

Playgrounds, Arcades, And Other Places Not Of This Universe

Part One

"There are moments which mark your life. Moments when you realize nothing will ever be the same and time is divided into two parts: before this and after this." – John Hobbes, Fallen

Happiness was a few cookies from the vending machine, a little bit of quiet, and a Gameboy.

That was Chip Masters' definition of happiness, anyway. He reflected on how good his life was as he lay on folded crash mats at the back of the strip mall karate dojo. The day was done, the lights were off, and Chip had nowhere to be and nothing to do but save the digital world in his hands.

Until he heard a crash from the office at the front of the dojo.

Chip leaned to his left to see across the dark dojo and saw a figure hobbling out of the office, cursing profanity under his breath. "Master Hernandez?" Chip called, somewhat incredulously.

The broad-bellied karate teacher jumped when Chip called from the darkness. He recovered quickly and groaned. "Jesus, kid, what are you doing back there?"

"I sleep back here," Chip retorted.

It took the school's headmaster a second to process his way through that and he was suddenly shocked. "Wait, for real? I thought you were joking!" He crossed the mats into the back and flipped on the light in the bathroom. Chip winced at the harsh orange light coming from the door. Amidst the stacks of kick pads and sparring gear, Hernandez saw the sleeping spot Chip carved out for himself every night. The big man looked down at Chip and was appalled. "Chip, you can't stay here."

Chip snorted at the very suggestion. "I've been staying here for two months." He swallowed a little awkwardly and focused on his screen. "That you know about," he added beneath his breath.

"Yeah, but I was—" Hernandez cut off and looked down at Chip. He pinched the bridge of his nose, still never quite ready to handle his youngest black belt.

Chip looked back at the door into the dojo and saw the big gym bag the karate teacher had brought. "Your wife kick you out again?"

Hernandez didn't answer and didn't need to. He just sighed. He spotted the wrapper of cookies and asked, "Was that your dinner?"

"I eat light," Chip assured him.

"Yeah, well, I don't," Hernandez grumbled. "Grab your jacket. Let's get some dinner."

Cookies and games were great, but real food was something Chip could never pass up. He excitedly grabbed up his bomber jacket and followed Hernandez out.

Master Hernandez poured salsa from the tiny carafe into the bowl and sighed mournfully. He looked across at Chip who was all too eager to help himself to the chips. Hernandez sat his chin against his hand and stared into the electric bulb meant to look like a flame. This led his eyes up to the mural on the wall next to their booth in the Mexican restaurant meant to look like how white people envisioned a Mexican street to look.

The mural on the wall was of some white-dressed senorita waving a handkerchief to a passing farmer with a burro. The love between the two lowly peasants, like out of some quasi-racially-sensitive fairy tale, was palpable...at least as palpable as the limited skills of the artist who'd painted the wall. Realizing Hernandez was looking at the wall, Chip looked at the mural as well. "What is it?" he asked his teacher.

"I miss being in love," Hernandez admitted, his Mexican accent thickening as his mind wondered. "I love my wife," he lamented, "but I'm not in love with her anymore. And she sure as hell isn't in love with me." He dipped a chip into the salsa. "Hell, I'm not sure if she even likes me anymore."

"So what was it this time?" Chip asked his teacher, dipping a chip into the salsa.

"What is it every time?" The karate teacher grumbled. "Why do you spend so much time at the school? Why aren't you home with me more? Why are you always around all those hot chickas and busty girls?" He continued the simulated accusations in Spanish that devolved into little more than gibberish.

Chip stopped, confused, a chip dangling half-eaten between his lips. "What busty girls?" Hernandez gestured in frustration, clearly at a loss. "We've got, like, six female students total."

"That seems to be irrelevant," Hernandez surrendered. "But she's always 'spend more time at home'. I tell her, do you know how hard it is to make a living teaching martial arts? Do you know what kind of numbers we got to meet just to keep the lights on?" He stabbed the salsa with a chip and shoved it into his mouth. "She thinks my comments that we'll have to move into the school are a joke." He looked across the table at the teen boy who was eating quickly. "I can't even pay you properly."

"I like sleeping at the dojo a lot more than at the park," Chip assured him.

"A roof over your head in exchange for teaching classes seems skewed," Hernandez remarked. "We sign some more students, you're going to draw a paycheck." He watched Chip eat. The scrappy blonde kid ate voraciously but not without some modicum of manners. Hernandez grew worried about the boy and decided to distract himself with conversation. "You go to school today? Or this week?"

