

Playgrounds, Arcades, And Other Places Not of This Universe

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Playgrounds, Arcades, And Other Places Not of This Universe

Part Two

*"It's much easier to be given a place to belong
than to make one for yourself." – Citan Uzuki, Xenogears*

For the briefest second, Chip Masters forgot about the army of ninjas chasing him through the primeval forest and instead recalled the lyrics from a Flock of Seagulls song.

The flight of lighthearted fancy lasted only a second before a kama came whistling through the air right by Chip's head, thrown fast enough to render the sickle into little more than a spinning disc of death. Chip didn't slow, only watched as the near-miss by the weapon slammed the steel blade into the trunk of tree older than some civilizations.

Chip ran at the tree, his sneakers getting a good grip on the textured bark, and yanked the kama out of the wood as he ran perpendicular to the ground. Gravity caught up with him but he pulled on the textured wooden handle to yank the weapon free. Rather than fall back, Chip kicked off the body of the tree and threw himself backwards in a flip. He sailed entirely over the ninja as the pursuer raced up the tree after him. The figure in dark blue and green armor barely processed Chip's backflip off the tree, only followed Chip's arc with a slightly dumbfounded gaze, eventually processing that the rubber texture he was seeing grow larger were the soles of Chip's sneakers coming right at his face.

The drop kick landed with Chip slapping the ground and the ninja unconscious in a crumpled pile atop the roots of the great tree. Chip flipped up to his feet and turned just as another ninja rushed at him with a straight-bladed sword. Chip parried with the newly-acquired sickle and kicked up under the ninja's arm to catch him in the chin. The ninja stumbled back, covering defensively in his daze, but easily a dozen more camouflage-clad warriors were approaching behind him. The shadowy fighters seemed to come out of nowhere in the forest, climbing down trees and out from bushes that couldn't possibly hide them and yet their appearance was sudden.

The ninja Chip had drop kicked on the tree rose and swept at Chip's legs to take him off his feet. Chip leapt over the sweep and kicked back but the ninja caught his legs and slammed Chip flat onto the ground. He yanked out another kama and swung down at the base of Chip's back but he rolled out of the way and let the kama strike into the soft forest ground. Chip kicked the ninja in the side, pinning his knee with his other leg to topple the ninja off his feet. The ninja flipped up not unlike Chip had done but by the time he was steady, Chip was standing and caught him in temple with the wooden handle of the kama.

Chip immediately turned his attention around the other way as the ninja with the sword swung at him. The steel blades met with a loud clang that, in the silence of the forest, sounded like alarm bells tolling. Chip popped the ninja in the face, but the warrior blocked with an armored bracer and tried to smash Chip with his pommel. Chip ducked under the attempted strike and gave a pop forward, kneeling the ninja in the solar plexus. Not content with the impact to the warrior's chest, Chip turned and kicked straight back like a mule, putting the full force of his body into the strike.

The backward kick sent the ninja one way and Chip forward. He used that momentum to power his running and sprint ahead. The soft air of the forest chilled him as he ran, hearing the telltale whispers of leaves rustling, knowing the ninjas were right behind him, approaching as fast as a deadly dawn and just as silently.

In his black and white karate gi, complete with strip mall sneakers, Chip knew he stood out. He checked over his shoulder and saw nobody and knew how much that meant. He darted laterally suddenly and broke into an all-out sprint, but the instant he crossed behind a tree, he leapt up and came down, driving his heels into the soft ground, forcing himself to stop in an instant. He took only a second to catch his breath and get his bearings. He looked into the sky, hoping to see some familiar stars but not only could he find no familiar constellations, he found no stars at all, only an endless canopy of trees rising into the distance, as if the treetops were the sky itself.

Chip heard a whistle and instinctively ducked, just before a barbed chain spun around the tree he'd been hiding behind. Chip rolled forward as a ninja in camouflage armor, like some hybrid of an anime ninja and a special forces operative, came swinging at him. The ninja tried to strike Chip with a kama attached to a long metal chain, then swung the chain's weighted end at him.

