

# Chip Masters, Ninja

## Part Three

A Crossworld Short Story

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FROM THE MIND OF

**RVA**

*"What did I tell you about camping? Monsters. TV is always right."  
- Bumblebee, Transformers the Animated Series*

The two walked in silence through the darkness of the forest. Chip's throat burned and his muscles ached as he stepped briskly to keep up with the significantly larger Kageryu's long strides. The light of the forest fires were either too far to be seen or the rain had quenched their thirst because the forest was entirely cloaked in black and deep blue. The only illumination offered were distant stars in the aloof sky. Chip saw them through the skyscraper-tall canopy of trees and felt hidden from their view. In the distance, fireflies alit the dark recesses of the forest, but more to create shadows than illuminate the darkness.

"I'm Chip, by the way," he told Kageryu. His voice sounded strange in the arboreal silence. "Chip Masters."

"So you told me," the giant ninja smiled. "I am Kageryu, Lord of the Shinobi."

"I gathered," Chip said genuinely. He glanced to his left and, as he passed a tree, found two ninjas in dark blue and green attire walking where, a moment ago, there had been no one. On the other side of Kageryu, Chip suddenly noticed a few more hidden warriors, walking into sight as if they'd always been visible. Chip focused on walking forward, not betraying his growing awareness that all around him was appearing an ever-increasing army of men and women, all in armor, all walking in the same direction as their leader. None said a word or even spared Chip a look. The silence unnerved him. He felt his safety in question.

Noticing the ninja made Chip self-conscious. Seeing them as people, individuals amongst them, even as identically clad as so many of them were, Chip felt pangs of mortal guilt. "Sorry, about...your people."

Kageryu kept walking, his eyes fixed forward. "My people?"

"I'm pretty sure a few of my...I know I got some of them with a blade," he said.

Kageryu nodded. "You will be surprised what our medical knowledge can heal."

Again, Chip nodded, keeping an eye on all around him. "I don't doubt it." He glanced behind him and saw Astrokell a few steps back. She didn't glare at Chip but her gaze was more venomous than friendly. Chip faced forward and found himself almost grateful to have remained near to Kageryu. His sense of personal danger was not abated.

The ground began to slope up ever so slightly and a lighter forest waited beyond the rise. "I invite you to the home of the Shinobi," Kageryu said. He stopped at the crest of the hill and looked back to Chip, inviting, almost daring him. Chip ascended the hill and stopped as well. A stunned awe overtook him.

Quietly between the trees was nestled a massive fortress. A veritable town had been constructed in trunk and branch of mighty trees that would dwarf redwoods. As elaborate as a city and as masterful as a painting, the fortress was alive with ninja walking among the trees, along bridges and standing atop platforms. The ninjas that had joined Kageryu and Chip continued on into the subtle field of the fortress and began to enter the trees. Some went through doorways, while others climbed ladders and ropes, while a few more merely leapt impossibly into the heights.

"What is this place?" Chip asked as the ninja passed him and Kageryu, heading towards the massive tree at the heart of the forest.

"Home," Kageryu told him. He walked towards the city, only to stop halfway down the steep hill that led into the large clearing. Devoid of stray leaf or splintered branch, the grassy field was wide and held only the massive trees in which the fortress was settled. He turned back to Chip and expounded. "We call it home. It has no name, no other designation. Merely home. Not our home. Not the home. Only home."

Standing at the base of a tree bigger than just about any building Chip could ever have recalled seeing, he looked up into the spanning distance, seeing no end to the mighty thing. "Home," he repeated, the word feeling as alien to him as the concept.

"You see a fortress," Kageryu observed, watching the boy before him. Chip glanced worriedly at the big ninja, then at the towering structures before him, as if he'd missed some critical cue. "Worry not. Your eyes do not deceive you. Merely, home is as the viewer imagines."

Chip had no idea what to say, so he only nodded. "Okay, but how does that work?" He gestured back to the ninja who were returning to home. "How does any of this work?"

"What do you mean?" asked Kageryu as he ascended stone steps, worn by an age's worth of warriors traversing them.

"Well, I mean, ninjas on earth were intelligence mercenaries," asked Chip, having trouble negotiating the steps without handrails. His sneakers did a poor job of stabilizing him. Around him, more of the shadowy figures ascended elsewhere, many eschewing the steps entirely. Despite a veritable army, there was scarcely a sound. "The ninja on earth were hired to gather information and as spies, by the shogunate or the bakufu of ancient Japan."

"Those were..." Kageryu wrestled with his word choice. "The ninja of ancient Japan were a remote operation. They were the local branch office. And as such, they had to do work to pay the bills." He resumed walking.

"So one of the famous information gatherers in history did that as a dayjob?" Chip marveled, trying to keep up.

"Essentially, yes," Kageryu told him. "My organization operates in many places, under many fronts. Always thieves and assassins, always spies. Many names." He spoke with a nostalgic melancholy, as though words history had

forgotten were among his favorites. Kageryu turned to Chip, the two now standing in a quiet landing between levels. "We are the eyes that see into and through the darkness." He put his hand on Chip's shoulder. "We are the living shadow, against which true darkness is battled."

"True darkness?" questioned Chip.

Kageryu seemed about to answer, but caught himself and held up his hand. "There is plenty of time to learn of the dangers that exist all around us."

"There's a comforting thought," Chip mumbled.

"For now, you must become acclimated to your new life and adjust quickly," said Kageryu. "You've skills to catch up to your combat prowess and your intellect." He started towards the giant trees.

"I'm a fast learner," Chip told the ninja. A wry smile came over Kageryu but otherwise, he did not respond.

Kageryu exited onto a bridge, an outcropping between the lowest limbs of the great tree. Chip followed and looked out at the town situated between the great roots of the trees. Chip paused, then looked at the bridge he was crossing. "Was this..." Kageryu looked back at him. Chip tapped his sneaker toe on the root, then slowly looked again at the magnificent city above him. A vast network of bridges interconnected between the branches and the trunks of the massive trees. Forming what seemed the core of the forest, the arboreal metropolis was alight with natural illumination from candles, torches, and luminescent lichen alike. The city was turned by soft, fresh air and seemed to exist in an eternal twilight, the world soft and calm but not dark.

Chip looked down at the bridge again, his mind struggling with the city in every measure. "These weren't carved," he slowly grasped.

The big ninja shook his head. "No. Grown," Kageryu told Chip, wondering why such interest. "The forest is grown and guided, not unlike a child." He tilted his head. "Think you only cultivation can occur with intelligence? Think you only mammals can learn?" He resumed along the path, Chip following.

"You will be issued your equipment and your station," Kageryu told Chip as they began to wind their way up steps that curled around the trunk of the tree. "I shall promote you to a station of some esteem but well beneath your capabilities. Best to let any lagging skills have time to catch up than to risk a weak link break the chain."