"No, but I watched some Nova on the computer, and that's the same thing," Chip told him. "I'm going to go to the library this weekend," he offered, almost as a consolation.

Hernandez nodded, not sure what else to say. "Yeah, well, I'd give you some crap about skipping school, but I honestly think you've got your mess together more'n me."

"That's a low bar," Chip retorted. Hernandez cracked a smile that turned into a chuckle. Chip joined him in the laughter and the evening improved.

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Saturday morning meant children.

Chip taught several kids' classes, starting first thing through to noon. Young kids. Older kids. Teens, bordering onto young adults. Chip put the white gi-clad youths through the paces, from the very beginnings with which was left and which was right, to helping older students prepare for upcoming belt tests and age-specific preparation for real-world violence.

After noon's arrival, Chip sat at the computer meant for bookkeeping. From the tiny office next to the front door vestibule of the strip mall karate school, Chip was cruising auction websites. He was scouring the consoles

and cartridges for sale, but nothing was jumping out at him. Without a television, most of the offerings were beyond him anyway. Until he happened on a chance listing.

Chip sat forward suddenly, his eyes alight. "In-box Gameboy Advance," read his eager eyes. He scanned over the listing and the specifics, checked the recent bids, and the time until the bidding closed. Sixteen minutes. He checked the most recent bid, sitting at three digits. He took a deep breath, then sprang into action.

Chip summoned up the website for an online bank. He created an ID and log-in, then set up a checking account. He then went to a Bitcoin distributor and logged in. Minimizing windows, he opened a folder on the computer itself and ran a small program. His computer screen went black for a second, and then came back up.

Chip went back to the Bitcoin account and the website froze still. It disappeared and then came back in plain script, without any images. Chip chose from some menus and options and decided, "A couple of hundred bucks should be good." He made a few changes to the code and shut down the working program.

His Bitcoin account now showed the equivalency of just over a three hundred and fifty dollars, American.

Chip transferred the Bitcoin into the new checking account with the online bank, then returned to the auction site. He went with the 'buy now' option, circumventing the rest of the bidding. He had the game sent to a gas station nearby. The purchasing done, Chip opened another program from deep within the computer and set about erasing all evidence that the bank account and its transfer. He had to go into the bank's core software which took some time but by half past one, no evidence of the transaction remained, except in the seller of the game's bank account.

Chip sat back, pleased. He beamed with delight, then sat forward at the computer and began searching for cartridges for his new game system.

Late afternoon found Master Hernandez announcing the advanced class was beginning by shouting, "All black belts, on-line!"

Laughter followed, as it often did, as the advanced students shuffled in, the black belts at the front of the class. In mostly white uniforms with a few colored pants mixed in, the small class stood at attention as Hernandez paced in front of them, his thumbs stuck in the knot of his belt. "Not too bad," he deemed the class's speed at getting into place. He looked down the line of karate black belts that began with Chip and smiled with pride.

"What's the on-line thing," asked one of the older black belts. "You say that every session."

Hernandez pointed at the meeting point of two sections of matting where all the black belts stood. "See that line? That's the line. Be on it." Some more snickers. "To be on-line," he told them as he paced up and down the single line, his thumbs stuck in the knot of his belt, "means to be aware. It means to be engaged, to be active and ready. When I say 'all black belts, on-line', it means listen up and be ready for what comes next. Get it? I pick on the black belts because you all lead by example, or are supposed to," he allowed, getting more chuckles.

"All right," he said with growing seriousness. "Let's get started."

Two hours later, in the heat of the day, the same black belts were all sprawled about on the mat, laughing. Class having ended and the underbelts gone, only the senior students and the headmaster were left in the school, shooting the breeze. "So there's just no dim mak?" asked one of the advanced students, across the mat from Chip.

"No," Hernandez dismissed as he wiped his face with the towel. "There's no death-point striking, there's no five-finger death punch, there's nothing like that. There are strikes to the nerve clusters but they're little more than...than a charlie horse. It can make a big difference in a fight but it's not like you're going to just turn off a person's hand or something."

"Then how did that kind of stuff get started?" asked another student. Chip remained quiet as the others spoke, watching them talk, gauging their questions as much as who was asking them.

