

Chip Masters, Ninja

Part 5

A Crossworld Short Story

By Robert V Aldrich

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FROM THE MIND OF

RVA

"The flow of time is always cruel...its speed seems different for each person, but no one can change it...A thing that does not change with time is a memory of younger days..."

- Sheik, Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time

Chip Masters stared at the palm of his right hand.

He looked at it, studying every detail with a morose, distant expression. He watched his fingers shift under his gaze, as if they were nervous beneath the scrutiny. He turned his hand over, and back again, looking at the details. Chapped, hard skin on the web of his thumb. Thick callouses on his knuckles. Short nails. Thick pads of toughened skin at the base of the fingers.

He closed his hand into a fist, the skin groaning under the strength of his grip. His knuckles popped from the intensity, the sound adding to his glare. But a melancholy came over him and he released his grip. He closed his eyes, almost remorsefully, and his hand drifted open. Tears built in the corners of his eyes and he looked again at his palm.

"Staring into the eyes of your only lover?"

Chip was startled awake and straightened up. He sat in a forested glen, on a fallen tree. Streaks of dusty sunlight fell down through the leaves and the song of distant birds echoed in the serene air. From around a tree, Yuki approached. Dressed in a deep tan ninja outfit, she wore razors on her bracers and a necklace that dangled around her chest. Deep brown skin contrasted with her icy blue eyes, eyes almost as pale as Chip's.

Chip looked again at his hand and decided to let the insult slide. "Just considering the mountains," he said.

Yuki laughed, an utterly confused look on her face. "The what?"

"The mountains," Chip told her with a forced grin. "Palmistry?" The word meant nothing to the ninja that approached slowly. He turned the palm of his right hand towards her. "This is the Mountain of Mercury," he said, pointing at the base of his pinky finger. "Mountain of Apollo, Mountain of Saturn, and Mountain of Jupiter," he said, going across his palm towards his index finger. He dropped his hand. "You use them to see the future." Yuki didn't look convinced. Chip looked at his hand again and then smirked. "Of course this is also the lung area or something." He grew a bit despondent.

"I used to know so much `magic'," he remarked with air quotes. "None of it was real." There was terror in his eyes as he looked back on his life before the ninja compound he now called home, terror born that what he looked back at might instead be what he looked forward to. Without looking at Yuki, he asked, "Has Kagumi said anything?"

Chip's peer shook her head. As young as he, her steps made no noise as she came to join him on the tree. She tugged her back-length ponytail around her shoulder and began to braid it. "I had hoped Hatsumi would be my partner again but I didn't want it to happen like this."

"Yeah, me neither," Chip said distantly. In a black ninja uniform and pale skin, with short-cropped blonde hair, Chip looked almost like a polar opposite of Yuki.

The pair shared the quiet moment on the fallen tree before Yuki, staring forward much like Chip stared at his hand, finally asked, "Did you do it?" Chip turned to Yuki, and she to him. "Did you betray us? Did you betray the Shinobi?" The shaking in her eyes showed how personal the question was for her.

Chip's gaze fell from her and strength left his voice. "It's more complicated than that," he admitted.

"No it isn't Chip," Yuki said, her words wet with tears that hadn't appeared in her eyes. "Did you—"

"I will handle the questions, Yuki."

Chip and Yuki both leapt to their feet and turned. Kagumi approached them from behind. On the far side of middle age, she wore lines of worry and stress with great dignity. Her hair, normally worn up in a bun, was set free and streamed down her neck. Her gaze was as intense as always but it carried a new hint of disdain as she looked at her two subordinates. "Be gone," she told Yuki.

Yuki bowed her head and backed away. Chip watched her go, even after she had simply faded away, as if into thin air. "I really have to learn how to do that."

"Your ability to learn the secrets of the ninja has never been in greater jeopardy," Kagumi warned her ward.

"I don't know," Chip said with impervious bravado. "When I first came here, the entire clan tried to kill me, including—"

"Not today, Chip," Kagumi snapped at him. The tone of a superior was gone, replaced by a friend who had grown tired of his ego. She unclasped her bracers, removing the matted steel armor from her dark green uniform.