Chip backed away and skipped across the ground, the ninja swinging at him. Chip ducked under the slices, then slashed back at the ninja, the kama's blade blocked with the barbed chain. The ninja tried to entangle the weapon and disarm Chip but he punched the ninja in the side, striking a

nerve cluster, forcing the ninja to gasp. Chip followed with a kick to his face and knocked him back into the tree.

The ninja hit hard and the faceplate on his mask fell off. He slid down to the ground, blood trickling down his brow. Chip readied to run but glanced back when he saw the young ninja, just a year or two younger than Chip. Chip couldn't bring himself to run, try as he might. He backpedaled a step towards the ninja. "Are you okay?" With no response, he knelt down to the ninja and felt the back of his head, finding a wet spot. "Can you hear me?" asked Chip.

The ninja flailed to get out a knife and stab Chip, but Chip caught the weapon and forced it out of his hand. "Quit it," he told the ninja, inspecting the injury. "I think you're going to be--"

Kageryu stepped around the tree. The tall ninja all but appeared out of the darkness, as if out from nowhere. In dark blue unlike his many subordinates, he stood out in both form and height. Chip scowled at the ninja and as he rose, threw the kama at him.

The weapon spun rapidly, sailing through the air, only for Kageryu to catch it without effort, as if the attack had merely been a casual pass. The ninja's eyebrow went up as he looked at Chip, then he studied the weapon. He smirked and tossed it away. Chip stared for a moment more until he heard the ninja at his feet rousing. With one more glance at Kageryu, Chip turned and sprinted. The instant he moved, Chip saw the other ninja that had been slowly and silently moving to surround him. Arrows splintered the air, lodging into nearby trees and the ground after him, cutting the air with the whistle of their pursuit. The footfalls, as silent as dewdrops, crept closer towards Chip as he raced through the darkness.

Kageryu watched Chip run, disappearing into the distance. A combination of confusion and amusement made him smile only on his left side. The tall ninja looked down at the downed ninja whom Chip had been seeing to. "How interesting," he said to himself before he faded from sight.

Chip made it to a ravine and leapt over the gap in the ground, only to be caught by spears shooting up from between the gap. Two spears nicked his legs, cutting his pants and drawing blood. He landed roughly on the edge of the ravine and began to slide in, the ground giving out from underneath him. As he stabilized his fall for a brief instant, he glanced into the ravine to see spikes protruding from the muddy soil below. A glance back up and he saw a ninja above him with a heavy two-handed sword. Just as the swing came down at him, Chip kicked off the side of the ravine and threw himself back against the other side. He caught himself on the edge with his arms and rolled back over his shoulders to come up on the ground again.

A spear went for his head and Chip ducked around it. He trapped the long weapon's shaft with his elbow and entangled the attacking ninja's hands with his other arm. Turning quickly, he threw the ninja into the ravine. He kept spinning, reorientating the spear in his grasp until he took a solid stance, the weapon ready for use.

As the many ninjas descended upon Chip, he turned into a whirling dervish, responding to their attacks with negations and attacks of his own. As the furious fight got underway, Kageryu stepped onto a branch overlooking the battle. Standing a few stories above, the swarthy-skinned ninja looked genuinely impressed. "Astrokel," he spoke aloud, looking away from the fight for a moment. Onto a branch on the opposite side of the great tree trunk, a woman in a sleeveless ninja uniform stepped as if out of thin air. Dressed in forest camouflage like her peers, she answered with a bow of her head. "I take it this is your doing."

The beautiful woman hesitated, and not without fear. "Not entirely, sire." When Kageryu did not respond except to look to her, she expounded. "I was sent to investigate him as a possible recruit."

"And?" Kageryu asked, still watching the fight below.