"Marketing, mostly," Hernandez said. "Old masters needed to impress new students so they spun yarns. Or an old master did a parlor trick and some yokel thought it was real. There's about as much magic in the martial arts as there are in a stage magician's act." That didn't sit well with Chip, but he kept quiet.

"Understand, in Japan and the Orient in general," Hernandez expounded, "martial artists were usually educated people, especially when it came to anatomy and physiology. They were just as often doctors as they were soldiers. Of course, this was medieval medicine we're talking about here. You're average CPR class probably would teach you more than they knew. But take their badass skills and mix it with their knowledge of anatomy and it's no wonder magic was ascribed to them."

"That's why there's usually this strong connection between martial arts and magic," he said. "Not just because martial arts' study

usually involves meditation and thoughts on transcendence and all that good hippy-dippy stuff. But if somebody is really sick and a martial artist comes to town and cures them, perhaps with just basic pharmacology or simple common sense, it's easy to say they've got magic healing powers. If this guy's got magic healing powers, it's not too much of a leap to think that maybe he's got other magic powers too."

"Back in the day," Hernandez joked, "martial artists would get called in to deal with hauntings and stuff, assuming an actual priest wasn't available. But then, the carryover between men of magic and martial artists has always been great."

"Men of magic," Chip wondered aloud with a mesmerized smile.

The next day, Chip was in the library. A sunny Sunday afternoon was filled with bright light showering in through the windows that stretched from floor to ceiling of the municipal building. Motes of dust floated in the air as Chip knelt down in front of the shelf of books that was packed densely from one end to the other. He scratched his nose as he turned the heavy page that was stiff from age and disuse.

The book trolley rolled past the end of the narrow aisle and an older lady in a knit shawl slipped in between the shelves. "Hello, Chip," she said as she began putting books away.

"Hello, Mrs. Cardigan," Chip said, scampering to his feet. He returned the book he'd been looking at to its place on the shelf and resumed perusing the titles, only with growing disapproval.

The older lady glanced down at the shelf that occupied Chip's attention. "Lock Ness and Big Foot this week?"

"I'm trying to find books on magic," Chip said. He stood and brushed down his karate gi, the only clothes he owned. "All of this is just cryptozoological nonsense."

"I think we have a book or two on yoga," said Mrs. Cardigan, taking books from the trolley and putting them in their place on the shelf. She spotted a few books needing to go on the bottom shelf and rather than bend over herself, she handed the books to Chip. He accepted them without hesitation and put them in their places. "Aside from that, I'm afraid all we have are books on angels."

Chip's left hand lingered on the last book he'd put away, his mind momentarily transfixed on the word 'angel'. He glanced up at Mrs. Cardigan who smiled at him. Her patience and kindness was endless but her smiles were as rare as a sun shower and as captivating. She turned and left Chip on the floor of the library to continue his searching.

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There was a very different vibe in the school when Hernandez called the class to order. Everyone was either stealing glances at the strange new woman, or trying very hard not to. Tall, athletic, and shaped like a goddess, she stood at the back of the class with the other beginners and new students. Without a colored belt and wearing a stiff, brand new karate gi, the clothing set weird on her frame. An intelligent and beautiful set of eyes looked out at the class from behind long black hair.

Hernandez found himself staring down where he shouldn't as they bowed in, a fact which Chip noticed and snickered at him. Hernandez shhhd him and managed to get the class started. One the barrier of beginning was broken, Hernandez was able to get down to business.

Everybody moved a little stiffly as they tried, and failed, to go about business as usual. The newcomer's beauty was disruptive. The guys tried to steal glances and the two other women did too, out of jealousy or envy, it was unclear.

Halfway through class, Chip found himself paired up with the woman. Her ample presence at eye level for the teen, she smiled as they were paired off for a drill. "I'm Astrokel," she told him with a friendly and disarming smile.

"Yeah, I got that," Chip assured her, his eyes set firmly on hers. It was an act of willpower not to glance south.

"I think you're the youngest black belt I've seen," she said as they feigned their way through the drill with punching mitts. "You must have worked very hard."

"Harder than you think, not as hard as I should have," Chip quipped. The quizzical response made her smile enigmatically. "Why'd you decide to check out our school?"

"I'm looking for somewhere I can learn to fight," she told him. "You can imagine how guys can get around someone like me."