She sat down on the fallen tree, facing the opposite direction Chip had been facing. "Start from the beginning. What happened?"

"Where's Hatsumi?" Chip asked in return.

"I need you to focus," Kagumi told him with a glance, speaking with more patience than she had ever before afforded him. She emphasized that by adding, "Hatsumi needs you to focus." She set her elbows on her knees and exhaled tiredly. "Start at the beginning. What happened?"

Chip wore the tight suit of a Tech-Noir youth. Out-of-fashion with the rest of the denizens of Crossworld, he looked like a boy playing business dress-up in a medieval castle. He wasn't the only one dressed that way, however. There were a hodgepodge of various people all around, clashing with the locals. It afforded him a dynamic blending that allowed him to slide through the crowd with some ease.

A dozen paces ahead of him, walking down the cobblestone street, was a man in a subdued brown jacket, the sides of which extended to his knees. He carried a book clasped in metal restraints and he adjusted reading glasses as he walked.

The street they walked along wasn't a commercial hotspot but a few markets were open, selling mostly vegetables and some wooden wares. Two of the Castle guard passed by Chip, their red armor highlighted with gold. One carried a halberd, the other unarmed. They passed by Chip without so much as guess that he was a ninja.

Chip followed the bespectacled target for another length of the city until the man stopped and surveyed a fruit seller. Chip paused and lingered at a window, watching his target's reflection. "You keeping up?" Chip asked, whispering aloud.

Hatsumi swung around from the edge of the alley where Chip stood. "Yeah, and I'm getting bored. Could you slip up so this guy will notice you and we can have some fun?"

"Shut up," Chip told him. He nodded at the reflection. "What's the deal with that book? We've got to figure out where he's--"

"He's moving," said Hatsumi, suddenly all business.

"Go," said Chip. He stayed at the window as Hatsumi stepped around him. Dressed like a Crossworld local, Hatsumi wore subdued leather clothes

with earthen tones. The clap of soft boots followed him as he walked, staying in their target's shadow.

Hatsumi followed the man through an entire neighborhood, the architecture transitioning to a denser, more urban design. Here, the man approached a small mansion in the heart of a circular street on the west side of the castle. He neared, walking over a small bridge over a moat that was little more than a wading pool. The door opened as he neared, a young attendant waiting inside. She accepted his jacket but not the book.

Hatsumi stopped at the edge of the street, watching longways as the door shut. "Crap," he whispered. "He's part of House Fasil."

Chip appeared out of a nearby side-street that intersected with the circular road. He spotted Hatsumi and neared him. The two turned and faced Crossworld Castle, the triple spires raising up over the rest of the city like a protective angel. "He's House Fasil," Hatsumi repeated to his partner.

The name meaning nothing to him, Chip asked, "Scale of one to ten, how bad is that?"

His usual flippancy gone, Hatsumi admitted, "It complicates things."

"Not exactly the beginning," Kagumi state tritely.

She sat in the very center of a plain, square room. The simple wooden room had no windows and no doors. A tapestry hung from each wall, a geometric pattern identical to the rug on the floor. Only the ceiling was devoid of any decoration, the only thing that gave the room any orientation.

Hatsumi leaned against the wall in front of her, his arms crossed. He was a bit taller than her when standing, but with her sitting, the height difference was more pronounced. He resisted the urge to pace. His dark blue ninja outfit was completed by ceramic and wooden armor clashing with the healthy wooden tones of the room. "I asked you to start from the beginning," Kagumi told him.

"I started where things took a turn," Hatsumi told her.

"Chip's impudence is rubbing off on you," she said. Hatsumi met her gaze defiantly but not antagonistically. Kagumi let him stare for a moment, then asked without breaking his gaze, "What was your assignment? Repeat the parameters of your mission."

"You told us to track a specific man: the man with the glasses leaving the Hartford Helios," said Hatsumi. "We went to the Helios and found him."

He was the only one there that used glasses. There were a couple of people who had corrective lens but he was the only one with external ocular adjustment. The Hartford is like all Helios; it's crowded, it's smoky, it smells like gambling."