"Yeah, no, that makes sense," Chip agreed.

Kageryu chuckled. "I am glad you agree."

"I'm not being sarcastic, man," Chip told him, stopping on the side of the tree. "I'm just, I'm trying to say I get it." The towering ninja, taller now that he stood steps ahead of Chip, turned around. The swarthy skin of his face and his dark eyes were alight by the first hints of the breaking day. "I do," Chip doubled-down.

"You get it," Kageryu repeated, heavy sarcasm. Chip nodded. "Then how far up are we?" Chip began to answer, then glanced out from the stairs. Beneath him spanned not a few dozen meters but stories upon stories. The forest floor was obscured by hazy mists like clouds lost from the sky. Chip looked up instead and saw the magnificent tree spanning still taller into the heavens. "You 'get it' in relation to that which you have known," Kageryu told the new recruit. "Yet what you must 'get' is that your perspective is as subjective to reality as your vision is to your placement."

Chip looked to Kageryu and found him gone. In his place was a doorway, set into a small circular structure akin to an enclosed gazebo. Gone were the stairs Chip had stood atop and instead he found himself on a pathway that wound through the tree as casually as a sidewalk wound through a suburb. Chip faced the door and sighed. "Oh well," he shrugged and pushed inside.

Eight ninja looked at Chip Masters.

Standing in the doorway of the small, circular room, lit only by a wide window that let in the forest dawn, Chip wasn't sure what to say at first. The other men, all in their mid-teens like he, were crouched by their bedrolls, rolling them towards the wall with a fluidity that spoke to the chore's frequency. They all slowed or stopped mid-motion at the newcomer.

"Hey," said Chip with a bit of a wave.

The eight ninjas were all clad in dark, cool colors. Deep grays and browns, greens and blues, they were largely devoid of black at all. Wearing split-toed sandals tied up to their knees, they carried the same semblance and regarded Chip with the same dismissal.

After only a moment, the others went back to cleaning up from their sleep. Unenthused by their friendliness, Chip crossed the small room for a sleeping pad that was wound up in a tight coil. Next to it was a small stand that was part night table, part trunk for personal belongings. Chip opened the double doors of the main cabinet, finding it empty inside. He pulled out the draw atop and found it likewise empty. "Do I get stuff issued or is this just for my things?" he asked to the others. A few spared him glances but none of them spoke. Chip noted their silence with irritation and shut the case.

A loud gong sounded in the distance and the others emptied out of the room with nary a sound. Chip turned and found the room empty except one other ninja. A young boy, perhaps a year younger than Chip, he had a shaved head and Asian features. He wore a dark green ninja outfit with brown armored plates and a sword with a straight, single-sided blade on his back. Chip noticed him remaining behind and asked, "What was that?"

"Breakfast," he explained. He very quietly pulled the door shut and told Chip, "I'm Hatsumi."

"Chip Masters," he said, standing.

"Yeah, I heard," Hatsumi said with a smile. More boy than man, his eyes were bright. "The human that followed Astrokell over," he said like it was some feat. "You must be crazy."

"Who is she?" Chip exclaimed, laughing with the relief of casual conversation. "Is she like a recruiter?"

"Yeah, pretty much," said Hatsumi as he wandered over, his arms crossed. "She's one of Kageryu's recruitment agents. He sends them out into the world and they find prospective recruits. Our numbers have dwindled of late, though, so I don't know if there are fewer recruitment agents or fewer viable recruits or what."

"What kind of numbers?" Chip asked.

Hatsumi shrugged. "I don't know. This camp isn't rational. Some days there will be a few dozen of us. Some days, there will be score beyond counting. I..." He just shrugged again, at a loss. "Most of us," he said with a look back around the empty room, "have learned to pretend we don't notice or we know what's going on."

"Yeah, this seemed like a friendly bunch," Chip said of the absent others.

Hatsumi nodded. "It's kind of a thing here. Nobody's all that talkative." He turned to Chip's bedroll and the cabinet. "You'll be issued some supplies, but you can keep personal belongings so long as they fit in the chest."

"Where do we get stuff?" Chip asked.

"Our chunin will show you," Hatsumi told him. "Her name is Kagumi. We'll see her at breakfast."

"Cool," Chip said. He brushed back his dirty blonde hair and asked, "I didn't get any sleep last night and fought Kageryu as well as a bunch of other ninja. Can I, I don't know, get a pass for today?"

"Nope," Hatsumi told him with total sympathy.

"Great," Chip sighed. He gestured at the door and said, "Lead the way."

Hatsumi started through the door and they headed out into the barracks proper. The halls were narrow, with short ceilings and lichen running along the edges to give soft illumination. The floors creaked with each step Chip made, the supple young wood planks announcing his every movement. The noises were not mirrored by Hatsumi. "Classes are in the morning," Hatsumi explained as he led Chip on. He whispered, the silence allowing for the softest noises to be heard. "The afternoons are free, though you'll usually spend that time working on a project or preparing for another class. Evening battle practice follows, then lights out."

"Huh," was all Chip said. He tried to walk quieter with his sneakers but succeeded at very little.

"Again, Kagumi will..." Hatsumi stopped when they reached the exit of the barracks. Stretching out before Chip was a massive forest clearing. Like coming out of a tunnel, Chip felt like he was looking out over the center of a densely populated city. The great trees that made up the city were evenly spaced in a ring of nine, with the clearing like the center of the very universe. Devoid of the usual

thick tufts of trees and ground shrubbery, the ground was a thick layer of soft grass from which the nine massive trees sprung. In the branches of the trees, a small city had been constructed, accessible by a precious few stairwells that wound along the thick tree trunks to the ground.

The ground, however, was not vacant but filled with ninja beyond count. The entire floor of the forest was covered in masked warriors in greens, dark blues, browns, and other natural tones. "What in the..." Chip whispered in stunned awe. He noticed Hatsumi had fallen silent, so he did the same. The two apparent stragglers stayed at the edge of the barrack's exit, almost hiding within the doorway.

In the center of the army of ninja, like the vortex of a whirlpool, stood Kageryu and another man. Unlike the tall ninja in a sleeveless uniform, the stranger wore black armor like sculpted onyx. He was white like Chip and carried a massive sword on his back, captured inside what seemed mechanical clasps securing the weapon to the armored back-piece. The sword was so impossibly big, it seemed almost comical, yet the man's expression and the deference of the ninja around him impressed to Chip that it was anything but sarcastic.

"Oroboris," Hatsumi gasped. "What's he doing here?"

"What?" asked Chip.

"That's Oroboris," the ninja whispered, pointing at the armored figure next to the ninja leader. "He's Kageryu's sibling. If he's here, things must be serious." He looked at Chip and could tell the newest recruit was oblivious to the significance of the man. "Ouroboris?" Chip just blinked. "The Infinity Dragon." Chip didn't follow and looked again at his guide. "Where are you from?!" Hatsumi remarked with a stunned shake of his head.