Chip didn't take the bait. "I think you'll find that this is one of the best schools in the area. I mean, I'm biased obviously, but we are. We're irreverent enough to be modern but traditional enough to stay true to our roots." Astrokel smiled and settled into their work.

When class was over, Chip was left to put away the equipment while every guy tried to decide if he'd approach the beauty. Each made the decision that she must have a partner, a significant other, someone waiting for her, without ever asking if that was the case. As such, Astrokel lingered behind alone and unaddressed as the other students filed out, one after another, until she was alone in the vestibule at the front of the school.

As Chip came from the back, he saw her standing alone in the single light of the dojo's entrance. He was about to call for Hernandez when she shared, "The sensei said he had to go home. Something about his wife."

"Yeah, I'll bet," Chip smirked, angry at himself for being in this position. "Do you need something?" he asked her more formally.

"I want to know more about the people who come to this school," she told Chip with an intoxicating look. "Why did you start?" The question seemed innocent enough.

"I've gotten into a fight or two," he shared with her. "I decided I wanted to learn how to do it better."

The answer made Astrokel smile enigmatically as a bang fell in front of her ambiguously ethnic eyes. She said nothing more for a moment, almost like she was waiting for Chip to say something. "Well..." she finally said leadingly, her lips parted just a bit. "Maybe I'll be back tomorrow."

"I hope so," Chip told her with a friendly but professional smile. In the following seconds, Astrokel lingered as though she was trying to work up the courage to speak. Chip simply said, "Have a good night." The beautiful woman looked hurt, but smiled still and turned away. She exited through the glass doors and walked to the far end of the parking lot.

Chip turned off the light and lingered at the door. Positioned behind the frame and trusting in the obfuscation caused by the glare from the streetlights that lined the sidewalk, Chip watched Astrokel depart. A bag over her shoulder, it took effort for Chip to focus on her and not her yoga pants.

She passed the last of the cars in the cracked parking lot and disappeared around the edge of the next shopping center. Grabbing his keys and nothing more, Chip locked the dojo and sprinted after her. The shopping center was empty and closed at this hour. Only the bodega at the

far end of the line of storefronts was still open. The rest of the windows were dark as the cloudy sky.

Chip leapt around the potholes and dodged around the couple of abandoned wrecks that had become permanent features of the concrete yard. He made all the noise of a shadow as he ran to the edge of the building. Making it to the graffiti-covered brick wall, he flattened against it and inched towards the jagged edge. He took from his pocket a pair of mirrored, wrap-around sunglasses and held them to see around the corner. Spotting nobody, he stepped around the turn.

Astrokel was right there, waiting. "Following me?" she asked the young Chip. The teen black belt stepped back nervously, as if ready to fight. "Why so scared?" the buxom woman asked before biting her lip.

Chip weighed his response. "Because you're lying about something."

"What a terrible thing to say to a girl," she parried. "What am I lying about?"

"I don't know but no white girl lives within walking distance of this place," Chip maintained. He nodded past her. "There are no apartments that way, either."

An eyebrow crooked up. "Really now?" She crossed her arms, making her proportions even more obvious, but it was clear her effect on Chip was dwindling. "I was just going to catch my bus."

"Bus service stops at nine," he said matter-of-factly.

"Does it?" Astrokel asked. She feigned a smile of concession. "Well, perhaps I've found a backroom in some dive of an establishment to live out of. But then, that'd be silly, right?"

Chip's hand moved subtly towards the switchblade he kept tucked behind his gi belt. "Odd choice of words," he said guardedly.

"You're an odd boy," she countered.

"Why are you here?" he snapped at her. "What do you want?"

Astrokel looked confused, though sarcastically so. "Want? I just want to know how good this dojo is," she told him. She turned coyly. "I want to make sure I'm not wasting my time."

"No, you want something with me," Chip maintained with a razor's seriousness. Chip tried to get a read on the beauty but all her body betrayed was that she hid a secret, not what that secret was.

Astrokel made no effort to hide her pleased smile. "I want to know if you're worth it," she told Chip in a cold whisper. Her breath came out as a puff of white and his skin stood up with the harsh chill. "Are you?" she asked. Despite never having come within arm's reach of him, she held up the keys to the dojo. "Let's see how good you really are." Astrokel turned and ran.