"I deemed him without any appreciable Shinobi heritage," she reported. As she did, Kageryu looked back around the great tree trunk. A few trees back, the ninja Chip had looked to aid was rousing, holding the back of his wounded head. "It was shortly after making that determination that you summoned me return," Astrokel continued to report. The leader of the ninjas nodded, appreciating how recent this development was. "He pursued and..." She gave up. Kageryu looked at her, not understanding her silence. "I don't know what happened. I don't know how he came to follow me, to arrive at the site of our battle with Xelix."

Kageryu looked only slightly troubled by that. He turned to check on the fight, only to find a crowd of defeated and injured ninjas, with no sight of their prey. "Huh," the tall ninja said, chewing on his lip. Intelligent and mischievous eyes narrowed. "Summon more of our forces," he told Astrokel. "I want to see just what we're dealing with."

Without another word, Kageryu leapt into the air, sailing between the towering trees, branches and leaves narrowly missed by his leap. He landed on a distant branch and looked quickly, then leapt again. He landed again and again, bouncing from tree to tree at lightning speed, covering dozens of meters in each leap, until he finally bypassed the trees all together and dropped many stories to the ground.

The great ninja landed right in front of Chip. The young blonde boy didn't even slow down, however. He leapt at full speed and kicked at

Kageryu with all his might. Kageryu parried the kick easily, but wasn't ready for Chip's other foot to come from the other side.

The scissor-like kick caught Kageryu in the jaw and sent him stumbling. The strong ninja recovered quickly and came around, drawing from his back the massive katana that slept ready. Chip backed away from the weapon but not the fight. "You test my patience," Kageryu told him crossly.

"I'll gladly leave," Chip told him with a semi-desperate laugh. "In fact, that's kind of what I've been trying to do. Your goons are the only reason I'm still here."

"I cannot allow you to leave, knowing what you know," Kageryu warned, turning the sword slightly as he cautiously circled Chip. His feet made no sound, even as the hard-soled tabi stepped on leaves and grass of the forest floor.

"Do I look like the kind of person people believe?" Chip offered, his sneakers sounding like a stampede of elephants by comparison.

"You look like the kind of person not foolish enough to take on a swordsman unar—" Kageryu was silenced when Chip whipped out a switchblade. The ninja stared at the tiny weapon for a second, then at Chip. "Really?"

"Ven y tomalo, vato," Chip told Kageryu. He threw the switchblade suddenly, tossing it at Kageryu who swatted it away with his sword. The movement shifted the sword off-center just enough for Chip to slip in close and stab his right foot straight up. The kick planted Chip's heel right in Kageryu's chin and knocked the ninja off his feet and almost a foot into the air. He fell back and was motionless for an instant, the force of the kick leaving him suspended in the air.

Chip heard running in the distance and snatched Kageryu's falling sword out of the air. The instant his hand curled around the handle, though, his fingers went numb. Chip tried to scream but his voice was entirely muted as his vision began to swirl. He stumbled back and tried to release the sword but his grip wouldn't let it go. As his consciousness warped, he threw himself to the ground and kicked the sword's blade to knock it from his hand.

He tried to shake off the disorientation, but gleaned only the lucidity to know up from down. He stumbled upwards towards the sky as two more kamas came sailing through the air. Chip simply pulled his feet out from underneath him and dropped, falling an easy thing to do.

The weapons sailed over his head and Chip fell to his back. The canopy overhead opened up and out dropped more camouflage-clad figures.

Chip rolled explosively to his left and slammed into a root, rolling over that as a ninja's sword struck the wood.

Chip got up to his feet, his mind returning, only for Kageryu to slice for him. The blade of his sword seemed to occupy a dozen different arcs, each slicing at different speeds like some fevered dream of death. Chip managed to leap back from them, only to collide with the ninja that had initially slashed at him. He knocked her down and rolled into a sprint, only to have another ninja slice to take Chip's head off.

Chip parried the slash at the ninja's hands and spun into him. He used his momentum to continue the spin and threw the ninja to the ground. Chip came back around, holding the stolen ninjato with expert poise as he faced off with Kageryu. More ninjas appeared out of the forest, exiting from the shadow and darkness, rising from the ground and dropping from the sky. They kept their distance, forming a ring so as not to interfere with their leader's work.

