Gravel crunched under the Seppun guardsman’s feet, shattering the stillness of the Forbidden City. Shosuro Sadako froze. The guardsman stopped and stared into Sadako’s eyes from less than an arm’s length away.

Sadako oriented herself on the vulnerable gap between the man’s dō, the armor protecting his chest, and the sode plate covering his shoulder. Now she stared back, focusing on the Seppun’s eyes, ready for them to narrow, or widen, or otherwise show that she’d been compromised. That was unlikely, but-

The Seppun grunted and turned away. As he withdrew, Sadako heard him say, "It was nothing...probably just that damned raccoon again.” The conversation continued between the Seppun and his comrade, another guardsman who’d stood ready some distance away. Sadako waited as they disappeared from sight, their voices fading.

Finally, silence. Sadako stepped out of the shadows -a rush of night air, like emerging from freezing water...blood rushing through her veins, a cold river branching, over and over...the pressure of the ground against her feet, of the dark clothing against her skin, of the blacked ninjatō against her palm and fingers-

-and stopped, taking a deep breath of night air to regain her equilibrium. The Shadow Brands imprinted across her flesh momentarily flared and burned like ice, but she made herself stay focused on her surroundings. Once, she allowed the wrenching transition from formlessness to form distract her, and it had nearly left her impaled on the spear of a surprised Lion soldier.

But there were no waiting bushi now, just the profound silence of night in this innermost sanctum of the Empire.

Sadako sheathed her ninjatō and resumed her way toward the Crane Guesthouse. She slipped easily through the gloom, pausing frequently to listen and look around her. She had to stop beneath a drooping willow near the moat surrounding the shrine to Hantei-no-Kami, going as still as the willow’s trunk while another patrol passed nearby. The Shadow Brands tingled as she watched and waited, but she remained as she was. The guardsmen were distant enough that mundane stealth was sufficient. There was no need for-

-no breath, no heartbeat, no sense of cold or warmth...no feeling at all. Just identity and darkness...and each time, it felt like less of the first, and slightly more of the second-

Grimly, Sadako carried on, her tabi-shod feet silent against the ground of the Forbidden City. Lord Hametsu had given her three tasks to complete tonight, and two of them were done.
In the morning, a certain minor Crane retainer would be found dead in the Chisei District, as would a particular servant in the Emerald Champion's residence, both apparently of natural causes. But those tasks were straightforward-easy, even, given that neither target was difficult to access or well-protected. The final task, the one looming ahead, this was the difficult one, and the one Lord Hametsu had declared the most important of the three.

And it didn’t involve killing anyone at all.

Isawa Ujina gasped and sat bolt upright. Darkness surrounded him...but just the familiar darkness of night, nothing more. Untangling himself from twisted bedclothes damp with sweat, he levered himself up from the futon and crossed to the window. Night shrouded the grounds of the Phoenix Guesthouse below. Beyond lay the tailored expanse of the Forbidden City, lanterns glowing softly among the buildings. Beyond that was the chaotic sprawl of Otosan Uchi, and beyond that, the sky.

"It is called Heihō," the old Ishiken, said, her voice soft in the night. "The Square. Do you see it?"

Isawa Ujina, who sat cross-legged in damp grass, nodded. "Yes, sensei. I see four stars in a perfect square, in the House of..." Ujina paused, considering the position of the Moon. ". . .of the Serpent."

"Good. Each of the stars corresponds with an element-Earth in the upper left, Air in the upper right, Fire to the lower right, and the last is Water. This is an important thing, but not the most important thing. I want you to consider the dark sky between and around these four stars."

"Because the darkness is...Void?"

His sensei said nothing.

Ujina studied the four stars called Heihō. They did form a square, almost perfectly so. But his attention quickly fell into the blackness surrounding the four stars. It was an emptiness, containing nothing...but it also united the four stars, defining their shape, the place of each and the arrangement of all...

Understanding dawned, an insight so deep he gasped.

But insight was followed by-
Ujina pushed away the memory of the dream and found Heihō, the square of stars. He had used it countless times as a focus for his meditation, always finding peace and harmony in its stark but simple perfection—by something else, a feeling of falling into deep water, as cold and dark as the sky...of that vast darkness Closing over him, drowning him. And now he was falling...flailing, he reached desperately back for his sensei, but she was gone. Another woman had taken her place, much younger, barely more than a girl, her face a perfect arrangement of curves and angles framed by hair so white it glowed—

"Ninube!"