"Attention," Kageryu said effortlessly. His voice reached Chip's ear with ease, sounding as casual and simple as if the man was standing next to him, not almost out of sight. "Xelex's incursion into my forest last night has raised concerns about our status and readiness. For this reason, we will be forgoing today's activities in favor of an exercise to secure the forest and ascertain how the demon entered home. The Jonin will confer with me, they with the Chunin, and the Chunin with the Genin." Kageryu turned towards his brother, casually adding, "Await your orders."

Hatsumi's stomach gurgled and he poked at it. "There goes breakfast." Chip chuckled, which made Hatsumi laugh. "I guess we wait to be told what to do," he said, looking around for the others in their team.

"Any idea what the exercise will be?" Chip asked, sitting down to dangle his legs through the railings of the barrack's walkway. He looked at the ninja who all stood in complete silence and perfect motionlessness as they awaited orders. "Man, does anybody move?"

"Not that I've seen," Hatsumi said, sitting down like Chip. He swung his legs a little, mimicking Chip's swaying sneakers with his split-toe tabi sandals. "Everybody here's pretty stiff, I think," he said, looking at the ninja lining the tree

branches and on the forest floor. "Anybody with a personality is probably given an assignment. We've got infiltrators all over."

Chip laughed eagerly at the implications. "Cool!"

"Yes, it is," came a female voice behind them. Hatsumi leapt up, prompting Chip to do the same. Coming out of the barracks hall as if she'd been following the pair specifically came a middle-aged woman with dark brown hair done up in a bun. She wore a light slate gray outfit with a few brown highlights, her attire devoid of any of the hard plates of her peers. Her arms were crossed and she leveled a disapproving look at the two boys. "Why aren't you at attention?" she asked, mostly to Hatsumi.

Chip didn't even know where to begin explaining his actions that he didn't know were inappropriate. Hatsumi took the lead. "Ma'am, I was helping Chip find his feet. He was very confused and when breakfast was called—"

"Shinobi learn by observation, not instruction," Kagumi told Hatsumi, clearly a reminder.

Chip verbally stepped between the two. "Instruction speeds the process," he retorted.

The woman centered her gaze fully on Chip. "Aren't you a little new to be mouthing off to your superior?"

"Oh, you're my superior?" Chip said with sarcastic realization. He extended his hand to shake hers. "Chip Masters."

Her expression soured even further. "I know who you are," she told him harshly. "I was wondering if you were arrogant or merely clueless."

"Aren't they synonymous?" asked Chip. Hatsumi closed his eyes, wincing in preparatory sympathy at the pain he was sure Chip was about to meet. "I mean, you can't be a stickler for details AND arrogant, because then you would know your arrogance is unfounded or exaggerated."

Kagumi merely stared for a second. "You really want me to kick you out, don't you?"

"No, I want you to punish the guy who caused the problem, not the student who took the initiative to solve it," Chip answered without hesitation. "Or better yet, don't punish the guy who literally an hour ago fought your head guru to a standstill." Hatsumi began thinking of what he'd say at Chip's funeral. "I know I have a lot to learn and I'm eager to learn it," Chip insisted, "but punishing somebody for trying to help me is not a lesson I will ever learn."

Kagumi's expression suddenly softened a little and her stern gaze very slowly twisted into a smile. She glanced at Hatsumi and then chuckled. "Your tone is going to get you into trouble," she warned Chip with what sounded like pride. "Your spirit however will serve you well." She faced Hatsumi. "You are excused from attention, for the moment." Based off Hatsumi's expression, Chip guessed this was both a blessing and a curse. "Take Chip and get him fully outfitted for his life here."

"Yes, ma'am," Hatsumi confirmed with a bow of his head. He looked to Chip and very subtly gestured for him to follow. Chip faced Kagumi and gave her the same bow, making her eyebrow go up in amusement. Hatsumi dashed away and Chip ran to follow him. He chased after Hatsumi who ran along the bridges connecting the huge trees, the two darting between standing ninjas and making their way along the great elevated expanse.

As they ran, Chip glanced down into the army of waiting ninja where Kageryu and Oroboris stood together, conversing. Both men's eyes raised to him and their words seemed to slow as they took note of him passing through home.

Hatsumi ran into the room and stopped with a bit of a skid. He looked around the huge store room, surprised to find it empty. Chip arrived a second later and wasn't sure what the holdup was. "I've never seen it unoccupied before," Hatsumi told Chip. He entered the room made up of shelves and cubbies full of materials, everything from blankets and clothes to herbs and glass vials.

"Okay, let's see," Hatsumi said, accepting that they were alone. "What do you need?" He bent over to one shelf near the floor and retrieved what looked like a toothbrush. Still at the door, Chip saw a man step out of seemingly thin air. In a cream-colored ninja outfit, Chip didn't know how he'd been obfuscated by the dark wood of the shelves but the instant he was visible, Chip kicked high for the man's head.

The ninja caught Chip's foot in the air and kicked him in the groin before shoving him into the door. Hatsumi turned to see the attacker and slashed with his straight sword. The cream-colored ninja blocked the strike with his armored greaves and punched Hatsumi in the arm, disarming him. He came up with an elbow that hit hard enough to knock Hatsumi straight up and nearly slam him into the ceiling.

Chip leapt off the doorframe and tackled the ninja around the waist and knocked him to the floor of the storeroom. The ninja wiggled for position and rolled Chip, ending up straddling his waist. He drew back his fist, but Hatsumi leapt onto him, locking in a fierce chokehold. The ninja tried to fight free but the blood choke stole his consciousness in seconds.

The man fell to the ground and Chip clambered up, as did Hatsumi. Chip caught his breath and stretched his legs, grateful he was still wearing his cup from the karate class he'd just exited prior to arriving in the ninja's forest. Hatsumi, though, looked amazed. Rubbing his bruised jaw, he stared at the cream-colored ninja as he started to awaken. "Who is this guy?" asked Chip.

"Auron, the guardian," Hatsumi told Chip. "He guards the storeroom."

"Why'd he attack us?" Chip asked.

"Because thieves are not suffered," said Auron, standing up. Hatsumi offered his hand and Auron accepted it. "Bold of you to steal in broad daylight."

"We were sent under orders, by our Chunin, Kagumi," Hatsumi told him.

Auron stared disbelievingly at Hatsumi for a second, then his eyes traveled up. Chip watched him for a second, then turned to see where he was staring. Auron stared distantly for a second, as if he was reading some far-off billboard, then nodded. "So she did." He turned to Chip Masters. "What's your weapon of choice?"

"He hasn't had one selected yet," Hatsumi told him.

"Sword," declared Kageryu.

