that give her insight to her new students.

Her family lineage can be traced through the Blazing Dancer clan and she sees her students more as her children than her pupils, and remembers all of their names. She teaches how to put one's heart and soul into every performance. Hayakawa is always hustling through the theater corridors, helping those who need guidance and readying for the next festival (especially if there is wine).



## SKILLS

Athletics 1, Crafts 2, Deception 0, Discipline 1, Empathy 2 (Read a crowd), Fighting 2, Fortitude 2, Holistics 2 (Diagnosis), Intimidation 1, Intuition 1, Knowledge 4, Marksman 1, Might 0, Perception 2, Perform 3, Persuade 2, Speed 2, Stealth 2, Survival 0, Travel 0

# SUGIYAMA TOMO

## ELEMENT: FIRE, TEMPERAMENT: SILVER TONGUED

- ◆ **Gift:** Always knows what to say. +1 Deception to convinced someone he's right.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when they try to use words to terrible effect when force is better suited.

## PROFESSION: ENTERTAINER, FOCUS: ACTOR

- ◆ **Gift:** Knows how to put on a face. +1 Deception when faking a personality, emotion or identity.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Hard to tell when he's acting or being sincere. Gain 1 Karma when his insincerity causes issues.

## TRAGEDY: RAVAGED BODY, AFFLICTION: SMOOTH SKIN

- ◆ **Gift:** His body is untouched for a reason. +1 Speed to avoid physical harm.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when the appearance of weakness causes trouble.

## WARTIME ROLE: SCOUT, TITLE: SLEEPER

- ◆ **Gift:** He's very convincing. +1 Deception to convince others of your loyalty.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when staying undercover costs them something important.

## CLAN: VIRTUOUS BODY GARDENERS

- ◆ **Clan Gift - Flowing Ink:** Expert artists. Gain +2 Crafts to produce art of tattoos. Pain penalties reduced by 2.
- ◆ **Clan Trigger - Prove Yourself:** Gain 1 Karma when he feels forced to act against his better judgement in order to prove himself.

## CONTACTS

- ◆ **Ally: Okumura Yuko (Might):** One of the strongest men in the realm, and he knows it.
- ◆ **Ally: Network of Spies (Gatherers).**
- ◆ **Rival: Yasutake Hizuru (Intuition):** A matronly midwife who claims to have helped more babies enter this world than the lives the Ninja Crusade has taken.

## MARTIAL TRAINING

- ◆ **Baby Monkey Has a Fit 1 (Monkey):** Gain +1 Fighting against opponents bigger than you are.
- ◆ **Master of Spies 1:** Gains Gatherers as an Ally.

## WAY OF THE INKED SKIN

**Training:** May use Withdraw Weapon for free (no check) with a Boost.

**Backfire:** -1 cumulative Speed penalty

- ◆ **Ink Touch (Basic, Yang + Crafts):** Create a tattoo on the target in any design the ninja can think up.
- ◆ **Remove Ink (Basic, Yin + Crafts):** Removes evidence of tattoos.
- ◆ **Complete Control (Adv, Yang + Discipline):** Must have used Ink Touch on target. Control the target for (Successes) Rounds. Each command uses an Action, and the target may resist with Strength. On a Boost, the target suffers a -2 penalty to resist.

## WAY OF THE UNSEEN

**Training:** They becomes less visible. -2 Perception to those trying to see them.

**Backfire:** Suffer a -2 Stealth penalty.

- ◆ **Blank Face (Basic, Yin + Perform):** Attempts to read the ninja's emotions suffers -2 penalty.

## STATS OF NOTE

**Health:** 7, **Psyche:** 5, **Yang:** 3, **Yin:** 0, **Rank:** 1, **Initiative:** 4, **Dynamic Actions:** 1, **Dynamic Dice:** 3, **Strength:** 4, **Movement:** 8, **Weapon:** Hidden Dagger (Concealable, Sharp)

Also known as Akai Hime, the Red Princess, Tomo is one of the deadliest deep cover agents of the Black Masks. He transgresses traditional boundaries, taking advantage of his feminine features to get close to his targets by masquerading as a geisha.

