

Chip Masters, Ninja

Part 4

A Crossworld Short Story

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FROM THE MIND OF

RVA

"Sword fighting is a little like making love. It's not always what you do, but what you say."

- Sword Teacher, The Secret of Monkey Island

Chip Masters leaned on his left hand, positioned to the side of the stadium seat. Looking down into the deep bowl of a stadium, he studied the runners as they lined up at the starting line. Around him, a vast host of people – most from Seir-reth but a few clearly from other city-states – were watching as well. There was a nervous murmur to the crowd, as well as plenty of anxious laughter.

Chip turned as Hatsumi sat down in the seat next to him, carrying two paper cones of popped corn. "I've got butter and caramel," he said, handing the butter over to Chip. Smooshed together in the narrow seats of the modest arena, they leaned forward over the railing separating them from the next row of seats two steps down.

"Did you place the bets?" Chip asked. He pointed at a plainswoman in the middle of the starting line. "I'm telling you, she can fly."

"If she does, she's disqualified," Hatsumi told Chip.

"I was speaking metaphorically," Chip said, covering his pale brow and sandy blonde hair from the sun as he checked the sky. "Who'd you bet on?"

Hatsumi scanned the runners for a second, his Asian-like features mixing as well as Chip's among the predominantly swarthy-skinned people of Seir-reth. "Uh...that guy."

Chip turned to his friend. "That guy? You don't even know his name?"

"It's not the person, it's the lane," Hatsumi said, sticking his tongue into the caramel corn and pulling out the popped kernels that stuck.

"That's gross," Chip complained, taking some of the treat off Hatsumi's cone. Hatsumi responded by taking some of the buttered corn from Chip's cone.

Over the middle of the field, a solitary ball of flame rose into the air. It began to spread, forming into thick bands in the air and shaped into numbers. Numbers that were systematically counting down. "Here we go," Chip said eagerly, bobbing up and down in his seat.

The instant the flaming numbers hit zero, a loud trumpet sounded. The racers broke from their starting positions, running down the track. Flawless form drove them as they grouped quickly. Chip and Hatsumi

screamed in support, both of them soon jumping to their feet. The entire stadium rose and clapped and cheered, shouted and called. The racers arched around the first turn and the group shuffled. Leaders fell back and those behind began to move towards the front of the race.

"There he goes, there he goes!" Hatsumi told Chip, pointing. "I told you, it's the lane!"

Hatsumi's racer, with skin as dark as the twilight sky and speed like a tornado's wind, took to the lead along the second straightaway at the far end of the course. Hatsumi screamed, Chip unable to contain his own excitement. "Go, go, GO!" Hatsumi yelled.

The racer made it to the edge of the turn with almost two lengths between him and the 2nd place runner. He turned into the final turn and slowed down. Holding his arms up, he cheered to the crowd. "What are you doing?!" Hatsumi yelled. "Finish the race, you moron!" Chip's cheers had ended and he was laughing now, mostly at his friend.

As the racer turned to finish, he was passed at the last second by another racer. The pair raced neck-n-neck for the finish line but it was Hatsumi's racer who came in second. "WHAT THE HELL?!" Hatsumi screamed. He turned at Chip who had fallen back into his seat, laughing. Hatsumi scowled and threw his caramel popcorn at Chip. That only made Chip laugh harder. Hatsumi fell back into his seat and sulked. "What the hell?" he griped. Chip put his arm around Hatsumi and hugged him supportively, even as he chuckled.

Hatsumi sighed and ate some of the popcorn out of Chip's cone. "Geez, that sucks," Hatsumi griped.

"At least your guy placed," Chip consoled. "You can get half your money back."

"Yeah, I guess," Hatsumi complained. He picked some of the popcorn off Chip's desert clothes of layered breezy attire. He popped the kernels into his mouth. "So where's our contact?"

"Behind us," said Chip nonchalantly. "He's been back there for the last two races." Hatsumi turned and looked back and the tall man with dark skin smiled pleasantly and waved. "You've been a little preoccupied."

To the man, Hatsumi said, "Hey, what's up?"

Behind the railing for the next row of seats, a pleasant-looking man with deep tanned skin and black hair smiled back at him. He had an iced drink with him as well as a roasted vegetable on a stick. "I'm called Cadres," said the jovial man. He extended a hand to Hatsumi. "Like the shop." Hatsumi glanced at Chip who just shrugged, not knowing the name either. "I'm Kageryu's Chunin for Seir-reth, under Jorge."

Hatsumi took note of the thinning crowd around them, whole chunks of the stadium exiting between races to either place more bets, get refreshments, or simply satiated for the day. "So what's the deal? Our Chunin, Kagumi, said something about an extraction?"

Cadres nodded. He checked his own racing stubs, shuffling the tickets forwards and backwards. "It will be here, in Fades," Cadres told them as he arranged his bets as if that would change the outcome. "I'm making contact with him, get him through Seir-reth's territory, and we'll ultimately be smuggling him to Crossworld."

"You're making contact?" Chip asked, only half-turned to Cadres.

"What, you didn't think they were going to leave this to a pair of Genin did you?" Cadres laughed.

"A little bit, yeah," Chip said.

"That's why we're here, isn't it?" Hatsumi agreed.

"No," Cadres laughed harder. "You two are here to provide support to me and our defector if its needed."

"Why not use a local pair of Genin?" Hatsumi asked.

Cadres looked both amused and incredulous. "Training, obviously."