The tall, powerfully built ninja began to pace slowly around the great circle formed by the army of ninjas. The others crawled away, leaving Chip to face Kageryu. He didn't look away from his opponent, but felt the eyes of the crowd burned on him. Kageryu aimed his massive katana, half-again as long as Chip's stolen ninjato. "Bold," he said simply, as both praise and threat.

Chip settled his feet and changed his stance, shifting from a rooted samurai stance to something more mobile, on his toes and the sword held more casually. "I want to leave," he told Kageryu, as a warning and less a declaration.

The ninja spun the sword in his hand. "I will be happy to aid you," he said. "Though not as you might hope." Kageryu practically teleported at Chip, he moved so fast. The great ninja slashed at Chip so hard and so precise, the air of the world itself nearly bled. The blade of the sword, mightier than thunder and sharper than a scalpel, took blonde strands off the top of Chip's head, but the younger fighter slipped under the attack and slashed across Kageryu's midsection.

Kageryu turned and Chip slashed him again up through the chest, drawing a line of sharp blood, then beheaded the ninja with a sudden swing. A razor's edge drew a line across Kageryu's neck and his headless body collapsed to his knees.

Chip backed away from the corpse, stunned. He lowered the sword, his eyes huge with shock. "Geez..." He whispered numbly. He swallowed tightly and took a step back, then remembered where he was. He looked at the shadows in the forest, the army of ninjas, and terror took hold. With a

burst, he ran into the woods, the ninja chasing after him with a loud roar, murderous intent replacing territorial fury.

A moment later, Kageryu opened his eyes.

The giant ninja swallowed and felt a scratchy sensation along his throat. He sat up and blinked a few times, disoriented. He touched his skin and felt the bloody line sealing up. "What happened?" he asked. He was aware of Astrokel arriving by his side. She knelt and reported, "The intruder scored a fortunate hit upon you, my lord--" The senior ninja fell silent in shock.

Kageryu looked up, curious what so surprised her. Standing over him was a woman in dark red Persian-style armor. Black hair was pulled back in a series of braids across her crown. A few years older than Kageryu, she wore the smirk of a sibling. Kageryu was surprised and asked, "Tiamat? What are you doing here?"

"Well, as your underling was reporting, you have an intruder and he scored a fortunate hit upon you," the woman said, looking terribly amused. "Which is a long-winded way of saying you got your ass kicked." She grabbed Kageryu by the scruff of his uniform and pulled him to his feet effortlessly.

Taller than Astrokel by almost a foot, Tiamat had an indistinct oriental bearing and a decidedly powerful build. Skin that was a hint darker than Kageryu's, she roughly dusted off his bare arms until he finally griped, "Stop it," like a petulant child. He looked to the woman with some more dignity and asked again, "Tiamat, what are you doing here?"

"Your other siblings and I felt your sword taken, albeit briefly," she told her brother. "I came to make sure you had matters well in hand." She stifled a snicker. "I see all is well."

"My lord, the intruder," Astrokel reminded Kageryu.

Kageryu nodded and looked to Astrokel over his shoulder. "Where is he now?"

"Heading east," she reported. "Our forces still track and engage him when they can. We have yet to position any of our agents ahead of him and what traps we've attempted to stage he has seen through or found his way around."

Kageryu looked to the east, as did Tiamat. She wondered aloud, "Why east? Crossworld is to the south and Xelex's castle is north. What aid does he hope to find to the east?"

"He runs random," said Kageryu. "He is not seeking aid, only to escape us."

Tiamat snickered again. "Boy is he in trouble."

"Yes," Kageryu agreed, but troubled. "He is." He turned to Astrokel and ordered, "Join the others and monitor him but par down the engagements." Astrokel bowed and began to step back. "Order the lower ranks to cease engagement entirely. Only chunin and jonin." This troubled the female ninja but she backed away as ordered, fading into thin air.

Tiamat watched the exchange and asked, "Something vexes thee?"