"You spotted him," said Kagumi. "And you followed him out of the Helios."

"You told us to gather all the information we could on him," said Hatsumi. "You didn't give us any indication why or what information specifically to gather, nothing. You did little more than say 'find this dude and learn everything'."

"Yes," she said. She returned back, "Was that a problem? Was it a mistake for me to entrust you with such an operation with so little oversight, so few instructions? Shall I treat you as I treat the juveniles? Hold your hand and instruct you to walk in a straight line?"

"I don't know, I kind of feel like I'm being treated that way now," Chip answered. He sat on the fallen tree, facing the opposite direction from Kagumi. She glared over her shoulder at him. He met her gaze with resolute intensity.

"You think you are owed a complete explanation for every order and operation you receive?" she all but accused.

"I think I need context to my orders, yes," Chip told her.

As though entertaining his statement, Kagumi posed, "I always felt that the necessity of one's orders would become self-evident as they were carried out. At least that's what I've always tried to instill in you." She asked leadingly, "What did become evident?"

The subtle turn of Chip's head wasn't lost on Kagumi. "Surprisingly little," he insisted.

"What did become evident?" Kagumi asked Hatsumi.

In the wooden room, he looked up at her and answered, "Our target was a part of the Ember's League."

Kagumi nodded as if she hadn't expected that revelation. "The Ember's League. Really?"

Hatsumi nodded. "I've really disappointed you, haven't I?" he remarked sadly. "You're normally not so patronizing with your sarcasm."

"Your attitude is not doing you any favors," she said back. She adjusted herself mentally with a turn of her head. "Tell me about the Ember's League. What do you know of them?"

"They're a criminal syndicate that operates primarily in the city-states of Tech-Noir and Teemlaln," Hatsumi answered, his hands on his thighs as he knelt before Kagumi. "They're not particularly egregious but they are very wide-spread. They allegedly have infiltrators in most of the towns between the city-states. Their calling card is a flourishing of the arts. They tend to cover most of the criminal activities under the guise of, or with the help of, artistic patronage. The Shinobi haven't been able to ascertain who the League's primary boss in Crossworld was, or if they even had an appreciable presence in Crossworld. As the city-state most devoid of technology and magic, as well as a general austere style, most people assumed Crossworld held little interest for them."

"And now we know differently?" Kagumi queried. Her condescending tone was taking its toll on Hatsumi but he relented and bit his tongue. He nodded and she asked, "How do we know this?"

The window slid open less the length of a hand before it stopped. In slithered Chip's arm. Trailing the edge of the window, his fingertips delicately tracked the path until they stopped at a small indentation. Barely a button on the wooden frame, it held a delicate tag of string almost impossible to see with the naked eye. Finding it, Chip pushed the window farther up, moving slowly until the catch of the window reached the string. Moving the window any farther would tear the line, Chip now managed to snake his way through the gap.

He slipped silently into the room and walked on his hands until he was fully clear of the window. He stood on his feet and surveyed the room. It was a simple office, with lounging chairs instead of seats. Several tables were set about, drawers all facing towards the north. Rich tapestries were draped over the walls with two doors leading into the house. The doors were pulled shut, light coming through the gliding tracks of both.

Chip waited for a moment and listened, then confirmed no change in the general noise of the house. He rose and turned to the window, carefully undoing the string trap. He opened the window the whole way and allowed Hatsumi to sneak inside. Hatsumi slipped into the room without any sound, his uniform shifting from urban grays and light browns to a more subdued forest color that blended into the visual texture of the office.

Chip rushed to the door, his tabi sandals making no sound. He approached the door and placed his gloved fingers to the wood. He gently guided the door just a bit to the side, opening it so slowly and gradually that it was imperceptible. Into the light he looked, seeing two guards. A man and a woman both stood casually but alertly by the main door of the house in a foyer with more doors and stairs. Chip held up two fingers as he closed the door.

Hatsumi went to the opposite door, the one leading deeper into the house. Just as Chip had done, he very slowly opened the door, wide enough to peek into the light. Beyond was a hallway with wooden floors deeply lacquered and polished. A candle sat across from the door, set into a recess in the wall. The wall was colored a gradient, from deep umber to a lighter yellow at the apex where it joined the ceiling.