Chip sprinted after her, but the woman inched farther ahead with each step. She broke out onto the sidewalk that ran ahead of multiple shopping centers, clearing whole sections of cracked pavement in what seemed impossible strides. Chip chased after her for the length of two shopping centers before he pulled his switchblade from his back. He flipped it open and threw it. The blade whizzed past her, not even coming close, but it hit the ground ahead of her, causing her to dart laterally out into the street.

Only a few cars dotted the six-lane flow of traffic but with the wide gaps between lights, they were traveling at full speed. As Astrokel burst out into traffic, a truck slammed on its brakes and skidded forward. She didn't hesitate or even seem troubled by the near-hit. She raced out into the turn lane as cars whizzed by. Reaching the very center of the street, she turned curious, and found Chip closing for a takedown.

Rather than be stalled by the traffic, Chip had sprinted between the slowing truck and its tailgating partners, leaping over the hood of an old-model car. He'd been right on top of Astrokel as she'd turned and he slipped in close for a textbook double-leg takedown.

As he picked her up, though, she became heavy. Not with a shift in her weight, but as if her weight had doubled in the time it took to take her off her feet. Chip finished the takedown with a hard slam, dumping her onto the pavement.

Astrokel landed with a laugh. She parried Chip's attempts to gain a dominant position in the road and rolled up to her feet. Chip moved after her and she kicked him right in the face. The blow knocked him onto all fours and bloodied his lip. The woman just laughed again as she skipped back, as though they were on some dance floor in a club.

A rumble of lightning, however, dampened her laughter. She looked into the sky. The stars were long gone, hidden behind a thick blanket of black clouds. From deep within the darkness, there were flashes of light that illuminated the rich texture of giant clouds that were swelling overhead.

Astrokel seemed encouraged by this, though her laughter was replaced with an intense smile. She backed farther away from Chip and said, "I'll give you one more chance, little bunny rabbit." She grinned and challenged him. "Test your might." She turned and resumed running.

Had she chosen any other words, Chip might have stopped. Instead, he was spurred on and sprinted after her. Disinterested in the traffic, he vaulted across a car and its honking horn and made it to the far side of the street. There, Astrokel leapt against a building, leapt off onto a parked truck, and used its roof to leap onto the building's rooftop.

She ran across the gravel-covered roof and slowed to check behind her. There was another flash and a gust of hot wind blew back her hair. Astrokel waited just a beat, then turned to be grabbed by the wrist. Chip was in front of her and she yanked back on the grab. He followed her and she turned the wrist-grab into a joint-lock, which he countered into an elbow lock. Pinning her arm against his chest, he torqued and cemented a shoulder-lock as well. He forced her to one knee as she yelped in pain.

"Who are you?" Chip yelled over the wind, a single hot drop of rain striking his cheek. The sound of water pounding in the distance was growing. The edge of a cloudburst approached.

"No one to be trifled with," she snapped literally. Breaking her own arm, she pulled out of the hold. She turned to the stunned Chip and threw her dangling arm like it was a wet noodle. The bones, joints, and sinew reformed in the snap and she held her arm ready.

Chip's jaw hung open. "How did you do that?" he whispered in awe.

Astrokel afforded Chip one more smile, though it was tinged with anger. She feinted a punch to his face and dropped to strike his stomach. She followed with another punch to his chest and swept in with a body blow that broke multiple ribs. She finished him with a kick to the chest that sent him flying.

Chip landed in a busted heap on the edge of the building, the light from the storefronts at his head. The rain began to fall now, hitting hard and fast like a curtain that had cut off Astrokel and Chip from the rest of the world. Chip stumbled to his feet, backing defensively right to the edge of the rooftop. Every breath was pained as he readied to fight on.

Astrokel stood neutral but ready, the rain pounding down on them both. She wore a mask that was an enigmatic smirk, like she knew all too well Chip's every thought and was amused as he tried to know them himself. Chip tried to find confidence in several different stances as he circled Astrokel and seemed vaguely willing to entertain his fight only as a source of amusement.

A rumble came from above, like a volcano in the sky was announcing its displeasure. The great noise from the deep sky snatched Astrokel's attention. She looked into the darkness, worried. Her troubled eyes danced across the clouds like she was reading. A great flash came from overhead.

Lightning lit up the world, illuminating the world brighter than the sun itself. The rain shone like crystals and it blinded Chip.

Wet hair matted against her strong neck, Astrokel backed away from Chip. "I've no time for this now," she dismissed. She turned, took only a few steps and leapt from the rooftop. She sailed to the ground like a graceful bird coming out of flight and landed in a sprint, racing at equine speeds.