Chip and Hatsumi both glared at each other. "Of course," they said in unison.

Cadres leaned forward and patted them both on the shoulder. "Don't sweat it, boys. I still get this crap from Jorge. He still gets it from Kageryu."

On the field down below them, racers began to exit onto the track. Their names echoing through the air as they approached their starting points. Some waved to the people in the stands, others strutted with athletic focus. "This is a good time to go," the Chunin told them. "The crowds are coming back." He rose and began to slide through the seats, heading towards the stairs that divided the arena's sections.

Chip and Hatsumi looked to each other, less than enthused. Chip ate some of his popcorn by sticking his tongue into the kernels and eating whatever stuck. "That's gross," Hatsumi told him, getting up to go. Chip followed.

Outside, in the large town of Fades, Cadres walked with Chip and Hatsumi on either side. Through the market square, people walked in every direction at different speeds. Vendors were set up, selling products and services from across the spectrum of needs. Not only were the sales

diverse, so were the people. Turban-clad desert dwellers of Seir-reth walked next to armored warriors from Crossworld and abnormal-looking figures from Tech-Noir, in outfits akin to the suits Chip knew from his home on Earth.

"His name is Alfin," Cadres shared with the pair as they walked, his knee-high boots kicking up only a bit of dust. "He's a low-ranking member in the Ember's League."

Chip slowed half-a-step. "Ember's League?"

"Local gang," Hatsumi told him.

"They aren't local; they're inter-city," Cadres told them. He turned around and, walking backwards, explained, "They've got agents in all five of the city-states and a lot of the smaller towns, like here in Fades. They're everywhere. Agent for agent, they may have more operatives than the Shinobi but that's just a guess. We honestly don't know."

Chip looked at Hatsumi and seemed impressed. "I didn't realize we had competition."

"Ooh, would we call the competition, though?" asked Cadres rhetorically before he turned back around. He bumped into a man who had been walking diagonally across their path. "Hey!" Cadres yelled in his face. "Watch where you're going!" He kept walking, the man he'd yelled at making a rude gesture as they departed. "Anyway," he continued, suddenly nonplussed by the encounter, "Ember's League is letting Alfin be extracted on the premise that he's going to be an informant for them. He'll report back to them periodically, but only to feed them information we provide him."

"This is crazy," Hatsumi told Chip. His blonde friend agreed with a nod.

"Spies versus crooks is always a bit of a head-spinner," Cadres agreed fraternally. "The point is, he's being extracted tonight. I'm making contact and staying with him; you two are to provide support."

"Is he trustworthy?" Hatsumi asked. "Are we letting a..." He did some math in his head. "...a triple agent into our midst, or a traitor?"

"I don't know, above my rank, and definitely above yours," Cadres told him. "Just focus on your mission."

"But why are we doing this?" asked Chip. "Why are we even involved? Does this guy have information that's critical to the Shinobi's safety?"

"No," Cadres told them. "We're not in danger. However, it is important to stay on the pulse of all information. Knowing information means helping information sources, sometimes even if their information is

less-than-critical. It's to curry favor. Not just with a specific information source, but with future information sources." Chip and Hatsumi both tried to reason that out.

The three arrived before a stone building along an unremarkable street. Vendors lined the far side, while establishments continued passed the stone structure in both directions in a slight circle. "This is the Phosphoradin Tea House."

"Phosphoradin? What's that mean?" asked Chip.

"I don't know; it sounds made up," Cadres told him. "Point is, I will be bringing Alfin down that street..." He pointed down the street they had come, "to this tea house. We will be followed. I leave it to you two to obfuscate us, attack our followers, distract them, whatever you wish, so long as it does not draw attention to Alfin's departure and definitely does not reveal the Shinobi." He put his hands on each boy's shoulders. "You will be ranked on effectiveness, efficiency, and subtly. Probably in that order." He clapped both Chip and Hatsumi's shoulders. "Until then, the afternoon is yours. I strongly recommend you scout your positions, set whatever traps you wish, place weapons, and generally prepare."

"We will," Hatsumi promised Cadres with the utmost earnestness.

The shop would have been a spacious eight-sided room were it not for the reams and reams of fabric that were draped all about. Folds of fabric spilled over one another, like the room was a giant collection of fountains, the flow of which was caught in time. The western-most wall was absent, replaced with two folding dividers for when the shop was closed. With the dividers open, the desert wind occasionally blew into the room but was absorbed magically by a trio of small blue stones that would glow whenever a gust kicked up.

Chip lounged on the sofa in the very center of the octagonal shop. A Gameboy Advance in his hands, he tapped the controls a bit with his thumbs, focused on the small screen. Behind him, the shopkeeper swept desert sand through the door and out into the daylight. The man paused and brushed his brow, then turned. In an aged and accented voice, he asked, "You are from Tech-Noir, yes?"

Chip glanced back at the man who had spoken to him. "Yeah," he lied, used to giving that as an explanation. "Not actually Tech-Noir, though. A little city outside called San Francisco."

"I don't know it," the man remarked offhandedly. He had deeply tanned skin and plentiful lines on his face. Scratchy white hairs stuck out

from his chin and lip, like a poorly-shaved van dyke. He was about to say more when Hatsumi exited the dressing room.

Wearing a deep blue turban and a pale gray gown, Hatsumi nodded and grinned huge. "Huh? Huh?!" he asked with increasing eagerness. "What do you think?" He turned around, mostly showing off the belt that visually and functionally held the bland outfit together. "I think I look like a desert native, right?" Chip responded with a shrug. Hatsumi's arms fell. "You're no help."