The three men all turned as Kageryu strode into the storeroom, Oroboris right behind him. Hatsumi bowed his head and backed to the wall, Auron doing the same to the opposite wall. Chip wasn't sure what to do, so he bowed his head and followed Hatsumi. Chip doing so made Kageryu chuckle. "He picks up quick," Oroboris told his brother.

"I told you," Kageryu told his sibling as he approached the wall of diamond shelves. Selecting from the crook of a higher shelf, the tall ninja pulled out a straight blade sword and removed it halfway from its wood and cloth sheath. He approved and tossed the weapon across the room to Chip. "How does that feel?"

Chip unsheathed the sword and tested the sturdy blade. "Fine?" he ventured, unsure what he was testing. He glanced at Hatsumi, whose head was still down and he was clearly unsure what to make of these unprecedented developments. "What's going on?" Chip asked with a nod out the door, to the gathering of the army.

"Do not speak to the master!" barked Auron dutifully.

Oroboris seemed confused. He looked at Kageryu. "Is that really a rule?"

"No," he said as he checked a pack of throwing stars. "About half the rules in this place I didn't make or approve."

"Why not correct them?" asked Chip.

Kageryu shrugged, most of his attention spent appraising the throwing stars. "That seems like a lot of work." He handed the metal projectiles to Chip. "These are all you get issued. Any more and you have to procure them on your own or make them yourself."

Chip looked at the four-point stars in a small cloth pack and said, "Okay," not quite sure why they were given to him. "What's going on?"

"Xelex is—" Oroboris began to answer.

"Hey," Kageryu stopped him, like he was jumping ahead of him in line at the supermarket. Oroboris gestured at the situation, totally confused at the protocol. "Xelex entering the forest should not have been possible," Kageryu told Chip. "I am sending the ninja out to test for weaknesses in our defenses and ascertain how he did it. And more importantly, why."

"Who is Xelex?" asked Chip. Hatsumi glanced up enough to glare at Chip, incredulous that he didn't know and incredulous that he was asking Kageryu for a tutorial on the obvious.

"The...enemy?" Oroboris answered, unsure.

Kageryu waffled at the declaration. "Yeah, kind of? I guess?" He turned back to Chip. "Anyway, I'm also sending a contingent of ninja beyond the confines of the forest to ascertain the movements of his troops and see if he's marching on one of the nearby kingdoms." Kageryu dropped a black ninja outfit into Chip's arms. "Guess what you're doing today?"

Chip looked shocked. "I...thought I had to wait on my Chunin to tell me?"

Kageryu looked amazed and turned back to Auron. "Where do you people get this stuff?" He told Chip. "This is my compound, you are my ninjas, and if I say you're going into the field, guess what?"

"I'm going into the field?" Chip guessed.

"You're going into the field," Kageryu confirmed almost simultaneously. He clapped Chip on the shoulder with a big 'I'm-almost-sure-you-won't-die' smile and began to depart.

"Master," Hatsumi said quickly.

"Silence!" Auron barked at the young Genin.

"Dude, lay off," Oroboris told the quartermaster.

"What?" Kageryu asked of Hatsumi from the door.

"I've been tutoring Chip since his arrival," the younger ninja told Kageryu, even with his head bowed and his eyes cast down. "May I continue to tutor him as he goes into the field?"

Kageryu puzzled through that for a moment. To Chip, he remarked, "You've been here for, like, ten minutes."

"It was a very enlightening ten minutes," Chip supported Hatsumi.

Kageryu thought for a second, then looked to Oroboris. "What do you think?"

"I think you run this place like a game of Calvinball," Oroboris told Kageryu, getting a snicker from Chip.

Kageryu told Hatsumi, "Sure, keep at it." He turned and with his sibling, the two icons departed.

Once Chip and Hatsumi were alone with Auron, they all stood straight. Chip put down the stuff in his arms and held out the ninja uniform that was clearly several sizes too small. "What the hell?" he balked.

"The Lord of the Shinobi has many concerns," Auron snapped at Chip, tearing the uniform from his grasp. He replaced it with one that looked to be perfectly Chip's size. "Sizing mortals is not one of them."

Chip glowered at Auron, then walked to the back of the storeroom to disappear behind a heavy curtain. "So Kageryu's not mortal?"

"The Shadow Dragon is a god," Auron told Chip.

"Are you serious?" Chip laughed, getting dressed.

"No, he's being honest," Hatsumi said. "Kageryu is not mortal; he is celestial." Chip appeared around the curtain, dressed in full ninja regalia: a black outfit that was tight where beneficial and loose where needed and fit perfectly. "You look good," said his partner.

"The pale skin and blonde hair will be a problem," Auron told Chip. He retrieved from a shelf a thick stick of makeup. "Learn to use this." Chip accepted the facepaint, then sat down to slip into the tabis of the uniform. Essentially thick socks with sandals on the bottom, the big toe was isolated from the other four.

"What's our day-to-day function like?" Chip asked as he stood, testing the feel of the tabi. He bounced from side to side, surprised to find the tabi so comfortable.

"No time for that now," Auron told Chip. "If you've got your equipment, then you need to be into the field. You've your assignment from the master."

"He said I, we were going into the field, that's it," Chip told the quartermaster. "How do we even know where to go or who to answer to?"

"I know," Hatsumi assured Chip. He gestured out with his head as he pulled the hood of his mask over his head. "Come on," he said as he affixed a ceramic mask shaped like a bird's beak over his mouth. Chip looked around for his own mask, but found no such piece. He looked at Auron, unsure if he was missing a piece but the stern man just pointed out the door. Chip pulled his hood over his head and headed out.

Hatsumi ran everywhere. The ninja ran in a peculiar manner, with his arms held out wide like wings and with short steps and high knees, like he was climbing a steep hill, even when running flat. What seemed a bizarre method of running quickly exhausted Chip as he struggled to keep up.

The young ninja ran across bridges and stairs while the air was alive with the leaps and sprints of other ninja, all going in a multitude of directions simultaneously without a sound or objection. The forest was silent except for the calls of insects and birds, as if the animal world was unaware of the ninjas' existence.

Hatsumi led a sprint down the nearest spiral stairs that wound around the trunk of the giant tree. He emptied out onto the forest floor where half a dozen groups were gathering. He turned and looked up as Chip rushed to catch up. Once Chip made it to the base, Hatsumi ran on, guiding him towards the edge of home.

Kagumi turned as Chip and Hatsumi arrived. In the center of a circle of approximately fifty or so ninjas of varying genders, ages, and ethnicities, the matron of their group stood with her hands behind her back as she paced around the circle. As the two joined the circle and while Hatsumi removed the ceramic half-mask from his jaw, Chip tried to note some indication that unified them, a patch or brand, but saw nothing. Kagumi was speaking to several ninja on the far side of the circle. As soon as she finished, a dozen of the figures turned and ran off. The circle tightened around the Chunin.