Panting, Chip stared down after her. "Oh, why not?" he asked himself before he jumped off after her. The one-story drop was rough without the broken ribs and Chip crumpled underneath the impact. He yelped in pain but willed himself to keep moving. He sprinted after the woman, losing ground to her quickly. As she darted in and out of shadows, weaving deeper and deeper into the projects behind the shopping centers, Chip tried his best to keep up with her. His lungs burned and his body threatened to collapse under the weight of injury, exhaustion, and his water-logged karate gi.

There was another loud rumble from overhead, louder than any thunder Chip had ever heard. An instant later, there was another blinding flash of lightning that lit up the world. This time, instead of the shadows of the familiar urban world of chain link and concrete, Chip found illuminated a mighty forest.

Chip tried to stop but where pavement had been, now wet mud gave way. He fell amidst a rampaging forest fire, torrential rain pelting him relentlessly. Frantically, Chip got to his feet and looked around, unable to process where he was. Towering trees, greater than redwoods, stood about like indifferent elders. Dotting between them were smaller trees of numerous sizes, from tiny flares of light to raging bonfires. The wet grass was soft from the rain that fought a battle against the thick flames that billowed from within the trees themselves. Trunks burned like captured flames within the ancient wood were trying to escape.

Panic set into Chip's young mind.

There was no sign of his familiar world. He was in some forest primordial, far removed from the safety of fluorescent lights and cracked pavement. Another roll of thunder and he shivered in terror. He backed away from the sky that was crying at him, the chill of the rain and the heat of the fire clashing over him like swords.

Then he heard the real swords.

Chip rolled from his back onto a crouch and saw a fight in the distance. Shadows only, the battle moved in a furious speed. He saw a single figure, hulking and gigantic, dispatching others. Many others. The kills were obvious, even without seeing the impact of blades and strikes. Quick, agile

figures that moved like the wind fell at the solitary figure who stood against them like a mountain against the breeze. His own lightning-quick movements were their death. Another flash of lightning and the shadowy figure in the next clearing was illuminated.

The figures moving with speed with clad in black, from the toes of their sandals to the masks over their face, looking for all the world like ninjas. Opposite the ninja, made of gray skin and black hair, the thickly muscled man looked like a statue given form. He wore a white tunic like some extra out of a black-and-white Greek epic. The two short swords that he used were clearly accustomed to the murder they were dealing out.

A lull in the attack fell over the figure and he turned this way and that, waiting for the next onslaught. Seeing no one, he turned again and his glowing red eyes fell upon Chip. The thickly muscled man looked surprised and he approached gently as one might a deer. Chip scampered back to his feet and backed away as the large man entered his clearing. Seeing Chip retreat, the figure stopped once they shared the space. His lips moved and Chip knew he was speaking but he heard nothing over the roar of the rain and the frantic crackle of the fires.

"How are you here?" the figure spoke again, his words warped and twisted by an accent Chip had never heard. Chip could do nothing but swallow in terror. "Speak," the figure insisted firmly, more to guarantee a response than to startle Chip.

"I-I followed a...a woman," he stammered. "What are you?"

The figure looked Chip over with red eyes and determined, "You are no shinobi." He seemed as confused as Chip. "How are you in their forest?"

"Shinobi?" Chip whispered, confused.

The statue of a man seemed equally puzzled by Chip's existence as Chip was his, but their mutual confusion was interrupted. As if melding out of the very shadows, four ninja appear. Clad in black outfits with sparse but functional armor, they all brought the straight blades of their swords to bear. Leaving Chip as an afterthought, they pounced on the gray-skinned man.

Chip watched the four-on-one fight and quickly learned the ninja had essentially committed suicide. The element of surprise and their superior numbers afforded the four attackers no modicum of advantage as they were dismantled and dispatched without hesitation.

Wielding his two swords, the figure blocked two strikes at once, lunging into one of those strikes to stab his attacker between the eyes. The bloody tip of the short sword pierced the rear of the ninja's head as his shrieking fell silent. Ripping his sword free, the warrior slashed overhead

down at the other ninja that had attacked him and cleaved through him, sword, mask, and skull in all. He slashed laterally at a third ninja coming behind him and let his blade be blocked, only to stab under his own sword to pierce the ninja through the chest.