Chip asked the shopkeeper. "What do you think?"

"Meh," said the old man. "It depends on if he is buying it. If yes, then of course, looks wonderful. You look like we look," he gushed. "If no, then no, you look like child playing costume-dress-up." He pointed at his own face. "It's the eyes."

"That's racist," Chip told the man.

"Is not," the old man said confidently back.

"I think I look good," Hatsumi decided. He went to a mirror and checked his reflection. He turned a bit, then gestured at the mirror. His reflection continued to turn, showing him off from every angle. "Yeah, this works. It totally works."

"Whatever you say," Chip agreed, focusing on his game.

"I think the dark brown belt and blue turban really hold the whole thing you really don't care, do you?" Hatsumi asked Chip. Chip just shook his head, lips pursed. "Are you playing with that thing again?" He started to come over. "What are you playing?"

"Final Fantasy 6," Chip said, showing him.

"What, again?" was all Hatsumi had to say to Chip. To the shopkeeper, he said, "I'll take it."

"Wonderful!" the older man suddenly gushed. "You look magnificent! You look like we look!"

"I heard you just a moment ago," Hatsumi told him. "I was right there."

"Yes, but that was then, this is now," the old man said as if it was praise. He headed to his sales ledger, Hatsumi following.

As dusk began to creep across the sky, Chip and Hatsumi stood at a vendor on the corner of the nearest cross street from the Phosphooradin Tea House. A purveyor of all varieties of dried fruit, the vendor was beginning to

close for the night. Behind the counter, a dog with spikes extending from its shoulders laying defensively atop the man's sales chest.

Chip looked up, along the rooftops a street over. "If we've got fellow spies, rooftop seems the best route for them." He turned and looked down at the ground beneath their sandaled feet. "Does this place have a sewer?"

Hatsumi shook his head, crinkling his nose at the jelly-like fruit that was both spicy and sweet at the same time. He was sweating mildly from the spicy taste, the bottom of his turban a distinctive shade darker. "I think waste is removed magically? Or just transfigured? I don't know."

"So we've got the roads, or maybe the rooftops," Chip reasoned.

"Or the air," said Hatsumi, speaking dramatically to avoid having to keep his mouth closed. "They might fly."

"Not a chance," Chip asserted confidently. "The risk of being spotted is too great. And Seir-reth archers can take down anything they see." Hatsumi gave it a moment of thought and agreed with only a little hesitation. He resumed eating the fruit. Chip asked him, "You got any reanglers on you?"

"A few," Hatsumi said, sucking the juice out. He inhaled suddenly and winced tight. "Uh, wow, geez, that's intense." His toes curled up in his sandals and his eyebrows flared as his eyes clamped tighter. When the heat and pain subsided, he blanched with relief. "Whew." He handed the tough skin to Chip. "Want a bite?"

"Hell no," he scoffed at Hatsumi.

"Your loss," his friend coughed before popping the rind into his mouth and wincing all over again.

Nighttime.

Fades was a modest town, nestled between two roads that broke before it. One southern route headed into the endless sands and rocks of the southern deserts. The more-northern road headed straight east and to the very gates of Seir-reth. Whereas Fades was a modest village with roads and paths leading out in all directions, Seir-reth was a monument. Massive walls on the exterior of the city rode out of the desert like it was a mesa all its own. The city thrummed with life and even across the distance, its presence could be felt over Fades.

Fades itself was lively, although the evening was beginning to die down. As dinnertime passed into night and the evenings fires began to burn out, the city was beginning to calm. Tiny trails of smoke rose into the desert

air, mixing into the soft breeze that carried the town's scent into the sky. Lights in windows and doorways burned bright while the long shadows of dusk had turned into the blanket of twilight. Stars overhead twinkled with not a cloud in the sky.

Alfin and Cadres walked down the street, the only two out. Cadres wore a Tech-Noir suit, carrying a black fabric satchel normally worn on the back. Gone was the visage of a harmless desert ne'er-do-well. Instead, the Shinobi Chunin looked every bit a responsible and upstanding businessman. He walked casually, while alert eyes very carefully searched his surroundings at all times. He looked unbothered by a single thing in the world while at the same time, he was aware of all.

On his right, Alfin clutched a large sack to his chest. In a red and white vertical striped desert dress, he turned frantically in every direction, panic clear on his sweat-soaked brow. He shuffled more than walked, as if too afraid to fully pick up his feet.

As they entered the intersection with the Phosphoradin Tea House in sight, Alfin slowed, paranoia getting the better of him. Cadres caught his arm, just above the elbow and pushed him into continuing to walk. The smaller man gave out a yelp of fearful protest but kept going. As they cleared the intersection, two figures rose from opposite rooftops. Dressed in a deep brown, like desert sand in shadow, the pair was almost invisible atop the earthen-tones of the rooftops. They carried deeply curved swords worn blade-out on their backs, the curve of the weapons cupping their torso.

With scarves across their faces, they watched Alfin exit the intersection. They reached into wide leather belts and drew out metal discs with subtle ridges on the exterior. The throwing weapons ready, they drew back their hands to attack, unaware of Hatsumi and Chip were right behind them.

Hatsumi kicked his target in the back of the knee, just as he was about to throw. The desert assassin dropped, too stunned to react. Hatsumi caught the throwing disc out of the air. Holding the weapon no bigger than a large coin, he yanked the assassin's mask over his eyes and slashed his throat. Had the blade not ended his life, the poison it had been soaked within would have.