Sugiyama Tomo was born and raised in Daiwa's Flower Town, where he learned the hidden power that the geisha held in society. Confessors and confidantes, they were trusted and allowed an independence that fascinated the young boy. Influential men would share things with geisha that they would never say to their wives or their male acquaintances. When he became one of the Virtuous Body Gardeners, he remembered that power, and used it to his advantage. Even when Tomo is not actively engaged in a mission, he often dresses as a woman and even when he doesn't, he is usually taken for one anyway.

Tomo is currently on assignment in Commoner's Dream, gathering information from officers and imperial VIPs who visit the tea houses.



## SKILLS

Athletics 3, Crafts 2, Deception 4 (Seduction), Discipline 0, Empathy 1, Fighting 3, Fortitude 2, Holistics 0, Intimidation 2, Intuition 1, Knowledge 0, Marksman 0, Might 1, Perception 2, Perform 3 (Dancing), Persuade 3, Speed 0, Stealth 2, Survival 0, Travel 1



# TANAKA "SAKE" SAKURA

## ELEMENT: WOOD, TEMPERAMENT: WANDERER

- ◆ **Gift:** Loves to travel and see new places. +1 Travel when going somewhere he's never been before.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when the new land they venture into spells almost instant trouble.

## PROFESSION: OUTSIDER, FOCUS: DRIFTER

- ◆ **Gift:** Has traveled the lands extensively. +1 Fortitude against environmental effects.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when she lacks resources when needed.

## TRAGEDY: TORMENTED MIND, AFFLICTION: HAIR TRIGGER

- ◆ **Gift:** Her reputation precedes her. +1 Intimidation when their target knows of their hair trigger.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if she loses her head when level heads are needed.

## WARTIME ROLE: MERCENARY, TITLE: REBEL

- ◆ **Gift:** She goes where the job is. +1 Travel when on a mission.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when her loner nature lands her in trouble.

## CLAN: VIRTUOUS BODY GARDENERS

- ◆ **Clan Gift - Flowing Ink:** Expert artists. Gain +2 Crafts to produce art of tattoos. Pain penalties reduced by 2.
- ◆ **Clan Trigger - Prove Yourself:** Gain 1 Karma when she feels forced to act against her better judgement in order to prove herself.

## CONTACTS

- ◆ **Ally: Saito Juzo (Perform):** A famed street performer, often performing gruesome contortions.
- ◆ **Rival: Asai Oniji (Deception):** The leader of a gang of orphan thieves, who doesn't take kindly to those who betray him.

## MARTIAL TRAINING

- ◆ **Battle is Beauty 1 (Artist's Eye):** On a Boost on an attack, they may make another attack against a separate Close target.
- ◆ **Impossible Target 1 (Artist's Eye):** Attacker suffers a -1 penalty to attack the ninja if wearing Armor.

## WAY OF THE INKED SKIN

**Training:** May use Withdraw Weapon for free (no check) with a Boost.

**Backfire:** -1 cumulative Speed penalty

- ◆ **Summon Chains (Basic, Yang + Fortitude):** Creates a chain weapon the ninja may use with +1 Fighting at Close Range or +2 at Near Range.
- ◆ **Chain Barrage (Adv, Yang + Crafts):** Attacks everyone within (Yang x10ft.) with a Fighting + Crafts + 2 roll. The chains provide +1 bonus to Block for 1 Round.

## WAY OF SURVIVAL

**Training:** Heal 1 Psyche. If done 3 times in same Scene, they may reduce a Condition by 1.

**Backfire:** -2 penalty to next Resistance or Defense check.

- ◆ **Instant Break (Med, Yin + Marksman):** Breaks an object instantly within Near Range. If a large item, instead deal 3 damage (ignoring Armor).