"He's a human from Earth," Kageryu told her, still rubbing his throat. "Brought here by accident, deemed to have no appreciable ninja heritage, yet he fights my shinobi to a standstill." Tiamat hedged, not prepared to acknowledge that to be a great accomplishment. "He scored some very real hits on me," Kageryu added, checking his throat with the reflection off a small dagger. Again Tiamat waffled. Kageryu glared at her and added, "He fought Octavius to a standstill."

Now Tiamat nodded. "No small feat, that one."

"Yes, and I...wait, the others are small feats in your eyes?" Kageryu growled.

Tiamat didn't respond. She looked into the forest, distance not constraining her. "He's capable," she declared as she studied his desperate fight against his army of pursuers. "Earth's...which one is Earth? Nevermind," she recalled. She watched Chip dash between trees and underbrush, dealing with ninja traps as well as ninja attacks. "He's losing steam."

Kageryu told her, "We've been after him for about an hour. I'm certain he's exhausted. And this after a brief exchange with Octavius."

Tiamat nodded. "You'll wearing him out soon," she said, not pleased with the prospect.

"Eventually. He cannot escape the forest," Kageryu agreed a bit curtly. He checked his palm to make sure he was no longer bleeding from the neck.

Tiamat stared for a moment more. "He's..." She looked at Kageryu, a little surprised.

He nodded. "I know."

"Huh," she said with some amusement. She swished her lips back and forth for a moment, then asked, "Mind if I engage him? Before your mighty forces finally defeat their greatest challenge yet?" Kageryu glowered at Tiamat, then gestured sarcastically into the distance. Tiamat chuckled as she looked after Chip, fading from sight in the process.

Chip ducked and glided to his left as he ran, a spinning metal star with four points flying by. The throwing star lodged deep into the trunk of a tree as Chip dashed passed. He ran around the building-sized tree, then leapt to his right to jump behind the trunk.

He dropped to one knee and gasped, taking a few precious gulps before he stood again and held his ninjato ready. He waited for ninja to come out from behind the tree, watching both sides for the abrupt appearance of mysteriously-clad figures.

Instead, Tiamat stepped around the tree. "Fie upon thee," she said simply, her voice like a sultry threat. She drew from her back a large broadsword, terrifying in its size and intimidating in its form. The massive sword with a gap along its fuller clashed in its dramatic, almost flamboyant, style with her understated and utilitarian red armor, but she had aimed the sword at Chip without trouble.

Chip stared down the blade of the sword and asked desperately, "Who are you?"

Tiamat smiled. "Not a friend," she informed him. She jerked forward, as though she would cleave him in two, but stayed her hand, faking him out. Chip sidestepped the attack and she hit him in the side with the pommel of her sword. The sharp edge of the butt of her sword handle tore his karate gi but didn't reach his flesh. She punched him in the face with the palm of her hand and then kicked him, sending him sailing over the soil of the forest.

Chip hit hard and slammed into the trunk of a giant tree. Nighttime dew sprinkled down around him as he rose, stunned by the car-crash ferocity of the strike. Meanwhile, Tiamat took her time approaching. "Kageryu seems to be having trouble with you, human-child," she said as she neared with the grace and poise of a fencer. She paused, though, and thought. "What's a human cub called? B-baby?" she checked with Chip, unsure.

Chip gawked at her. "What the fuck is wrong with you people?" He ripped his ninjato up in a defensive stance. The tip of the blade shook, whether from hysteria or fear, Tiamat wasn't certain. "I just want to leave. Let me leave!"

"What fun would we find in that?" she asked, nearing. She sliced overhead at Chip and he stepped aside and slashed at her. She stepped casually out of the way of the strike, maintaining and controlling their distance with no trouble. She tested him with several more strikes, all of which Chip avoided or parried, never blocked. And always, he counterstruck to varying degrees of near-success.