The woman who looked like a young grandmother turned around to Chip and Hatsumi. "Chip Masters, I will send you to the mountains." Chip looked for some indication from the others as to whether this was an easy assignment or not. He was afforded no such indication. "I would have you retrieve purdonas. All you can find."

Chip nodded certainly then raised a hand. "Purdonas are flowers," Hatsumi whispered. Chip lowered his hand.

Kagumi noted the exchange with a sigh. "Yuki, think you can survive without Hatsumi?" Kagumi addressed a woman about Chip's age who wore a uniform of deep blue and tan. The young woman with deep brown skin glanced at Hatsumi, then at Chip, then nodded to Kagumi. "Hatsumi, you are to accompany your new best friend to the mountains."

"New best friend?" Chip remarked.

"Hey, I ain't thrilled about it either," Hatsumi chided.

"Retrieve purdonas and try not to get lost," Kagumi finished. She stared at them and when they remained standing before them, she shooed them like she was encouraging toddlers. Hatsumi backed up a step, then grabbed Chip by the arm and tugged him away. They left the circle of ninja still awaiting their orders and began walking towards the edge of the clearing.

Chip looked back and saw the village of ninjas, now a series of huts on the ground with no tree in sight. "What the hell is going on?" he remarked.

"Is the tree...yeah, it is," Hatsumi noted. "Yeah, the place changes. Like, constantly. One time, I was walking up stairs, blinked, and boom, totally different. Fell right on my face."

"Geez," Chip said with a shake of his head. He yawned while his stomach groaned. "Man, we need to get some breakfast."

"We will, once we get out of here," Hatsumi told him. He returned his ceramic half-mask and, with just a glance behind to Chip, began to run. Chip sighed in pre-emptive exhaustion and took off after his friend.

Kneeling before the small stream, no wider than a meter, Hatsumi studied the crystal clear water for a moment. Chip watched him, not quite sure what was happening, when Hatsumi suddenly shoved his hand into the water. He pulled it out, water spraying everywhere, and cursed. "What are you doing?" asked Chip.

"Catching breakfast," Hatsumi told him, stabbing the water again with his hand. This time, he retrieved from the stream a writhing and wiggling fish. As he withdrew the fish, Hatsumi tossed it across the stream at Chip who panicked at the sudden projectile and scrambled to catch it. He managed to slap the fish between his hands and held it for just an instant before it began to dance free. It squirted out between his palms and shot into the air. Chip clapped at the fish a few times before finally catching it again.

"Eat it quick," Hatsumi said, pulling a second fish from the stream.

"Eat it ho—" Chip started to ask when he saw Hatsumi throw the entire fish into his mouth. "Dude!" he exclaimed.

Hatsumi's entire face pinched tight and stuck out his tongue in disgust. Chip decided to act and not think so he followed suit and threw the fish into his mouth. He quickly chomped down on the fish and regretted it. An intense salty taste made him shudder and he nearly threw up. He chewed fast and gulped down the entire fish in a single intense swallow. He dropped to his knees and tried to keep from giving up the meal. "Geez, that sucks!"

Hatsumi flopped onto his back and groaned. "Yeah, but...it sure beats an empty stomach, right?" Chip didn't respond. "Right?"

"I'm thinking!" Chip yelled back. He pulled himself to his feet and crawled to the stream and drank copiously from it. He sat back and stared up at the daylight peeking out through the sparse trees. Leaning back on one hand, he listened to the birds sing. The natural world sounded so alien from the rush hour traffic and urban conversations he was used to. "So what are ponchitas?"

"Purdonas," Hatsumi corrected, rinsing his mouth out. He began to search the stream for more fish.

"Yeah, those too. What are they?"

Hatsumi retracted his hand and, finding it empty, growled at the lost fish. "They're flowers. They're these purple and blue flowers. We use them to make an antiseptic." He tried again for a fish, with the same result. Chip knelt on the opposite side of the stream and looked down into the water. As if sensing his partner's curiosity, Hatsumi explained, "They're pipers. I think some of the other shinobi call them water pipers, so maybe there are sand pipers? They're nothing but fat and muscle so they're really filling. They spawn by the dozens so you can always—" He stabbed the water again. Again he came up empty-handed. "They're semi-transparent and you can see their guts, which is kind of gross, and it makes them hard to see."

"Eww," Chip said. He stabbed the water and pulled out a slimey, wiggling fish. "Here," he told Hatsumi, just before tossing the fish at him. Rather than scramble back for the catch, Hatsumi caught the fish with his mouth and chomped down like an animal.

Both ninjas were astonished at the luck and stared in awe at the serendipity. They began to laugh together.

"We're officially beyond the confines of the forest," Hatsumi told Chip as the two exited the tree line into a huge, wild field. Big, gray clouds were swept from horizon to horizon, moving at a brisk pace. There was no sign of the sky now, the daylight lost from view. Billowing, blustery gusts whipped the grassy fields and churned the river that wound through the land into choppy waves. In the far distance, a line of solid rock ran along the edge of the world. Too smooth and steep to be natural and too massive and raw to be constructed, the imposing mountain range was like the spine of some impossible slumbering giant.

"What's that?" Chip asked of the mountains.

"Those are the Barrier Mountains," Hatsumi told him as he led the way into the fields. The billowing wind hit Chip hard as he left the security of the forest. The vibrancy of the wind and the world threatened to overwhelm Chip. He felt saturated.

He closed his eyes, fighting back the urge to pass out from sensory overload. Hatsumi was ignorant of Chip's struggle and kept walking. Chip studied the mountains for a delirious moment, his eyes just barely beginning to adjust to the world. The mystery seemed too daunting to begin to address, so he decided he had enough on his plate. "kay," he decided.

"So where are you from?" Hatsumi asked as they made their way across an open field. Chip struggled to keep up, his head swirling at the dizzying vibrancy of every sight, color, and sound. "You're from another world, right?"

"Yeah, apparently," Chip said, focusing on getting a rhythm at traversing the naturally fertile ground, still getting used to the tabi sandals. Even the texture of the dirt was rich and lush compared to his homeworld. "I guess I'm an alien." The sentence and the idea it presented made Chip stop. "Do you get those a lot?"

Again, Hatsumi shrugged, a gesture equidistance between teenage apathy and overall disinterest. "It happens. I don't know how many at home are from here and how many aren't. I know Lape is from somewhere else. Maybe your world."

The name meant nothing to Chip but it sure didn't sound like any name he'd ever heard. "How many worlds are there?" he asked.

"I don't know," Hatsumi said. "Kageryu doesn't share that kind of information. For what it's worth, I'm from Seir'reth."

Chip nodded. "And that's..."