## STATS OF NOTE

**Health:** 7, **Psyche:** 6, **Yang:** 3, **Yin:** 0, **Rank:** 1, **Initiative:** 8, **Dynamic Actions:** 1, **Dynamic Dice:** 3, **Strength:** 2, **Movement:** 9, **Weapon:** Sake Gourd (Fragile, Heavy)

A constant wanderer, Sakura is known in nearly every bar and port of call in the Izou Empire. She stumbles from adventure to adventure; usually with a flask of rice wine in her hand. She is a master of Drunken style. Many enemies have fallen after deciding to teach the rude drunkard in the corner a lesson.

Her best friends are a Blazing Dancer named Kaida and her fellow Ink, Sumi Rika. The three of them drink and cavort together, drawing down the wrath of the Izou army and the local ninja before they blow out of town as quickly as they arrived.

Sake is a force of nature. She's relatively short, but solidly built. Her lean, muscular frame gives her a hungry look, and her chopped hair and dusty clothing lend her the air of a vagrant. The gleam in her eye belies a cunning, insightful intelligence, however, and those around her often find themselves caught up in her current, doing things they never imagined.



## SKILLS

Athletics 2, Crafts 2, Deception 1, Discipline 1, Empathy 1, Fighting 4, Fortitude 2 (Drinking), Holistics 1 (How much more can they take?), Intimidation 1, Intuition 3, Knowledge 1, Marksman 2, Might 0, Perception 0, Perform 1, Persuade 2, Speed 2, Stealth 1, Survival 1, Travel 3

# YAMAGUCHI ASUKA

## ELEMENT: WATER, TEMPERAMENT: DEVIOS

- ◆ **Gift:** She has an underhanded streak. +1 Fighting if attacking in unsportsmanlike ways.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when cheating the wrong person comes back to hurt her.

## PROFESSION: WARRIOR, FOCUS: MARAUDER

- ◆ **Gift:** She knows how to get what she wants. +1 Intimidation when conscripting or to take things from others.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when she chooses personal safety over her group.

## TRAGEDY: VICTIM OF CIRCUMSTANCE;

### AFFLICTION: ORPHANED

- ◆ **Gift:** Gain +1 Survival whenever the ninja must rely on their own wits.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when the ninja's fear of abandonment prevents them from making a solid connection.

## WARTIME ROLE: SOLDIER, TITLE: BOWMAN

- ◆ **Gift:** She is an expert shot. +1 Marksman to attack through cover.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when firing blind hits the wrong target.

## CLAN: BLAZING DANCERS

- ◆ **Clan Gift - Performance Mastery (Tumbling):** +1 bonus to any check that can use their specialty. +2 if used with Perform.
- ◆ **Clan Trigger - Disrespected:** Gain 1 Karma when the clan's bad reputation puts them in a bad situation.

## CONTACTS

- ◆ **Ally: Nakata Sachiko (Marksman):** She grew up in the same village as the ninja and is working to become an Empire engineer. Friend or foe?
- ◆ **Rival: Ryoko Naoko (Perform):** A fellow troupe performer, she can carry a song like no one else, but doesn't like to share her fame.

## MARTIAL TRAINING

- ◆ **Beating My Wings 2 (Eagle Style):** Suffers -1 penalty, but may throw 3 ranged weapons at up to two enemies simultaneously.

## WAY OF THE IMMACULATE SHOW

**Training:** Illusions of the story they are trying to tell come to life.

**Backfire:** -2 Initiative and audience displeasure.

- ◆ **Deadly Music (Basic, Yin + Speed):** Musical items do not become improvised weapons, instead mimicking weapons.
- ◆ **Trick Shots (Basic, Yang + Marksman):** (Successes) follow-up attacks gain +1 Marksman, ignore cover and return to the ninja if the attack misses.
- ◆ **Juggling Hands (Med, Yang + Marksman):** Summons illusory arms that ready (Successes) weapons for combat. Each attack gains a +2 bonus. Effect ends when all weapons have been used.