On the other side of the street, Chip grabbed his enemy's hand and yanked it back. He pulled the man off his feet and slapped him onto the rooftop. Pinning him with a shoulder lock, Chip transitioned quickly into a chokehold and kept it locked well after the foe had ceased moving. Silently, he laid the man onto the surface of the roof and left him there. He looked across at Hatsumi. His Asian partner pointed at Chip, and then pointed to

the tea house. He pointed at himself and swirled his finger. Chip nodded and leapt off the rooftop.

Landing a story below on the surface of the road, Chip rolled at the impact and came up in a brisk but casual-looking trot. He started into the intersection when a shadow moved against the still night. Chip turned to face down the road and snapped both his fingers. He pulled his hand down his face and in doing so, his vision shifted. Color drained from the world and he saw only endless dark tones. Purples and deep blues filled his world as near and far became cast against each other like a painting. All except for three figures in vibrant, unmissable green.

The shapes of the assailants were rounded and warped, like bubbles against the two-dimensional background of the rest of the world. Their movements were stilted but their attention was obvious. All three slowed when they realized Chip was looking right at them and their invisibility was gone. Chip dropped low and grabbed at his back, pulling from its sheath the straight-edged sword of the Shinobi. As the three dropped their façade, Chip's vision returned to normal and he rushed into the street at them.

A fight commenced in utter silence. The nighttime was not disturbed by the clashing of steel or the shrieks of effort and pain. All that was heard was the whipping of the wind as blades carved through the air, narrowly missing. Attacks were precise and calculated, as were the movements to avoid them. Less a berserk bombardment, more a furious dance with lethal consequences, the four fighters battled as quiet as a cloud.

Chip slashed at one man, missing by inches as the desert assassin leapt over the slice, landing in a roll that bought him space from Chip's blade. Another swung at Chip, who spun around the blade and slashed at the man's head. A quick duck and a retreat meant no hit was scored. Chip instinctively slipped suddenly to the side, avoiding being impaled from behind. He flipped backwards, landing a bicycle kick with his shin to the man's face.

Chip landed on his shoulders and flipped up to his feet. As he did, and his kicked opponent began to rise, Hatsumi dropped from above. Landing blade-first on Chip's downed foe, Hatsumi's sword drove all the way to the hilt through the man's chest. The desert killer let out no scream or sound, only a whitening of his eyes as life left his body.

The two other assassins backed away from the two Shinobi, rethinking their strategy. Chip and Hatsumi rose and turned, squaring off with them. The only noise the droplets of blood from Hatsumi's edge dripping to the dusty road beneath their sandals. He and Chip backed slowly away, step by step. A wind brushed through the streets, noisier than them or their opponents.

As the desert assassins inched nearer, very subtly closing the distance, Chip released one hand from the handle of his ninjato. He slapped his thigh, the impact sounding like a shout in the quiet street. Immediately, Hatsumi disengaged. Lowering his sword, he turned his back to the pair of assassins and retreated, leaving Chip alone. The two desert killers weren't sure what to think and hesitated.

Hatsumi ran only a few dozen steps to the intersection and, once there, drew from a pouch on his side a single steel ball. He threw it down the street, then tossed a similar ball in the opposite direction. That accomplished, he turned back to the attackers and slapped his thigh just as Chip had done. Letting Hatsumi watch his retreat, Chip disengaged and broke into a run.

The two killers abandoned their third and gave chase. Chip sprinted ahead of them and leapt out of the intersection. Only steps into their pursuit and the pair of desert killers realized they were charging down the road they had just left. They stopped and turned and raced to return, only to realize they were facing the opposite direction yet again. They looked this way and that, angles changing on them and roads that should have been adjacent were paired opposite one another. No route led the way they expected and they found themselves bewildered and lost just standing still. Before they even grasped their own confusion, they also realized they'd lost all sign of the two Shinobi.

Through the swinging doors of the Phosphoradin Tea House, Chip and Hatsumi found bright candlelight and soft music. The crowd was tipsy with a pleasant evening, the crowd of businessmen discussing matters all their own. A single musician played strings in the corner as wait staff bustled about. In the corner opposite the musician, Cadres waved to the pair. He and Alfin were sitting with their backs to the establishment, a hookah and a large tea tray on the table. Chip and Hatsumi sat cross-legged on the cushions and reported, "All clear. Now."

"Good job," Cadres said, blowing smoke out through the corner of his mouth. "Why are two of them still alive?" he asked, as if a quiz.

"So they can tell of how badly they got beat by the Shinobi," said Chip, not unused to tests like that. "And maybe live in fear of facing us again."

Cadres nodded. "Not the answer I was looking for, but I like it. I was thinking 'because killing unnecessarily is a waste', but whatever."

The two younger Shinobi looked sidelong at one another. "Did Kageryu approve that?" asked Hatsumi.

"'Cause that doesn't sound like him," Chip agreed.

"And you've met the Shadow Dragon?" Cadres challenged in an irritated tone.

"Actually, he has," Hatsumi spoke for Chip. "They fought," he went on. "He survived." Chip smiled almost apologetically.

Cadres was genuinely stunned. "Huh," was all he could say. He looked at Alfin, who was totally lost by the whole exchange. "Well," Cadres started, trying to get back on track, and practically burst. "Really? You fought the leader of the Shinobi? Is he as tall as they say?"