"A city, to the southeast," explained Hatsumi, as if surprised Chip really knew that little of the world he found himself upon. The matter at least momentarily settled, he looked at the fields around them. "Of course, everything's to the southeast of the forest." He studied their surroundings for a bit more. "Right, kay, so," said Hatsumi, getting down to business, "these flowers, the Purdonas, they grow in the wind. They've got thick stalks and purple leaves. Or pedals, whatever." The incorrect terminology made Chip snicker, mostly in sympathy. "They'll be real obvious."

Hatsumi began to walk with a little less intention, heading closer towards the mountains. Chip lingered and, as a rain droplet struck his nose, looked into the sky. The windy clouds rushed by, endless in all directions. The textures of the clouds were vivid and their speed terrifying. Vertigo grabbed Chip and for a moment, he felt like he was hanging off the world rather than standing atop it.

When Chip shook off the disorientation, he found Hatsumi far away. Chip closed his eyes tightly and leaned into the wind and felt his disorientation grow more intense. He began to shuffle towards Hatsumi, holding his stomach. Across

several ravines, Hatsumi noticed Chip falling behind. He began to approach and returned to Chip's side quickly. "Hey, sit down, sit down," he urged his new friend.

Chip sat down and then lay back on the knee-high grass, breathing deliberately and intensely. "I just..." He laughed, mostly embarrassed. "Wow."

"I guess the pipers are disagreeing with you," Hatsumi teased.

"Must be," Chip said. Hatsumi looked over Chip for a second and sat down next to him. Chip steadied himself by looking up, into the window and the clouds above. "It's beautiful," he whispered.

Hatsumi glanced down at him. "What is?" Chip gestured at the sky. Hatsumi looked up and tried to see it with new eyes. The active beauty dawned on him and he lost himself in the passing clouds. In a second, he grabbed his head and teetered a bit. "Whoa."

"What?" asked Chip, sitting up.

"Just...a little spot of dizzy there," said Hatsumi. He caught his breath. He chuckled. "I don't really ever stop, so the inconsistency never gets to me." Chip was lost. Hatsumi grabbed a pebble off the ground and tore a blade of grass. He held them up, he and Chip sitting next to one another, facing opposite directions. "How far away are these?" Chip recognized a rhetorical question when he heard them. "Check the mountains," Hatsumi told him. Chip looked, then looked back at Hatsumi. "Are they the same distance?"

Chip looked at the rock and the grass. He was less sure this was rhetorical. "I can't tell."

"Guess," Hatsumi urged. Chip gestured vaguely, genuinely unsure. "For arguments sake, we'll say no." He threw aside pebble and grass both. "The unobserved changes," Hatsumi told him. "When you lose focus, whether deliberately or accidentally or casually, the world around you can and will readjust."

Chip looked again at the mountains to the north. "So the Barrier Mountains are closer or farther away, depending on when you look at them." Hatsumi nodded, craning his head to see around Chip. "An event changes based on the observation of it." He smirked and quoted to himself, "'No fair, you changed the outcome by measuring it'."

"What?" laughed Hatsumi.

"Nothing," Chip said. He looked at Hatsumi and his bright smile. His expression was infectious. "This world is different from mine." That wasn't a complaint. He gave as a conversational example, "On my world, a mile is a mile."

"Are you sure?" Hatsumi challenged. Chip didn't respond, he only looked again at the Barrier Mountains. "I mean, it might be. Maybe the sickness you're feeling is the fact that you're not used to this level of...of magic." The word caught Chip's attention. "That's what it is, I guess," Hatsumi told Chip. "Magic is spontaneity, unpredictability, un...un-something." He laughed and seemed to blush a little. "Man, it's weird being the one doing the teaching for once."

"Should Kagumi being teaching me this?" asked Chip.

Hatsumi scoffed. "Are you kidding? You're supposed to pick this all up by observation." Chip rolled his eyes, Hatsumi laughing. "Yeah, exactly. Observation is the basis of everything to a ninja, but man, it's hard to know what to do if you're supposed to learn it on your own. Wait until you have Kagumi kicking your legs until you get into the right stance. That—"

A hound bayed in the distance.

A chill running down their respective spines, Hatsumi and Chip both turned to the southeast and they heard more lupine-like calls. Hatsumi scrambled to his feet and looked into the stormy horizon. "What is it?" asked Chip. Hatsumi only shook his head.

Out from the very distance came bounding a massive dog. Nearly the size of a horse, its massive jaw was bristling with teeth and a harness rested atop its back. Its black and tan fur arched as it sniffed the air and a pair of red eyes settled squarely on Hatsumi. "Run," he told Chip as he drew his ninjato from behind his back.

Chip remained crouching in the tall wild grass but rolled onto his stomach to remain hidden. Hatsumi affixed the half-mask over his mouth and said, "I'll deal with this." He went charging towards the beast.

"Uh... 'kay," Chip reasoned, unsure what else to do. He checked around in the endless fields and saw no other threats and no sign of any other living things. He checked back with Hatsumi as the ninja neared the massive dog. The charging ninja distracted it with a spray of ninjas starts that peppered the dog's face, causing its snarls to turn into yelps of pain. Hatsumi closed and tried to impale the dog through the exposed throat but in the last second, he was struck from the side by another dog.

The second beast pinned Hatsumi to the ground and snarled at him, threatening him if he resisted in the slightest. Out from the field itself appeared an old woman, approaching with a cane of bone. "Found a forest spirit, have I?" she said. Natted, dreadlocked hair dangled over her shoulders as ragged clothes smelled of the waste of many different animals. The woman tapped at Hatsumi. "Little boys should know better than to play alone." She turned and a wooden tail followed behind her. "Bring him," she said. She began to head into the fields.

Chip watched as the two dogs carried Hatsumi by the neck, dragging him like a fresh kill. They followed the woman, the four disappearing into the distance far sooner than the horizon should have allowed. From his hidden vantage, Chip rose and began to rush after them. Running as he knew and not like the ninjas, he sprinted over field and hill, trying to recapture sight of the woman and her beasts.

A house with the legs of an elephant stood in the middle of a canyon.

The canyon had been carved through dark gray rocks by a small trickle of a stream that continued to flow at the bottom of the ground. The slowly narrowing canyon ended in the flat beach of pebbles and broken rocks where the house rested. The one-story house that was little more than a storybook cottage had a

brick chimney whose smoke trailed into the air. Windows burned with a candle on both sides of the glass, as if they were reflections of one another. A stoop led to the door, with small flower plots on either side.

The woman ascended the steps to the door, her wooden tail thumping on each step behind her. "Take him 'round back, boys," said the woman with a voice that echoed in the canyon. She pushed open the door without unlocking it and the two giant dogs tugged Hatsumi around the house. The woman stopped at the threshold of the door and looked back. An ancient face with sharp, wise eyes surveyed the winding canyon for a second. With a 'hrmph', she disappeared into the door and slammed it shut.