Tiamat sparred with Chip for a moment, scoring a few inconsequential strikes on him, but nothing more serious than a few rips to his karate gi and

a single ugly cut under his right eye. Blood trickled down his cheek but he continued to face her. Her pale lips curled at the corners as they fought. After several exchanges, Chip backed away from Tiamat, farther than before. "I wouldn't run, child, if I were you," she warned.

Chip checked behind him and saw only the dark forest, the trees and branches churning in gusts of wind like a storm lay on the horizon. He faced Tiamat and asked, "Well, I don't want to fight, so why shouldn't I run?"

"Because an army of Shinobi lay beyond the veil I have drawn over our discussion," she told Chip with sobering sincerity. Her voice was strong, like a rumble of thunder behind distant clouds. "The gathered might of Kageryu's forces surround us. Just beyond the shroud of visibility do they await." She smiled rakishly. "With fury and rage, do they set their gaze upon you." She laughed and paced a bit, leaving Chip alone for a moment. "You, who have shamed their lord. They would have your life," she promised Chip.

Chip couldn't stop himself from glancing over his shoulder, but he saw nothing but forest extending into infinity. "Today you die, child," Tiamat told Chip, once again pointing her sword at him like the grim reaper aiming a single bony finger between his eyes. "If you are warrior, you will die at my hands. If you are coward, you will die at the hands of an army. But whatever the timbre of your character, you enjoy the last few precious moments of your life." Her eyes narrowed at him, almost in envy. Her gaze was piercing and her eyes were multichromatic and just a hint too large for her perfect face.

Chip's heart beat fast as he stood before Tiamat. His throat burned, each breath stinging like he was breathing ice. Yet he closed his eyes and willed himself to calm. His heart slowed and his breathing stabilized. He opened his eyes to face Tiamat and she realized she faced an entirely different opponent. "Maybe," he said stoically. He took up a new stance, the sword held high and by his head.

Tiamat seemed to accept his choice with a tip of her head and took up an identical stance. "Death at the hands of a god is the most any human can ever hope for," she promised Chip. She began to circle around him. He took mirrored steps to match, the two poised in perfect opposition. "To die in the presence of the divine is the best death imaginable."

"'Best death' is an oxymoron," Chip told her simply, his face impassive.

Tiamat smirked in approval and stepped forward. Chip did the same, then doubled-down with a slash at her. She parried his slash and returned it from a high angle. Chip slid under the slash and swung at her midsection. Tiamat moved like a dancer, narrowly avoiding his strike with a great bend

in her body, then used her supple rebounding to swing her sword powerfully. Chip parried and avoided her massive blade and moved in, punching her across the jaw. He spun with the punch and came around with a powerful kick to her face, and finished the spin with his sword slicing down on her forearm.

The blade slipped behind her bracers and cleaved deep into the meat of her strong muscles, hacking down into the bone. The steel chipped as her hand went limp and her sword dropped. She turned around to Chip, her eyes flashed with rage. Literal fire erupted from her glare as she grabbed him around the throat, all civility lost.

With a single hand and more rage than a volcano has heat, she yanked Chip off his feet. He leapt with her and kicked her in the armpit with both feet, knocking himself free and driving her to the ground in the same motion. She hit hard in a pile of leaves while around them, the forest transformed as if revealed by a bolt of lightning. Hundreds upon hundreds of ninjas crowded the treeline in all directions, turning the fight into a spectacle of the ages. They were silent as they focused on downed Tiamat.

The woman gathered herself to her knees, shaking her hand as her wound healed in seconds. Muscle and flesh rejoined seamlessly. Even the blood red fabric of her armor returned to pristine perfection. Tiamat rose to her feet and turned, furious, only to find Kageryu standing where Chip had been. She looked confusedly around and asked, "Which way did he go?"

Kageryu rather sarcastically pointed to his left. Tiamat checked and saw a gap in the ninja army, most of whom were turning to give chase. "Huh," she remarked. She looked at Kageryu, conveying her genuine opinion with just an impressed nod. Kageryu nodded in agreement.

