

THE RED FIST
By Frank Verderosa

CHAPTER I: STOP THEIF!

The light in the corridor was dim. There were torches placed periodically along the walls, but they were few and far between. They cast pale shadows on the rough stone walls that rose up into the darkness of the fortress, their light diminished by the immensity of the structure around them.

Two men walked slowly down the corridor. They were dressed all in black except for a red insignia on the left breast of their shirts. They talked in hushed tones as they passed down the hallway, almost as if they were intimidated by the cold walls that surrounded them.

They paused for a moment in the middle of the corridor as one of them lit a cigarette. As they moved on a little bit of rock dust drifted to the ground behind them.

Clinging just below the ceiling on the wall directly above where the two men had been standing the young ninja breathed a sigh of relief as the two men disappeared down the hallway. Much as she would have been amused to see the look on their faces if she had dropped on top of them, it was unlikely she could have taken them both out before they raised an alarm.

She slid silently down the wall. She stopped when she reached the bottom and looked around quickly, more out of habit than caution. She knew the next patrol would not come through for another ten minutes.

Smiling to herself, she quickly passed down the corridor. So far, things had been absurdly easy. At the end of the corridor she turned left and entered a narrow room, dimly lit like everywhere else. On the floor was a brightly painted mural of a large red dragon.

She walked slowly across the room, being careful not to step on any portion of the floor that was painted red. On the other side was a locked metal door. She crouched down beside it for a few minutes.

There was a soft click, and then the young ninja stood up and swung the door open. With one more glance around she stepped inside.

The room was circular, and even darker than the others. A flickering glow dimly lit the room, but it was not the glow of torchlight. In the center of the room stood a narrow pedestal. On top of it was placed what looked like a materia orb.

The ninja could not help but stare in wonder at it for a moment. She had never seen anything like it. It was huge, much larger than any materia she had seen before, almost the size of an ostrich egg. But the thing that really captivated her was the color. Normal materia glowed faintly with a certain color depending on what type of materia it was, but this sparkled with multicolored lights. Red, blue, green and yellow all flashed and flickered within it.

She slowly walked over to it, unable to turn her gaze away. The colors whirled around inside it. One growing brighter than the rest, then fading away, to be replaced by another color. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

"I've been expecting you."

She jerked her head up to see a figure standing in the darkness nearby. Instinctively she flung her shuriken at point blank range.

Almost too fast to see the man stepped to the side, then almost casually reached out his hand, and suddenly he was holding her shuriken.

Her eyes widened in spite of herself and she took a step back.

"I'm afraid you'll have to do a little better than that," he said calmly. He tossed her shuriken aside and stepped toward her. He was an older man, with white hair and a short beard, and he wore the same black uniform she had seen on the other men in the corridor. On the left breast was the insignia of a red fist.

The young ninja launched a kick at the man's knee, but faster than she could follow he reached down and intercepted her leg. He twisted it round and she felt searing pain run up her leg. With a cry she fell to the floor.

The man let go of her leg and stepped up beside her. She turned to look at him just in time to see him stoop down and bring his fist forward. Then all was blackness...