"He's a good head taller than you, yeah," Chip agreed. "He's also kind of a dick."

"Well, yeah," Cadres agreed, as if it was obvious as the night is dark. He put all that aside. "Anyway, we've got more pressing matters." To Alfin, he said, "We've got to, uh, liberate his family's good luck charm."

"It is not a good luck charm," their contact insisted. The movement of his hand to emphatically express the urgency and importance was the first time his hands had left his satchel. "It is the Manasta Jewel."

Chip and Hatsumi looked at each other, neither sure if the name was supposed to mean anything to them. Their equally lost expressions were little reassurance. Hatsumi asked, "What's the Manasta Jewel?"

"The thing you two are going to go get," Cadres informed them both with a sarcastically contrite smile.

Chip rolled his eyes and facepalmed. "Christ, I could see that coming a mile away."

"The Manasta Jewel is a powerful artifact of the ancient world, and it is a family heirloom tracing my heritage back to the dawn of time," Alfin insisted.

"Yeah, we don't care," Chip told him.

"How big is it and where is it?" Hatsumi asked, on the same page as Chip and in just as much of a hurry.

Along a stone wall, a bird slowly walked on four spindly legs. The rear hips were small, but the chest and torso were much bigger, almost a giant plume of feathers and mass. Two tiny wings fluttered occasionally, while a long neck ended in a small head with a short, angled beak. The bird kept on its pace, eyes bigger than its mouth darting in every direction.

As it passed, a grappling hook landed behind its step. The bird turned and squawked quietly. It bent forward curiously and stared at the grappling

hook, the rope trailing behind it. It squawked again and pecked at the metal hook. It snatched the rope in its beak and snapped it with ease. As the rope fell back to the ground far below, the bird pecked at the hook, loosening it and then throwing it over the side after the rope.

During the guard bird's distraction, another grappling hook swung behind it. Chip and Hatsumi climbed silently over the rope, disappearing over the other side of the wall.

The pair landed on the far side of the wall, amid some bushes and behind a tree. Hatsumi landed effortless, but Chip had to roll at the impact, causing leaves to rustle. Several of the guard birds along the perimeter wall of the wide compound turned and looked for the source of the disturbance. Hatsumi stayed close to the ground, the colors of his desert attire muting slowly. His ninja outfit - folds of cloth tied where beneficial and loose where useful - shifted from sand-colored to the color of shadowed soil like the ground he knelt upon. Chip, likewise stayed perfectly still, his breath barely disturbing a leaf. His own ninja attire darkened as well, matching the shadowed underbrush he lay amongst.

Almost one at a time, the guard birds lost interest. They systematically resumed their perimeter guarding, a network of sharp eyes pacing counterclockwise along the wall. The last of the birds was the one directly above the pair. It let out a squawk of disapproval, then resumed walking. Chip risked letting out a sigh and looked at Hatsumi. "They react to movement," Hatsumi whispered. "Be...patient."

They very slowly rolled onto their stomachs and at a hypnotic pace, they began to crawl out from the bushes. "Just...stay...calm," Hatsumi told Chip as they crossed the lush green field.

"Says...the...guy...who...just...HAD...to...use...his...grappling...hook..."

Hatsumi scowled. "I...brought...it...I'm...going...to...use...it..."

The pair kept shuffled on.

A narrow hall extended into darkness on either end. A solitary candle flickered in the breeze fed by distant exits. The fluctuations created a single orb of dancing light against constantly encroaching blackness. At the edge of the darkness, Hatsumi knelt and searched the shadows. Next to him and standing, Chip did the same. Hatsumi reached to Chip's leg and gave him a squeeze, then pointed.

Chip silently shifted his sword in front of him and, bracing himself, partially drew the blade. The newly-exposed steel caught the light of the candle and a bright spot reflected into the opposite darkness, falling right upon another desert assassin like those from the street. The man hiding in

the shadows was taken by surprise and unprepared ready for action. Before he could draw his weapon, Hatsumi had leapt by him, beheading him in a single movement. The ninja landed without a sound and turned, catching the falling head and then steadying the body as he led it gently to the ground.

Chip slipped passed Hatsumi and felt the wall. Finding the edge, he used a knife to carve into the soft stone just a bit, then he pushed against it hard. The door popped open, allowing Chip to get his fingers inside. He pulled open the door wide enough for the pair to see within.

Awaiting them was a room full of beauty. Jewels of all shapes, sizes, and colors were encrusted in the walls and ceiling. Golden foil covered the elaborate walls. Small piles of silver and gold were piled in aesthetically striking locations. Statues and works of art helped to separate the large room into corridors and aisles. Chip smiled at Hatsumi and they slipped inside.

Hatsumi pulling the door to, Chip took out a small gem from within his vest. He shook it a few times, then popped the top with the flat of his hand, causing the white gem to begin to glow from within. Its radiance began to build until it gave off more light than a torch. He held it up, giving them a better idea of the scale of the room. "Geez," Hatsumi breathed, taking in the opulence before them. "There might be more wealth in here than in the rest of Seir-reth."

Chip walked over to a life-sized statue of a woman, carved out of jade and encrusted in elaborate clothes made entirely out of jewels. The life-like statue had closed eyes and a down-cast expression. She had a third arm on her right side, holding a knife. Her other hands were held in a praying position. "I wonder who this is," Chip remarked.

"Don't worry about her; worry about the Manasta Jewel," Hatsumi said. He walked down the middle aisle, appraising the art of every variety. "I'm not sure how we're going to find it," he whispered.