As Hatsumi looked through, a figure crossed the door. Training kept Hatsumi from darting away, trusting that movement would expose him sooner than anything else. He watched as a young man in his late teens walked passed. He wore a golden rope, barely a cord, tied to his wrist and matching the rope around his neck. A mid-pubescent face was marred with one scar that went from his cheek down his neck. He was shirtless, revealing bruises on skin kept deliberately supple and refreshed. His thick belt held tight a knee-length skirt that only partially hid dark bruises on his legs. Leather sandals squeaked a bit as he walked by, a slight limp present but easily overlooked.

Hatsumi drew back from the door, shocked. He removed the ceramic half-mask over his mouth and let out a needed gasp. "What is it?" Chip whispered, little more than mouthing the question.

Hatsumi answered, "It's a Jem'dar."

"That was our first warning something was amiss," Hatsumi told his superior as he sat in the corner of the room. His elbows on his knees, he stared at Kagumi. He searched her face for some sign of surprise or expectation, some indication of where this news fit in her plans. The only reaction he got was a thoughtful reservation, like he had informed her of an unexpected development in the weather in a place she hadn't planned on visiting.

"A Jem'dar," Kagumi repeated. "Explain."

"Explain what a jem'dar is?" the young ninja repeated. "They're a slave." His tone was caustic.

"Are they?" Kagumi asked in a tone that suggested a quiz. "That is debatable. They are legal in Crossworld. They're legal in most city-states."

"Jem'dars might not be illegal but they are most certainly frowned upon," Hatsumi insisted. "Frowned upon to say the least. More than a few houses in Crossworld have barred them."

"That may be," Kagumi told him, "but yours was not a task to judge your target."

"Oh I beg to differ," Chip told her, turning to her as the pair sat on the fallen tree trunk.

"I'm sure you do," Kagumi answered, not turning to him. Before Chip could grow angrier at her lack of response, she addressed him verbally. "From the moment you arrived here, with the Shinobi, you have struggled to recognize your role, and even the role of the Shinobi themselves."

"And that role is passive subservience?" he all but attacked.

"That role is that of an observer," Kagumi told him in a detached tone, turning the seasoned eyes of a veteran on him. "The existence of the all is based on a universe that sees inward as well as out. All knowledge, all awareness, all being, is fundamentally connected to the eye seeing itself. We, the Shinobi, are the eyes of the universe, seeing existence, bearing witness to reality."

"Seeing is not enough," Chip told her. "Knowing there is a world beyond you is meaningless if you have no interaction in it. Knowing there's something beyond your door is..." His logic began to fail him. "It's trivia."

Kagumi laid clear, "It is your role, it is your place, and it is your assignment."

"I will never fail to address an issue if it comes up," Chip told her firmly.

Kagumi stared and Chip glared but neither spoke for a moment. When the silence of the forest was broken, it was by Kagumi saying, "And address it you did. Tell me," she challenged, "How did that work out?"

The door from the office opened slowly and Chip slipped through the gap. His hand over his right waist, he readied to draw the ninjato he carried there. But he saw no reason to draw the sword, the long hallway extending

in both directions but devoid of anyone. Hatsumi exited the office door and pulled it closed. He joined Chip in silently confirming they were alone, then they moved in tandem steps down the hall.

They arrived at the next doorway, an open portal through which was the kitchen. A pair of sous-chefs were working at a counter, their backs to the ninja as they passed by like a shadow. Chip led the way, Hatsumi's attention more aimed at the hallway behind them.

Chip headed for the next door, but paused abruptly. Hatsumi backed into him, stopping centimeters before a collision. He looked at Chip, who looked at him. The pair shared glances over their shoulder but didn't speak. Chip turned to the wall itself while Hatsumi kept a lookout.

Chip held his hands to the wall, feeling nothing but the smooth wood of the timber. Chip grimaced, then patted Hatsumi on the back. Their backs to each other, the pair spun around each other, as if dancing to choreography. Hatsumi now faced the wall. Only a second of attention to it, however, and he felt a pull of magic. He passed his hand over the wall, then back around it.