Ujina reached for Doji Ninube, his betrothed, his beloved... but now she was the one falling, her perfect face twisted in pain and terror as she plunged into an ocean of nothing, plummeting away, dwindling to infinite smallness and screaming, screaming the whole time～

Ujina scrubbed a hand across his face. It had just been a dream. So why, then, was he unable to look upon Heihō now without seeing Ninube’s face, as though it were real and right before him, but falling away into that cosmic emptiness? He was the Elemental Master of Void. Mastery of his thoughts was...should be...absolute.

"Something isn’t right," he said to the square of stars.

Ujina turned back into his bedchamber and glanced at the futon. Its disarray looked bleak and uninviting, so he began to get dressed instead.

Sadako stopped at the edge of a stand of sugi trees surrounding a small shrine. Across a wide expanse of immaculately trimmed grass, she could see her destination the magnificent silhouette of the Crane Guesthouse.

She listened. Somewhere to her right, a pair of guardsmen spoke in hushed tones, their feet scraping against stone. But they were heading away from her, so she turned her attention back to the open space. It was at least a hundred paces across, absent of cover aside from a statue of the Kami Hantei. Drawing upon all of her skills, she might be able to reach the statue unseen, and use it for further concealment. But not only was the risk enormous, the idea of using the Kami’s likeness in such a pragmatic way...it was distasteful.

Sadako reached into her tenugui, a simple but useful piece of fabric she usually wore as a mask, but currently used as a belt. The scroll case was still in place, secure.

This scroll case was her third task, and the most important.

See to it that this scroll finds its way to a particular place in the Crane Guesthouse, Lord Hametsu had said. If you accomplish nothing else, you must accomplish this.

Sadako let go of the-scroll. She could go left or right and work her way around the open space, but this would bring her close to the other clans’ guest houses in one direction, and the residences of the Imperial Families in the other. Either approach would be time-consuming, and risked discovery by the ever-vigilant guardsmen. Dawn was still several hours away, but
she would need all of that time to carry out this final task, and ensure she escaped undetected. The surest way, therefore, was the most direct.

Sadako fixed her eyes on a distant shadow, one cast by a lantern illuminating the main door to the Crane Guesthouse. Taking a deep breath, she focused the image of the shadow through a lens that was her intimate awareness of her Shadow Brands, of their painful tingle as they bore into her flesh, down to her bones. Then she stepped into the shadow of a sugi tree—a rushing away of sensation...no cold or heat, no breath, no touch or feeling, just blackness like endless water, and she an infinitesimally small mote suspended within it—and stepped out of the shadow cast by the lantern in front of the Crane Guesthouse.

Sadako bit back a gasp. For a moment, her head swam and her Brands burned like hot wires plunged into her flesh.

...identity and darkness...each time less of the first, and slightly more of the second...

Gathering herself, Sadako moved quickly around the side of the building. She sought a window for a particular room, which was only a short distance from where Satsume’s possessions were being stored. It should only take minutes, and then she’d be gone, as though she’d never been.
Isawa Ujina stepped out of the Phoenix Guesthouse and into the cool night. The placid nighttime stillness of the Forbidden City enveloped him, as it always did. Still, something was amiss, somewhere...

A pair of guards stopped and bowed. They no doubt found encountering an Elemental Master surprising...but there were many powerful people in the Forbidden City, all of whom probably found sleep elusive at one time or another. Ujina acknowledged them and bade them continue their rounds. But as they withdrew, he considered calling them back, to alert them to...

To what? A vague feeling of unease following a troublesome dream?

Doji Ninube...dwindling to infinite smallness and screaming...

Ujina started walking, his destination nowhere in particular. He was determined, at first, to push away the remnants of the dream-

Doji Ninube...screaming...

-but it was pointless. His visit tonight to Yume-dō, the Realm of Dreams, simply could not be denied. So, instead, he sought to remember as much of the dream as he could.

...screaming. ..

Ujina slowed. Doji Ninube, his first wife, was never far from his thoughts, of course, but he hadn't had such a nightmare about her since...

He stopped, not far from the Crane Guesthouse.

Not since she had mysteriously vanished shortly before their marriage. She'd been assumed kidnapped, but whoever had taken her had just as mysteriously released her, leaving her with no memory of the ordeal. They'd been married, and soon after Kaede had been born...

"Ah," Ujina said to the night. "Yes...of course."