"Alfin said it was big and purple, with silver flakes inside of it," Chip likewise whispered, beginning down the left side.

"There's an entire chest in here of just purple gems," Hatsumi said, gesturing at said chest as he passed it. "What's big? I mean, for a gem? The size of my fist? The size of my head?"

Chip gave up studying the gems and artwork. He began to turn around thoughtfully. "Where are..."

"Where's what?" Hatsumi asked as Chip robbed him of light as he rushed back to the entrance. "Where are you going?" Hatsumi asked in the dark.

Chip didn't answer for a moment, instead heading back around the far aisle of treasure. Hatsumi heard him shuffling with stuff for a moment, then a very quiet, "A-ha!" Chip stepped up on a chest, his face appearing between two statues dividing his aisle from Hatsumi's. "The Manasta Jewel is the size of a soccer ball and its diamond-shaped."

"Great," Hatsumi praised sarcastically. "What's a soccer ball?"

"It's the size of your head," Chip corrected. He hopped down off the chest and resumed looking. "That should narrow it down."

"How'd you figure that out?" asked his partner.

"This isn't about wealth; this is about collecting," Chip told him with a broad gesture at the extravagant room. "Anybody who collects this stuff is going to have reference material citing and describing how valuable it is."

"So you looked for a book that described the Manasta Jewel?" Hatsumi gawked.

"I checked the FAQ, yes," Chip responded.

Hatsumi sighed. "You are so weird."

The pair finished their respective aisles, coming to the far end of the room. There, situated in the corner between a giant one-edged sword the size of the guard birds outside and a mirror that showed no reflections, they spotted the Manasta Jewel. They paused before it and studied it for a second. Hatsumi cautioned, "It's trapped." Chip nodded. "I can do this," Hatsumi told himself and his partner.

He approached the jewel with his knife and knelt before it. The oblong purple gem sat atop a wooden pedestal equal in height to their knees. A single support leg rose into a circular cup that held the jewel from beneath, allowing one to casually look down into its largest facet. Hatsumi studied the leg for a moment, then knelt close and studied the cup through which he could see the smaller facets. He very gently touched the wooden leg with his knife and rocked back, uncertain. "I don't see any traps."

"Maybe it's not trapped," suggested Chip. "I mean..." He gestured at the rest of the room. "If somebody wanted this stuff, they'd have grabbed something else by now."

"I guess," Hatsumi said. He rose, put away his knife, and took the jewel from the pedestal. In doing so, the entire room erupted in a loud, grating alarm. "Or maybe I just suck at finding traps."

"No, you're fine at finding them," Chip argued as they both ran for the door. "You just suck at finding them before they go off."

They slid through the door and pushed it with their backs. The door was considerably harder to shut than to open, but with their combined

might, they were able to shove it closed once again. They turned to run, Hatsumi tripping over the headless body of the guard. The Manasta Jewel went flying from his hands, its facets throwing fractal beams of reflected candle light onto the wall before it disappeared into the adjacent darkness. There was a loud clatter.

Chip and Hatsumi were panicked for a moment, terrified of the state of their quarry. Hatsumi quickly picked himself up and ran into the darkness, shouting, "Got it. It's fine." Chip slapped him on the shoulder as he ran by, the two charging through the shadows.

Around them, the alarm sounded. Like a screeching eagle, the sound emanated from the walls themselves, filling the compound with din. Along with the alarm's noise, though, soon came the stampede of feet as guards came pouring from the barracks. With swords and knives, axes and maces, hard men with scars of battle filled the exterior spaces, looking for intruders.

Chip and Hatsumi reached their chosen exit of the compound, only to see the men rushing into the garden through which they had entered. A dozen men of muscle and blades rushed not at the Shinobi however, but the desert assassins dressed like those from earlier in the night. Chip and Hatsumi froze, lingering with the safety of the shadows, as the compound guards fell upon the assassins.

"Huh," Chip remarked, mostly to himself. "I thought those guys were from here."

"Yeah, me too," Hatsumi agreed.

The two watched as four assassins fought the guards head-on. With the thick blades of curved scimitars, they parried sword and axe equally. They fought quietly, dodging multiple blows with acrobatic skill while chipping away at the greater numbers of guards.

"Amateurs," Chip decided, shaking his head, his arms crossed. "They're taking too long."

"Yeah, so are we," Hatsumi told him. With the Manasta Jewel in his arms, Hatsumi slunk back into the hallway and headed out the other direction. They passed the treasure room and headed on, arriving at an intersection of halls in the compound's inner keep. "Crap, which way to do we go?"

"Away from the noise," Chip said, regarding the stomping of feet. The pair looked quickly for cover, finding nothing reliably nearby. Instead, Chip leapt up onto the roof and slung his feet on some rafters. Hatsumi passed the jewel up to him, then as Chip rolled over onto the rafters, laying on his back so as to obscure the jewel with his body, Hatsumi leapt and pulled himself up as well.

The pair of Shinobi had barely disappeared when down the side hall came a dark-haired, swarthy-skinned man in a silk robe. Otherwise nude, he practically ran with a frantic look in his eyes. "They mustn't be gone," he was saying to himself.

A few steps behind, two of his wives went racing after him, both bundling up with more modesty than their husband. "What mustn't be?" yelled the brown-haired wife, the fairer of the two.