Atop the edge of the canyon, Chip appeared. He looked down on the four-legged house as it remained straddling the stream. Protected from the wind coursing above the deep cut of land, the smoke was diluted well before it reached the blustery air above, making it almost impossible to spot. Chip was acutely aware of this as he glanced back the way he'd come, seeing no sign of Kageryu's forest or any landmarks at all save for the omnipresent Barrier Mountains.

Chip turned back when the house lifted on its feet. Powerful legs elevated the house to almost again its height and then the big, lumbering feet began to travel down the canyon floor. Chip watched it take a few steps and carefully negotiate the rocky ground, and then he just sighed. He checked around the grassy surface of the world for some sign of how to proceed and noticed nothing but the shadow of his sword over his shoulder.

Chip forgot about the walking house for a moment and instead looked up. The sky was absolutely thick with fast-moving clouds, and yet he cast a slight shadow on the ground. He gave up on trying to make sense of it and instead began to run. He charged ahead of the house that was, at best, trotting slowly along. Chip sprinted at full speed, following the canyon ahead of the walking house until he came upon a series of outcroppings. Rather than climb carefully as he would have preferred, Chip leapt down the side, hopping from one ledge to the next, trusting to speed to move him too fast to make a catastrophic mistake.

He landed the last distance on the rocky ground just as the house came lumbering by. Chip fell back against the wall of the canyon and flattened against it, hoping the black of his ninja attire would mix well enough with the dark gray rock. If it did or didn't, the house seemed not to notice either way. It just lumbered by, breaking rocks and stones as it walked, its massive feet flattening all under the tremendous, ponderous weight of each step.

With the house passed him, Chip saw a large door like a stable entrance at the rear. Concluding that to be the dogs' entrance, he ran to the house, negating its slow but long strides with a quick sprint. Chip leapt onto the wooden door and grabbed tight the crossbeams at the base of the door.

Clinging to the back of the walking house, Chip couldn't see between the doors, nor could he hear much over the rock-crunching steps of the house. He considered his options and began to shimmy slightly to his right, dangling just behind the legs of the house. He shifted a bit at a time, his fingers burning as he moved, approaching the right-rear corner of the house.

At the edge of the door, Chip looked for options beyond the smooth wood grain of the house exterior. He looked to the window with the stone sill a few feet above. Chip tried to swing towards the window, hoping to catch it with his foot, but no luck and the attempt nearly cost him his grip. His right hand fell away and Chip swung wildly, the ground treacherously beneath him. Chip exploded back at the window with his legs and threw himself with the counter-momentum. He caught the window sill with his fingertips, his hands burning from the effort. His grip was giving but he still had some friction left and he pulled himself up by his fingertips to see inside.

Through the window, Chip saw a concrete room with no windows or doors. The room was tiny, smaller than the house could be, and in the center lay Hatsumi. A length of gold twine was draped around his neck but he seemed otherwise unbound. Chip considered the window for a second then slipped out a ninja star. Struggling to keep from falling from his millimeter-sized perch, Chip managed to work the throwing star's blade through the window's edge and pulled the lock open. He pushed the window open just enough to plunge his hand through and get a real grip. His feet slipped at that moment and he banged against the body of the house, hanging by just his hand.

Chip tossed the ninja star inside and pulled himself up. He tugged through the window and half-flipped/half-fell inside. The newest of Kageryu's ninjas collapsed on his back and took a second to gasp. He again shook his head, not sure how he found himself to be in this position when, not even a full day ago, he was teaching kids' karate in a strip mall.

Chip crawled across the tiny room and shook Hatsumi. "Hey, you okay? Wake up." Hatsumi roused unevenly, his eyes barely opening. Chip off Hatsumi's ceramic face half-mask and felt for a pulse, only finding the weakest of life signs. "Come on, man, wake—"

"Who are you now?" came an unfamiliar voice. Chip turned to see a woman in the cement room. Through no door had she entered, nor was she the old woman who had captured Hatsumi. A younger woman in the pale green scrubs of an operating room, she wore a face mask and looked less like Baba Yaga and more like a mad scientist out of a pulp sci-fi movie. "How did you get in here?"

Chip began to answer but a glance to the corner he'd come through showed no sign of a window. It was now, also, that Chip realized the room was not shifting at all but perfectly still. Whatever movement the steps of the house might have generated, they were insulated from them now. Chip looked again at where the window had been, where it should have been, and gave up with a dismissive, "Whatever." He stood from Hatsumi and said, "Some woman captured my friend here."

"You're...friend?" the scientist said in utter disbelief. "Your 'friend' isn't human. You are."

"My first love was a video game character; what's your point?" Chip countered.

"My point," said the woman, nearing Chip a little frantically. "He's not alive. He is magic incarnate. He is a fairy. An elf. A forest spirit." She searched Chip's face for some sign that he processed what she was saying. "A forest. Spirit!" she repeated, as if that had some specific meaning.

Chip merely stared unblinking for a second. "kay."

"The magic that flows through him, that makes him up, is too valuable to let remain wild," she insisted. "Too valuable and too dangerous."

Again, Chip merely blinked. "kay."

The scientist held out hands. "Does that mean anything to you?" Chip shook his head. "I need to remove the magic from him."

"I'm going to trust that made sense to you," Chip placated her. "I'm getting him out of here, and if you try to stop me—"

The snarling of two giant dogs came from behind Chip. He swallowed tightly and drew a slow, deep breath. "My boys will make short work of you, and your boyfriend," said the scientist, her voice sounding closer to the woman that had captured Hatsumi in the overworld.

Chip leveled his gaze over the woman's mask and told her clearly, "I have a strong disdain for harming animals, but so help me, I will kill them."

The woman ripped away the mask and stormed right at Chip. Despite being half a century younger, she was clearly the same woman from outside. "Don't you DARE threaten my boys."

Despite still appearing twice Chip's age, he was the same height as her. Looking into her eyes, Chip smiled knowingly. "They aren't dogs, are they?"

"And you aren't a ninja," the woman countered, like such an insult mattered to Chip. "I don't hurt humans but I will make exceptions."

"You aren't hurting my friend," Chip told her clearly.

"Then you aren't leaving here alive," she returned just as clearly.

Chip smiled. "We'll see." He winked at the woman and stabbed her in the throat. The throwing star didn't go too deep into her neck but it pierced deep enough to spray blood. Chip shoved her away the instant he'd perforated her neck and turned as he whipped out his sword. He slashed just above waist height and lucked into a perfect slash right across the jaw of the nearer dog. The giant beast howled in pain and yelped, scampering back as its lower jaw dangled from the joint.

The other dog came rushing at Chip, barking furiously. Chip stepped back and fell deliberately. The giant dog bounded atop him and Chip let it. Falling to the cement floor, Chip pinned his sword to the ground on the pommel, aiming the blade straight up at the dog, letting it impale itself on his blade.