"Just a second," he told Chip. He opened a pouch on his utility belt while above them, the ceiling creaked with footsteps on the floor above. Chip looked up at them, then back over his shoulder Hatsumi. His partner held out a throwing star towards the wall. He turned the star flat against the wall and pressed it into the air.

A shower of light descended over the wall, revealing seams in the wood. A door that hadn't been visible before was now exposed. Hatsumi looked at Chip, smiled, and flashed his eyebrows. Returning the star to his pouch, he very carefully pushed on the door. Before the door was even fully open, there came from within a child-like shriek of pain and agony.

"The instant that door opened, everything went sideways," Hatsumi recalled gravely, as much a confession as a reporting. He leaned his head back and he faced the ceiling. His eyes drained of focus while his mind drowned in thought.

Kagumi was quiet, her reaction very reserved. "For all the time you and Chip have been a team, for all the missions and operations you have taken part in, you and he have never discussed his past."

"No," Hatsumi told her, his eyes still faced up. "We haven't really discussed mine either. I got the impression..." Hatsumi's gaze grew still

more distant, even compared to the middle distance he had been staring into. "I guess I just assumed we were equally repulsed by where we had come from."

"But you had no indication he would respond this way?" Kagumi asked. The hesitation in Hatsumi's response spoke volumes of how unprepared he was for what occurred.

Hatsumi's hand slapped down onto Chip's, catching him before he drew his sword. Eyes locked as the two ninja stood in the hidden doorway. Just beyond, shrieks echoed. In the hallway, two ninja matched wits as they wrestled motionlessly over the lethality only one sword swing away.

It was Hatsumi who won. He forced Chip back and waved his hand behind him. The door disappeared and with it went Chip's hope of intervening. He looked at Hatsumi, livid to the point of hysteria but Hatsumi forced him back down the hall, towards the office through which they had entered.

Chip stared at the palm of his right hand. He studied the details of the creases of skin, the callouses that had grown, had been earned. Next to him, Kagumi was quiet. Careful eyes monitored him as he stared at his hand. When he sniffed abruptly, she was taken aback.

"It was just too much," Chip whispered from his soul. "The instant that door opened...as soon as I heard..." His stare fell from his hand and drifted to focus on the amorphous shadows of the past. He looked away and shook his head. His eyes clamped tight and his face clinched as he tried to maintain some shred of control of himself.

Moments of intensity passed and Chip opened his eyes again. To Kagumi, he said, "Say what you want about 'operational parameters' and 'mission objectives'. If you tell me what needed to happen didn't happen, then I'll tell you you're blind."

"What happened next?" asked Kagumi. "Not that night; immediately afterwards. You and Hatsumi departed. What happened next?"

Chip stormed through the door of the tiny apartment. The stone square of a room, lit only by a pair of opposing windows set at the apex of the walls, rang out as Chip screamed in unbridled rage. Hatsumi winced at the scream but did nothing to mute it. He let Chip roar with the fury of a thousand hells, then when the scream subsided, he remained silent. Chip seethed, visibly shaking in rage. He wiped his face, trying and failing to contain his anger. "Why?" he asked, his voice a hoarse whisper. "Why did you pull me out of there?!" His question turned into a furious accusation and he stepped into Hatsumi's face.

"We have orders," Hatsumi answered, speaking with his eyes closed, knowing more shouts were forthcoming.

Chip's eyes held violent hysteria. He turned around and paced into the apartment, crossing the brick floor that sloped ever-so-slightly to a drain at the center. "Hatsumi, he was..." Chip couldn't even say it. He covered his face and resumed pacing.

The door of the apartment opened and Hallcyr peeked in. "What the hell, guys?" she exclaimed. "We can hear you out on the street."

"We had...an issue," Hatsumi told her.

"Don't blow my mission because yours went to crap," she told her peers before shutting the door.

Hatsumi looked back at Chip, certain the discussion wasn't complete. "Chip, we need to report this."