Chip's lungs burned as he knelt behind the bush, pressed against the base of the giant tree. He covered his mouth to keep from being heard, his lungs and heart burning in exhaustion. He risked peeking around the tree, unable to see any of the Shinobi and knowing that was no guarantee they weren't there. He shifted and leaned against the tree, his eyes closed. Sitting on a root, he tried to rest enough to think his way through his next move.

"I must confess," Kageryu said, terrifying Chip. The boy turned where he was seated to find Kageryu leaning against the tree, his arms crossed, one leg propped up on the trunk. "I am impressed," he said like he almost resented uttering those words. He looked down at Chip, the boy still not having moved except to slide his hand towards the handle of the stolen sword. "That will not be necessary," Kageryu told Chip simply.

He stepped away from the tree and walked out into the forest proper. His arms were still crossed as he seemed to half-stroll, half-pace about. In starlight that solely illuminated the forest, Kageryu was practically a silhouette against the lighter shadows of the night. "It has been many years since..." He slowly realized he was talking to himself. "Come out from the bush," he told Chip. Nothing happened for a second and Kageryu sighed and – a little irritated – stormed over to the bush. "I said come out from the—"

Chip was gone.

Chip ran.

The straight-edged sword in his hand, he dashed between trees as he sprinted this way and that, darting through the underbrush of the forest. He spared only occasional glances back, confirming he saw no one following but without any way to know that for certain. He kept running, changing directions often, using natural breaks in the terrain to hide the light tracks left by his sneakers in the soft forest soil.

He reached a clearing, a momentary opening in the forest and skidded to a halt. Chip panted roughly and checked behind him, then double-checked the clearing itself. It seemed clear. A tiny pool of water was fed by a small stream recessed into the fertile ground. Chip risked approaching it and saw no one and no traps. He glanced into the crystal water and knelt over the crack in the ground. He bent down and scooped up a palm of water, swallowing it quickly.

"As I was saying," Kageru resumed, standing right behind Chip. Chip didn't even bother to check. He just leapt over the stream and started for the edge of the clearing. "Are you really going to do this again?" Kageryu called, not giving pursuit. This time, Chip slowed and finally stopped, just inches from the edge of the clearing. He turned cautiously back around and looked at the giant ninja warily. His sword was held ready, as was he.

"I'll not pursue you, if that's what you're after," Kageryu offered Chip patiently, not bridging the distance between them. Chip said nothing. He only moved laterally, keeping the sword handy but not threateningly held. "You are here by accident," Kageryu told Chip, as if both an admission and an apology. "A gust," he emphasized, "of the winds of fate. I know not if you worked some magic to follow Astrokel, or merely slipped through the door, as it were, to find yourself embroiled in our little strife. What I do know," Kageryu told Chip honestly, "is that you have accomplished survival against the might of the Shinobi in a Shinobi forest. That's..." He hedged before deciding with some minor awe, "...a thing."

Chip stared at Kageryu for a long moment, then glanced around the forest itself. "Am I still in danger?" he asked.

The towering giant of a ninja smirked to one side. "No, boy, you are out of danger." Kageryu stepped across the stream with a single, long stride of his powerful legs. He approached Chip, yet in a manner that didn't warrant a response. He held his hand to Chip and the boy turned over the sword without compunction. Kageryu looked over the stolen sword, as if it were a trophy of Chip's accomplishment. He looked across the blade at Chip and practically quizzed, "And what will you do now?"

Chip seemed bereft of options. He glanced around, like he was trying to find a strategy guide to deal with the not-wholly unfamiliar situation. "Uh..." He scratched behind his head. "Um..."

"Will you return home?" asked Kageryu, turning the sword around in his hand, holding it so it ran up the back of his arm.

"In order to do that, I'd need to know where this place is," Chip admitted to him cautiously.

"Not entirely true," excepted Kageryu. "If you wish, I can see you returned home tonight. You will be dropped off at your very...doorstep? Do you people have doors?"

Chip couldn't tell if the ninja was being serious or mocking him. "Yes," he decided cautiously.