He wiped blood and body from his blade and turned to the final black-clad ninja that had yet to assault. The figure's sword shook, and then she dropped it. She backed away from the soldier and fell to the ground. Rain passing by him but not hitting his gray skin, the man approached her as indifferent to her life as he was to her death.

Training took over and Chip grabbed up the broken sword of the ninja cloven in two. "Hey!" Chip yelled. "I had dibs."

The gray-skinned warrior stopped and looked over a muscled shoulder at Chip. His glowing red eyes took on a sharper gleam and he turned around to him. "You know not what you do, child." Staring a hole through Chip, he offered, "I give you this chance to retreat. You'll get no other."

Holding the broken sword directly before him, Chip responded, "I'm not retreating."

The warrior looked disappointed. "Very well." He came at Chip, turning the short sword in his right hand over to hold it like an icepick. Ready to deal with that sword, Chip barely had time to respond to the slash from the other blade. Rather than block it, Chip slipped back and let the willow-leaf blade pass within inches of his eyes. He surged forward at the gray-skinned figure and stabbed him in the side, just below the armpit.

The point of the broken blade piercing adequately, Chip angled the sword up and, rather than withdraw it, sliced through the man's back up to the base of his neck, cleaving through muscle and sinew alike. He whipped around and sliced at the man's back, cutting deep down to the ridge of the backbone. The gray-skinned figure dropped to his knees, then onto his hands, barely catching himself from collapsing completely.

Chip backed away, the sword held ready directly before him. Seeing by the light of the dancing flames burning down the forest, it took Chip a second to process what he saw. In horror, he watched as the lacerations that had ripped open the gray-skinned warrior's body began to close. Before Chip's very eyes, he watched as the man was renewed in a matter of seconds.

The gray-skinned figure rose slowly, turning his full attention now to Chip. "Who are you to so casually throw your life away?" asked the man in heavy words amidst rain and fire. "What machinations of doom have brought you here?"

Chip glanced back and saw the ninja he'd helped disappear into the shadows of the burning forest. He faced his foe and told him. "I'm Chip Masters. Who are you?"

"I am called Octavius," he told Chip as he spun his swords to readiness. Without warning or precursor, he slashed at Chip with a short sword, the blade of the weapon coming dangerously close to Chip. It would have beheaded Chip had he not slipped to the side.

Chip slashed at Octavius' midsection and came back around to slash at his neck. Octavius allowed the midsection cut, barely aware of the damage scored. He held his second sword behind his back to block the follow-up slash at his neck and came around with a tree-splitting slash at Chip. The young fighter backed away and Octavius followed through.

Metal clanged as their fight raged around the clearing. The larger, gray-skinned fighter had Chip constantly on the defensive but was never able to land a strike. Chip, meanwhile, peppered at Octavius with wounds that on any other would have spelled death, but on the likes of this foe, they were barely even an annoyance.

Chip risked an exaggerated lunge at Octavius' face which the warrior avoided with a slip of the head. Rather than withdraw the sword from the missed strike, Chip leapt into it and slammed his elbow into Octavius' head. Releasing the sword, he looped his arm around the back of Octavius' neck and pulled him low as he fell down, slamming the crown of Octavius' skull into the ground. A resounding cracked echoed up and Octavius' body fell lifeless. Chip got to his feet in a frantic scamper to grab up his sword.

Octavius did not move for a moment. The rain hissed at the fires, blocking their advance but also unable to quench their hunger. A stark cold breeze tore through the superheated forest air. All the while, Chip watched the body of his fallen foe.

As the rain fell, Octavius' twitched. The neck that lay at so awkward and unnatural an angle twisted suddenly and his head returned to its normal orientation. Red eyes opened and a new anger burned within them. Octavius rose to his hands and knees and looked at Chip, fury now occupying his mind. "Your victory," he told Chip, "is short-lived." He rose slowly and faced Chip. Chip swallowed and tightened his grip on his sword, readying himself for more.

"Octavius."

It was a deep voice that sounded like a volcano. Both Chip and Octavius looked to the far end of the clearing as the shadows parted while fire and water gave way. Out from nothingness stepped a black-clad figure with gray skin and white hair. Standing impossibly tall, he walked with huge

strides as a cape-like great coat swayed around his ankles. "What is the delay?" asked the nightmare of a man.