Kaede—now of the Lion Clan—no longer lived in the Phoenix Guesthouse, a reality that still pulled at him when he passed by her empty apartment. She was gone...and she reminded him of Ninube so very much—

...her face a perfect arrangement of curves and angles...Ninube, who had died shortly after Kaede's birth.

Ujina started walking again.

His daughter's absence had sent him on a journey to Yume-dō this evening, where he had relived the pain of losing her mother. So nothing was amiss, aside from hurtful memories of his own past...

And yet.

Ujina slowed again and looked at the immaculate lines of the Crane Guesthouse. It looked no different, but something about it felt wrong. Stopping, he expanded his awareness into the familiar, restless waters of the Void...but that resolved nothing. The nagging feeling of something being wrong still plucked at him like a newly chipped tooth.

He resolved to walk a little farther. Perhaps he would wander the gardens encompassing
Sadako slipped out of the same window through which she'd entered the Crane Guesthouse. She'd placed the scroll precisely where Lord Hametsu had directed, and now simply had to remove herself from the Forbidden City, unseen.

She passed quietly among fragrant gardenias and mokusei azaleas, taking great care to avoid snagging any of the leaves or blossoms as she did. The Crane gardeners favored carpeting their landscapes with cedar chips, into which her cautious steps fell silent. A particular willow, drooping over a pond just ahead, marked the limit of the gardens in that direction. Aiming herself that way, she moved a trifle too close to another azalea, catching a branch against her thigh. She immediately froze, then prepared to back up, looking around as she did. This was why she saw the approaching figure before it saw her. On instinct, Sadako stepped back, concentrating on her Shadow Brands and-

...no breath, no touch or feeling...
-vanishing into...becoming...just another shadow among many in the gardens.

Ujina froze. He had seen movement. Was sure of it. His immediate thought was that it was just another guard, going about their rounds...but, no. Guards did not lurk in the gloom like thieves.

He started forward, expanding his senses as he did. A part of him considered not doing this, instead retreating and seeking help. But there was still nothing specific to seek help for. If someone was concealed in the shadows of the Crane gardens, it would be trivial for Ujina to sense them, no matter how stealthy they might be. Nor was there any threat here that he couldn’t deal with, and with just a flicker of thought, at that.

But there was nothing. The Void was as placid as a still pond, which wasn’t surprising in a place designed for tranquil reflection.

Ujina felt only that same, fleeting disquiet and nothing else. The shadows were empty. Sighing, he started to turn away

...her face a perfect arrangement of curves and angles framed. by hair so white it glowed...

Ujina turned slowly back, thinking, I have returned to Yume-dō.

Except he hadn’t. This wasn’t a dream, nor the memory of a dream. Doji Ninube, his beloved wife, stood just a few paces away, smiling at him.

Sadako saw the man, a Phoenix by his garb, start to turn away... then turn back and look directly at her. She saw recognition in his eyes. Saw him suddenly start forward, saying, “Ninube?”
Sadako looked past him, at the shadows pooled beneath the distant stand of sugi trees. She would use her Brands to escape whoever this was, who somehow saw her amid blackness like endless water, and her an infinitesimally small mote suspended within it.

The man, barely an arm’s length away now, reached for Sadako just as she stepped-
-a rushing away of sensation
-into an utter darkness that swallowed them both.

Was this Kaede, who had come back to the Forbidden City for some reason? No, this was Ninube, somehow returned to him after all this time. The rest of the world rushed away as he reached for her, leaving only the two of them surrounded by an infinity of night. Joyful tears welled in his eyes as he gathered her in his arms, holding her close so she could never be taken from him again...

And then she was gone, and he was falling...falling into deep water, as cold and dark as the sky...a vast darkness closing over him, drowning him.

Shosuro Sadako knelt under the sugi trees. She had no memory of getting here. There had been a man, confronting her...her hand, instinctively reaching for her ninjatō...then the darkness had swallowed both of them, and now she was here.

She took a breath. Tried to remember. Had she killed him? But there was no blood on the ninjatō’s blade. Nor was there a body...not here or, she knew, outside of the Crane Guesthouse. He was gone-whoever he was.

Shaking, Sadako stood. Shock and regret and second-guessing could wait. Her mission apparently hadn’t been compromised, but neither had she yet completed it.

She set off through the darkness. Her Brands tingled-
-less of the first, and slightly more of the second-
-but she gritted her teeth and ignored them.

By the time Lady Sun drove away the night, Shosuro Sadako was far away from the Forbidden City.