"I will see you returned home, though I suspect 'home' appeals little to you," Kageryu ventured, walking around Chip. As he circled the blonde boy, Chip noticed the sword he'd handed over was gone from Kageryu's grasp. "You seem the type of person whom would take an opportunity when it arrives."

"Depends on the opportunity," Chip said cautiously, turning with the ninja.

Kageryu nodded without looking at Chip. His expression was one of distraction, like he was paying Chip only a token of attention while he listened to a music album and a lecture simultaneously. "Would you stay?" he asked Chip, glancing at him.

"...stay?" Chip asked, confused.

"Among the Shinobi," offered Kageryu. "You are not one of us but you survived against us. And without magic, as well."

Chip's heart skipped an anxious beat. "M-magic?" he asked, trying to sound calm.

Kageryu's eyes twinkled with delight. "Yes, child. Magic." He looked up at the stars beyond the canopy of the great forest trees. He laughed, as if at himself, then said, "You need not make a decision now." He turned and gestured to the forest Chip had escaped through. Chip turned and

discovered behind him, somehow, was the very edge of the forest. Beyond it, nighttime fields were combed by a soft breeze that coursed through the warm air. The breeze carried just the subtlest tint of an ocean scent. Stars twinkled like diamonds in infinite velvet night. Chip could see light in the distance and could almost make out a massive shape like a skyscraper rising over the rolling hills.

"Go," Kageryu told him, adding, "If you wish." He walked next to Chip and crossed his arms, looking out over the nighttime beauty. "Beyond those fields of grain is civilization akin to what you know. Explore it, if you wish, and experience a new life in a new world." He turned around, somewhat demonstratively. "Or, stay here."

Chip squinted to see into the spanning distance. On the glowing horizon looked to be a castle, like a medieval-style fantasy castle out of some fairy tale. Chip shook his head, certain he was seeing wrong. "What will I find here?" he asked the ninja beside him.

Kageryu smiled and assured him, "Magic." He began to walk very slowly back into the forest. Chip looked again into the wide world of vibrant beauty. "Magic, and training, and knowledge." Kageryu stopped and turned, half-observed by the darkness of the forest, his face rendered a mask beneath the shadows of the trees. "Tell me, Chip Masters, what is it you seek?"

Chip stared for a moment more before he gave up on seeing what the castle's shape really was. He turned to Kageryu and said, "I seek..." His words failed him and his gaze fell. He glanced down at his right hand, flexing his fingers thoughtfully. "I seek answers."

Kageryu's eyebrow raised. "Answers to what questions?" Chip only shrugged. Kageryu turned slightly, thoughtfully. "Interesting," was his only response. He took a breath and glanced away as though he'd heard something far off. "Make your decision," he told Chip. "Come or go." He nodded into the fields just beyond the forest. "Search. Explore. Experiment. Decide." He fixed his gaze on Chip. "Return, if you wish. Enter my forest – as only you will be allowed – and come to the camp if you so desire. Your invitation awaits."

Kageryu turned and walked into the forest, slowly becoming shadow until he was nothing more than a part of the night. Chip watched him disappear, unable to fully process what he had seen. He glanced back around and looked into the fields. He scratched his temple and exhaled slowly, realizing he was simultaneously exhausted and amped up.

Chip walked into the fields and felt the plains breeze brush against him. He stood still, even leaning slightly into the breeze, his eyes closed. He drank in the feeling, letting it refresh him from the outside in. He heard

the leaves of the trees rustle and the tall wild grass and the spanning the fields of crops sway in waves, blown by the untamed wind.

Chip opened his eyes and felt calm. A strange sense of ecstatic belonging welled up in him, like he was nostalgic for that moment. He smiled, tears in his eyes, and chuckled at his own amazement. He turned around and started back into the forest. He made it only a few steps into the shadows before he realized Kageryu walked next to him. Chip was less startled than he expected he would be. "Wise choice," Kageryu told him with a proud smile.

"I've been known to make them," said Chip. "On occasion," he qualified, walking deeper into the forest alongside the giant ninja.