"The swords," he yelled after her, his voice disappearing down the hall towards the treasure room. Chip and Hatsumi both glanced at one another and decided to hear out the situation. They heard the heavy treasure room door open and then further exclaiming and the clatter of searching. "Thank Seyurn!" they heard the man breathe. "The swords aren't gone. My fortune, it exists on these blades."

"Bastard didn't even notice the gem is gone," Hatsumi whispered in disappointment.

"One man's treasure is another man's trash," was all Chip had to offer.

"Let's take out the trash," Hatsumi said, getting back to the matter at hand. He swung down on the rafter, dangling upside down as he looked back down the hall. It took a second for him to confirm the married group had yet to leave the treasure room. "We're clear," he whispered and he dropped to the floor. Chip rolled off his rafter and landed with all the noise of a feather.

Hatsumi checked in the four directions and decided on the opposite route from which the trio had come. Staying low and hugging to the heavy shadows, he led Chip down the path. But just as they began to make speed, the candles and torches on the wall all came alive as one. Flames burst into existence and the hallway lit to nearly daylight.

Up ahead, guards appeared, weapons already drawn. Chip and Hatsumi began to backpedal, only for more guards to appear behind them. Chip drew his sword from behind his back and said, "Move!" He burst ahead of Hatsumi and launched himself at the forward guards. He slashed high as he spun, then landed in a low crouch, still turning. The straight blade of his sword cut deep through the first two guards' unprotected thighs. Deep slashes through the thick of their muscle caused shouts of pain and then total collapse.

Chip came up with a sweep of his blade, slicing through another guard from gullet to nose, parting the man in half with the razor's edge of his sword. He turned his sword over in his hand as he swept it through the air and punctured through his most recent victim before the body could fall away, stabbing the final guard through the chest.

As Hatsumi ran passed, Chip grabbed Hatsumi's sword out from the scabbard across his back. Armed now with two straight blades of Shinobi make, he attacked the guards approaching from the rear. Holding both weapons in a reverse grip, the blades traveling down his forearms, Chip moved into the four's midst. He blocked strikes with the flat of his swords and then swept the twin blades in tandem, ending a life with every swing. He danced nimbly between the muscled men, negating their strength with leverage, surpassing their speed with timing. In only a few breaths and as many moves, left them deprived of their lives. "Let's go," he told Hatsumi who had ceased running and was staring, impressed.

The two rushed down the hall, mindful of the clatter of more footsteps. Unsure if they were being followed and running too quickly to worry about it, they spilled out into yet another courtyard. Waiting for them were not more house guards but more desert assassins. Just as surprised to see the Shinobi as Chip and Hatsumi were to see them, the four quickly tore free their scimitars and readied them for war.

"This is getting dull," Chip complained, tossing Hatsumi's sword into the air. Hatsumi dropped the Manasta jewel and, just as bored, snatched his sword out of the air. The two dropped defensively, ready to fight. Immediately, the four assassins began to back away, their masks hiding their expressions but not the budding fear in their eyes.

Hatsumi grinned, proud, and then his grin darkened. "There are house guards behind us, aren't there?"

"Of course there are!" Chip chastised.

Both Shinobi turned, throwing handfuls of projectiles at the house guards. Hatsumi threw six-pointed throwing stars, Chip threw caltrops, and all failed to hit their targets. But the thrown weapons caused the eight guards to scatter, giving Chip and Hatsumi the chance to turn as the four assassins rushed them from behind. Hatsumi stepped back, blocking an overhead hack from a scimitar, only to skip back farther as a second blade slashed at his stomach.

Chip went straight at the nearest pair of assassins, feinting with a stab from his sword so that he could kick the leftmost of the pair in the face. He landed and rolled to keep from behind split in two by the still-standing assassin. He came up defensively but the assassin was impaled from behind by the house guards. They bypassed the other assassin, letting him join the other two facing Hatsumi. Chip had to backpedal to keep from being overwhelmed by the sheer number of the guards.

A guard with an axe chopped at Chip with a loud shout. He dove under the chop and rolled passed. Chip came to his feet, leapt up, and

kicked straight back to hit the guard in the side as he turned. The big man stumbled into two others, the last guard coming at Chip with a sword.

Steel met steel for the first time as Chip blocked the strike. The force of the man shoved Chip back and the follow-up swing did the same. Chip slammed into the wall of the compound as the guards recovered and the rushing of footsteps signaled the impending arrival of still more armed men. "We got to get out of—" Chip was cut off by the guard slamming into him, trying to behead him. Chip blocked the strike and put muscle against muscle, a venture he was fast losing.

Hatsumi flashed by the guard, slicing out his hamstrings. The man yelled and collapsed. Chip grabbed up the Manasta Jewel, already a step into rushing after Hatsumi. Chased by both guards and assassins, Chip laterally passed the jewel as the two Shinobi ran straight for the wall. Hatsumi went bounding up onto the wide perimeter wall, the four-legged birds rushing along their patrol to intercept him. Hatsumi landed and stopped as if without the slightest momentum. Dropping the jewel, he spun around and dropped down onto his belly. Laying down, he held out his hand back down into the compound.

Half a step behind, Chip leapt up and kicked on the wall. He got as high as he could but wasn't even close to Hatsumi's hand. He landed and quickly tore free the scabbard of his sword, then stepped back and leapt again. Hatsumi caught the extended scabbard and pulled as Chip kicked up the wall, narrowly avoiding the blades of the assassins.