Thick, soupy blood the like of which pumped through the veins of no natural animal came spilling out of the dog, covering Chip in the nasty, iron-tinged smell. The dog's carcass fell to the side and Chip scampered up frantically. He checked the other dog that remained whimpering in the corner, then turned to the scientist.

"NO!" she screamed, leaping at the dog and cradling its head in her lap. "What have you done?!" she screamed hysterically. She began to age rapidly, then transitioned towards youth, and back again. She went from ancient hag to pre-teen girl and back again, over and over as she rocked back and forth, cradling the dog and howling sorrowfully. The other dog howled lamentably as well, a warped sound with its jaw dangling from its head.

Chip grabbed Hatsumi on the floor, throwing away the gold chain. As soon as the metal twine was removed from his neck, Hatsumi seemed to come to life. He looked away in disorientation but Chip didn't indulge his delirium. "Come on," he urged, picking up his friend.

Just as the two got to their feet, the woman looked up from the body of the dead dog. "YOU!" she rasped, her voice sounding like a tornado winding through a grave yard. The woman rose, her eyes flashing with rage as she transcended age and turned into the living embodiment of decaying death. A boney finger pointed at Chip, like a skeleton's hand wrapped in sandpaper. Her eyes grew massive, her eyelids eroding away until two unblinking eyes fixed on Chip and Hatsumi. "A thousand years of death will await you!" she roared, her voice echoing through their very souls.

The cement room faded around the two of them, turning into a spanning chasm of nightmarish storm clouds. Irradiated purple mixed with incandescent shadows, spinning wildly like some sickened technicolor tornado within which the two stood at the very eye.

"A thousand deaths for a thousand years shall you each know until you scream for the sweet mercy of pain!" she roared, her voice merging with the spinning tumult of air.

Chip turned to Hatsumi. "Well, your turn."

"Did you try stabbing her?" the ninja asked. Chip balked so Hatsumi grabbed his sword and threw it at the woman. The straight-bladed sword sailed through the air like a spear and struck true, right to the center of the woman's bony chest. The blade pierced through her body entirely without effect. Chip and Hatsumi watched the sword fall into the spanning chasm of the netherworld beneath them.

"Whelp, we're boned," Chip declared confidently.

Hatsumi nodded, then took out a smoke bomb. He hurled the tiny black pill at the floor and a blast of light disoriented the floating witch. "NO!" she howled furiously. She soared at the floating platform and swung for the two, hitting nothing. "Where are you? Where are—"

Hatsumi leapt onto the woman's back and slashed her across the throat with a throwing star. The iron edge cut unevenly across her flesh like a dull knife sawing through aged parchment. Dust and aged sinew like tangled rope splayed out as the woman howled, now in pain.

The spinning vortex of contradicting light began to flash, the world turning white for brief instances. The flashing increased and amidst the strobe-like effect, Chip spotted the outside world. "Look!" he yelled. Hatsumi, still on the woman's

back, drove the blade in deeper, piercing through to jagged, chipped bone of her neck. She tried to scream but only paltry coughs like cracking dead wood escaped.

The light faded and the outside world was all that existed. The platform disappeared from beneath Chip's tabi and he stood upon the rocky surface of the stream at the base of the canyon. "Run!" Chip yelled.

Hatsumi shoved off the woman and she fell to the ground. Little more than a skeleton now, she collapsed onto the chunks of splintered rock, barely holding herself up. More hacking coughs came from her zombified throat. Hatsumi and Chip didn't wait to see if she recovered or succumbed. They ran down the canyon, their sandals kicking up pebbles and chunks of slate as they ran.

The pair ran through the canyon for a bit, finally spotting a ledge low enough. Chip leapt at the stony wall and began to climb while Hatsumi went bounding up the side. Once the ninja reached the top, he turned and readied a throwing star to attack their pursuer but the canyon was empty.

A moment later, Chip climbed up onto the edge of the canyon and collapsed onto the grassy field. The sky was dark gray as it had been and the wind brushed him as it whipped by. Hatsumi waited a moment longer, then grabbed Chip's hand and pulled him to his feet. "Come on," he urged and the two took off into the distance.

Hatsumi finally stopped running once they were completely beneath the thick, familiar canopy of Kageryu's forest. He fell back against a sapling and slumped to the ground, panting. He rolled his head back and removed his ceramic mask as Chip watched back the way they'd come. "She...she won't risk entering the forest," Hatsumi assured his new friend.

"You know who she was?" Chip asked. Hatsumi shook his head. "Then I ain't assuming anything."

"We need to report to Kagumi," Hatsumi said, taking a small pellet from his belt. He popped it into his mouth and his cheeks swelled up. He swallowed and gasped as if he'd just drunk a mouth full of water. "Tell her what we...what we..." He wasn't even sure how to encapsulate it.

"We need to go get the petunas," Chip said.

"Purdonas," Hatsumi corrected out of habit.

"Kagumi isn't going to like us coming back without them," Chip concluded.

"No, I'm not."

Chip's head dropped and Hatsumi clamped his eyes shut. They both looked into the forest to see the Chunin come strolling casually out of the sylvan world. She eyed the deplorable condition of the two of them before she asked Chip, "Where is your sword?"

Chip and Hatsumi glanced at each other. "Uh..." they both began before diving into a confusing but not entirely inaccurate accounting of events. They

spoke quickly and over one another, not stopping for anything, confirming and correcting each other in an increasingly overlapping report.

Kagumi glanced between the two for a moment before she silenced them with a simple, "Enough." She pointed at Hatsumi. "You are disappointing." She pointed at Chip. "You are incompetent." She dropped her hands, disapproving of them both. "Return home and await further instructions."

"Yes ma'am," they both said quickly. Chip helped Hatsumi to his feet and they started into the forest.

Kagumi glanced over her shoulder at them and added, "And wash your uniform."

Chip stopped mid-step and just nodded. "Yes ma'am," he acknowledged.

They kept walking for a bit, the edge of the forest and Kagumi's form slowly disappearing from sight behind them. After a bit, Hatsumi glanced back and made sure she was no longer in sight. "They're not really uniforms," he remarked. He held up his ceramic mask. "This isn't, like, a thing I was issued. I picked it up in Crossworld. I just thought it was cool."

"It does look cool," Chip acknowledged. Chip's confirmation made Hatsumi smile and he returned the mask over his mouth. Meanwhile, Chip tugged at his blood-soaked outfit. "How do I clean this?"

"There's a place where we...I'll show you," Hatsumi said, pointing ahead. As they kept walking, he added, "Thanks for saving me."

"Thanks for saving me," Chip returned simply. The two shared a smile of fraternal gratitude as they kept walking towards the rest of their day.

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