## WAY OF THE WARRIOR

**Training:** Steels their warrior spirit. Dynamic Actions give +2 damage for next attack.

**Backfire:** Their body breaks, suffering a Broken 1 Condition.

- ◆ **Precise Eye (Basic, Yin + Marksman):** Make an immediate ranged attack with a +2 bonus.

## STATS OF NOTE

**Health:** 7, **Psyche:** 7, **Yang:** 2, **Yin:** 1, **Rank:** 1, **Initiative:** 8, **Dynamic Actions:** 1, **Dynamic Dice:** 3, **Strength:** 4, **Movement:** 10, **Weapon:** Kunai (Sharp, Ranged)

Young and itching to prove her worth, Yamaguchi is another outcast that found her new path with the Blazing Dancers... this time from the Grasping Shadows. She has no contact with her former clan, but rightly fears that they will attack her on sight. Luckily, she is now backed by her new family.

Yamaguchi has had rigorous training and meditation exercises, but still she is too quick to rely on her Grasping Shadow training in a pinch. Her patience is growing, because she realizes now that the Dancers will never give up on her. She has a new home within the clan even though she sometimes doesn't quite understand it that well. She is still undergoing her training, but soon her first mission will be underway. Yamaguchi eagerly awaits that day.

She is a shorter girl with dark hair just past her ears. She sticks to dark clothes and tries to blend in instead of standing out. She smiles convincingly, although it often feels forced.



## SKILLS

Athletics 2, Crafts 2, Deception 0, Discipline 2, Empathy 1, Fighting 2, Fortitude 2, Holistics 0, Intimidation 1, Intuition 2, Knowledge 1, Marksman 3, Might 2, Perception 1, Perform 2, Persuade 0, Speed 3, Stealth 2 (Hide in shadows), Survival 1 (Tracking), Travel 1

# INDEX

## A

New Afflictions.....49

## B

Bamboo Herbalists.....17, 42, 45

Bellows.....19, 49

Body Modifications.....34

## C

Celestial Animals.....58

## D

Drowned Fields.....40

## F

Fields of Endless Fray.....41

Fighting Styles.....50

    Artist's Eye.....50

    Fox Style.....51

    Scorpion Style.....52

New Foci.....49

## G

Gracious Illustrators.....62

Grasping Shadows.....16, 46, 62

Grey Tigers.....66

## H

Hands.....19

Heiminmu.....39

Hidden Strands of Fate.....17, 46, 62, 75

Hiho.....43

History (Dancers).....9

History (Inks).....27

Horikaze.....29, 45

Horimono.....53

## K

Kakou.....23, 48

Katsu Sofu.....20, 84

Kokyoryo.....20

Kumo Grove.....42

Kurokamen.....44

## L

Land of Exalted Flame.....9, 23, 40, 59

Living Chronicle.....17, 28, 46

## M

Masaki Shrine.....42

## N

Nakajima Kayanwe.....36, 86

Nozomi Hayakaw.....11, 87

## O

Odoriko Minori.....16

## P

Pack of the Black Moon.....18, 46, 67

Performing Troupe.....54

## R

Recoiling Serpents.....16, 30, 47, 66

Ronin.....18, 44

## S

Sugiyama Tomo.....30, 88

Sumi Rika.....45

## T

Tamers.....19

Tanaka "Sake" Sakura.....41, 89

Tattoos.....33

New Temperaments.....48

Thousand.....19

New Titles.....50

Tokatsu.....41

## W

Wardens of Equilibrium.....18, 32, 47

Way of Bloody Claws.....68

Way of Deadly Crescendos.....72

Way of Fire.....55

Way of the Immaculate Show.....56

Way of Inked Skin.....57

Way of 18 Strokes.....64

New Weapons.....53

Will of Iron.....17, 47

Winds of Aion.....70

Wu Ji Theater.....24

## Y

Yamaguchi Asuka.....25, 90