Hatsumi yanked Chip up as fast as he could. He barely got Chip within grasping distance of the wall when he let go of the scabbard abruptly and rolled to keep from being impaled by the beak of the first bird that arrived. Chip shouted and grabbed the edge of the wall with his fingertips. "Hatsumi!" he yelled, his grip giving.

Hatsumi spun on his shoulder, legs flared, to drive back the bird. He came up to his feet and leapt, kicking the bird in the head. It hissed and backed away as more birds rushed to its aid, squawking as they neared. Hatsumi grabbed Chip's hand to help him get a better grip, then slashed at the bird.

Chip pulled himself up onto the wall, just in time to slash defensively at the birds that arrived from the other direction. "What do we do?" Hatsumi asked, fencing with the sharp mouths of the birds. Chip looked over the wall at the rooftops of the buildings a street away from the compound. "No, Chip!" Hatsumi protested, right as Chip snatched up the jewel, grabbed Hatsumi by the shoulder, and leapt off into the city.

At the Phosphoradin Tea House, Chip rubbed a leaf against his scraped fingers, breathing sharply as the wound burned worse. The tea house was empty, devoid of even one other patron and only a single host who had fallen asleep in the pre-dawn hours. A solitary candle burned on the table Chip sat at as he scrubbed his wounds.

Opposite Chip, Hatsumi sat topless with a multitude of welts, cuts, and scrapes. He was using a larger leaf to scrub his own slashes on his forearms. He inhaled and stiffened, holding the leaf to the wound as long as he could before the pain grew to be too much. He yanked it away and let the clotting injury breathe for a moment. "Think Alfin will betray us?" he asked Chip.

"I doubt he'll ever know anything sensitive enough for it to matter," Chip said, still scrubbing his scrapes with the leaf. "This seemed more like a..." Chip's words stopped cold with sudden realization. "No," he whispered to himself.

"What is it?" Hatsumi asked, sitting up with paranoid concern.

"No, no, no," Chip repeated worriedly until he fished through all the pockets on his belt. He sighed with relief and took from his pocket his Gameboy Advance. He laid the portable game system on the table with some care, then reached over his shoulder to keep disinfecting the wounds on his back.

Hatsumi rolled his eyes and resumed tending to his own wounds. He groaned, then sighed with relief just after a loud joint pop. He feigned fainting with relief and slumped in his chair. Chip giggled, harder when Hatsumi had to sit up because he'd caught a cut on the backrest of the chair itself. "Don't laugh, ass." Hatsumi threw one of the leaves at Chip.

The leaf floated harmlessly in the air, then dwindled to the ground. "Hey!" protested Chip, catching the leaf before it touched down on the sandy carpets beneath their chairs. "These things are expensive."

Hatsumi looked astonished. "They're stolen."

"Right, so show some respect for how hard they were to get."

"I'm the one who stole them," Hatsumi further pushed.

"Exactly," Chip said emphatically. The confusion, combined with the late-night exhaustion, caused the pair to burst into giggles. They tried to get back to their wounds but couldn't stop the laughter.

When the curse of inanity finally did subside, Hatsumi confided to Chip, "I just...this whole thing...Cadress...it just seems like it was more an exercise than anything else."

"That is because it was an exercise," came a matriarchal voice. Chip and Hatsumi looked up as through the door of the tea house came Kagumi. The seasoned woman with indistinct Asian features walked past the host, making not a single sound as her bare feet padded along the wooden floor. Her normally silvering hair was a striking blue and she was dressed in desert attire befitting a widowed mother. She approached the table at which Chip and Hatsumi sat and helped herself to a seat. "You passed," she told the pair, adding, "Barely."

"Is there any other way to pass?" Chip asked, pushing a cup of tea from the silver tray to Kagumi.

Kagumi accepted the cup and took a sip, surprised by the strength. With a disapproving look at the two mid-teen boys, she informed them, "The fight in the Moogurush Compound was very poorly done. You barely escaped with your lives."

Hatsumi held up his right arm, showing the nasty cut along his side. "Yeah, we know." The slash matched others dotting his arms and legs.

"The grappling hook as a distraction was very well done," Kagumi nodded after another sip of the tea. She helped herself to a few of the shelled nuts complimentary with an order of tea. "As was the use of the re-anglers on the streets outside this establishment. Using them to avoid a continued fight against the rival spies was almost clever. Their involvement suggests possible movement by other forces beyond the Ember's League or the local criminal element. This is something we will have to investigate further."

Chip and Hatsumi looked at each other, a little confused but also hopeful. Chip tilted his head to Kagumi and asked "Will we be getting assigned here on a long-term ba—"

"Oh no," she almost laughed. Chip and Hatsumi were both let down. Hatsumi resumed scrubbing his injuries thoroughly but carefully. Chip collected his Gameboy and returned it to his pouch. "Your performance was adequate, until you reached the compound," their superior graded. "The first death of a desert assassin was where everything went awry." Kagumi told the two young ninja, "We don't leave behind bodies unless it is approved."

The elder ninja finished the tea in her cup and poured a bit more from the kettle. "Are you planning to ever sleep?" Chip mildly marveled.

She emptied the tea cup with a single shot and set it down, then informed the pair, "Cadres has extolled your virtues as operatives, limited though may be. You have done acceptably."

Hatsumi looked deadpan to Chip. "Such praise. I'm getting weepy."

Chip tapped his chest. "She really got me right here."

Kagumi rose from the seat and lastly informed them, "And the notion that the lane decides the victor of a race is positively foolish." She turned and began to depart, leaving Chip and Hatsumi to follow her back home.

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