Octavius looked to the giant who dwarfed even he and bowed his head respectfully. "Xelex, we have an outlier." He turned and pointed his sword at Chip. "He is not Shinobi."

The man called Xelex took notice of Chip for the first time. Red eyes seemed to pierce through Chip's very being, seeing into the heart of his soul. Chip backed away from the monster half a step, barely able to process the figure he was looking at. Whatever the figure saw, he was unimpressed. "We have more important matters to attend to," he said, turning away from Chip. "Finish him."

"He is no Shinobi, yet he—" Octavius protested.

"Crossworld is what matters. His lineage is of no concern," Xelex told Octavius. "Neither are the Shinobi and we have already spent too long exterminating the vermin." He spared Chip a look of disdainful indifference and repeated, "Be done with it."

Octavius turned to Chip and began to approach him in an executioner's walk. "As you command." Chip tightened his hand around his broken sword and readied for more fighting. He didn't get the chance.

The flickering of the flames that burned at the base of the great trees created a darkness in the very center of the clearing. From that darkness stepped a new figure. Tall and dark-skinned, he wore a deep blue ninja uniform and a mighty sword on his back. He ignored the nearing Octavius and, looking right over his head, addressed Xelex. "You've grown bold to attack us directly, Xelex."

Xelex, his thick arms crossed over his big chest, looked sideway at the new arrival. "Kageryu, you are of no interest or concern. Be out of our way and we shall cause you no further inconvenience."

"And let you ravage the city at your leisure? Hardly seems sporting," Kageryu told Xelex. "My forest is and always shall be your first concern on this land." He smiled. "I've seen to that."

"Why do you obstruct us?" Xelex asked, as though genuinely confused by Kageryu's protest. "What is your vested interest in the survival of these lands?"

"If you're foolish enough to destroy something whose value you do not understand, then that is reason enough to obstruct you," Kageryu told Xelex. He then drew his massive sword from his back. A long katana blade glistened in the firelight. "Yet I've grown tired of talk," he told Xelex as he

readied himself. "You've slain many. I aim to slay but a few." He gestured his sword right at Xelex and Octavius. "Whom of you would prefer to die first?"

"You would combat me directly?" Xelex asked.

"If you would call it combat," Kageryu mocked. "Merely an exercise in execution."

Xelex's red eyes hung on Kageryu as the tall ninja smirked aggressively. The rain continued to fall, landing all around but touching neither of them.

"You delay us," Xelex told Kageryu, as if the declaration were at Kageryu's ineffectiveness and a promise for a future to be countenanced. Still, Xelex faded into the blackness of the night, disappearing entirely like a mist evaporated by a breeze.

Octavius lingered and Kageryu twitched his head. "Off with you, child."

The term angered the gray-skinned warrior but he hid it well. He returned his gladius swords to their sheaths at either side of his belt before fading from sight just as Xelex had.

Kageryu returned his sword to the sheath on his back and exhaled with a worried look. "How concerning," he told himself.

From the edges of the clearing, ninja began to appear. A few at first, then dozens. They seemed indifferent to the deluge that poured down from overhead that was only now beginning to extinguish the fires that had burned hot up until now. The forest was growing dark as the flames disappeared. The air was cold, chilly for a night and arctic now in the absence of the fires.

"The 'Shees are gone?" Kageryu asked to the growing host of blue and black-clad ninja.

"They've retreated with Xelex," answered someone from the darkness.

"Good," the tall ninja decided. He began to turn. "We must ascertain the purpose of their incur—" He fell silent when he seemed to notice Chip's existence. The young stranger was standing exactly where he'd been, exactly how he'd been, when Kageryu had first stepped from the shadows. The muscular man with a dark complexion cocked an eyebrow at the boy and looked him up and down. "And just what are we then?" he asked Chip with a confused look.

Chip looked down at his black karate gi and sneakers, holding a broken sword that wasn't his own. "I'm..." His words failed him. He looked at the gathered ninjas and swallowed fearfully. Rather than drop the sword, he instinctively tightened his grip.

"Who are you?" Kageryu asked Chip again.

"I'm..." he stammered unevenly before he licked his lips. He glanced at the host of ninjas at the trees, standing among the dying fires as the rain intensified. With renewed certainty, he told the towering ninja, "I'm Chip Masters."

Kageryu nodded in affirmation, almost sarcastically. "Yes, excellent," he dismissed as he turned to his lieutenants and casually ordered, "Kill him."