"Report this?" Chip glowered. "So Kagumi can turn a blind eye? So Kageryu can bemoan 'what's the big deal?'" He stepped into Hatsumi's space again. "The problem is before us. The problem is here, now. It's on you and me."

"Chip..." Hatsumi practically pled. Chip spun away from him, cursing. "Just, please," Hatsumi did beg. "Just, take an hour. Okay, take an hour and, and try to calm down, alright?"

"An hour?" Chip asked, like he was mocking Hatsumi. "What the hell do you think will change in an hour?" Again, he got into Hatsumi's face. "An hour might make the difference in whether they live or they die! Whether they can live with themselves or—" He turned abruptly and fell deathly quiet.

Hatsumi licked his lips and sighed. "I just...I thought, if you took an hour, then maybe you could...go to sleep." When he said that, he waved his fingers in front of him. Chip turned around to Hatsumi, shocked by betrayal.

The spell worked quickly, though, and Chip teetered. He stumbled and then fell back, barely catching himself before he collapsed onto the brick floor.

Hatsumi admitted to his superior, "It didn't help." He had shifted now. He still sat in the corner, but he leaned against the adjacent wall now, staring into a different but no less bleak distance. "I thought with some time, with some distance from the moment, you know, maybe Chip would calm down." Kagumi sat with crossed legs in the center of the room and listened to everything; spoken word and silence alike.

"Chip's...he's like no one I've ever met before," Hatsumi shared. "I remember...I remember when I first met a god." He looked from his vacant stare to Kagumi. "You've met Tiamat, right?"

"Kageryu's sister," she confirmed. "I have been in her presence."

"She spoke to me," Hatsumi shared with Kagumi like it was a treasured secret. "'I know where you should be', she said." He smiled, a happiness that faded all too quickly. "I don't know when I realized how...how full of crap the dragons are."

"Be mindful," Kagumi snapped.

Hatsumi glared at her, challenging her warning with a devout certainty she'd only before seen in Chip. "Next time I saw her, she didn't even remember bringing me to home. I wasn't even an ant to her." He sat back with a sigh. "And, you know, fine. Whatever. They're gods; I'm a mortal. Sure. But, don't pretend like there's some magnificent, perfect plan and omniscient awareness of all things. Gods might know more than us but they're still insensitive dicks."

Kagumi did him the courtesy of saying, "I'll pretend I didn't hear that."

Hatsumi told her, "Summon Kageryu. I'll say it to his face."

"You take risks, Hatsumi," she warned him earnestly. "You think the latitude Kageryu periodically grants Chip somehow extends to you?"

"I think Chip's right a lot more often than anyone gives him credit for," Hatsumi told her. "I wish I was as right as he is." His eyes fell, as did the timbre and strength of his voice. "I make too many mistakes. Like forcing him to sleep."

Kagumi saw Hatsumi's bitterness and her tone softened. "It was a good idea."

The young ninja only shook his head. "I thought I was giving him a chance to calm down," he told her. He looked at his hands hanging between his knees. "Turns out, I was just trapping him inside his own mind."

"No."

The singular word snapped open Hatsumi's eyes. He stared at the ceiling as the blue night of the city filtered in through the tiny windows at street level. Hatsumi glanced to his left, to the corner where Chip slept. Bundled up defensively around himself, he clutched his shoulders as he periodically jumped in his sleep.

"No."

The word was repeated, its echo bouncing around the featureless apartment. Hatsumi sat up, his course heavy blanket falling from him onto the sleeping pad. The room was shared with six others, all low-ranking Shinobi on assignment in Crossworld. All awake from Chip's slumbering protest.

"The watch will hear," whispered Hallcyr, the senior-most of the Genin. "The last thing we need is a bunch of Crossworld Castle Guard coming down on us."

Hatsumi looked over the faces of the others, all similar in age to him. Bereft of ideas of what to do, he rose from his sleeping pad and crawled across the floor to Chip. He passed his fingers over Chip's head, whispering, "Awake." Nothing happened for a second and Hatsumi had to close his eyes and work to focus. "Awake," he repeated, moving his fingers again.

Chip awoke with a start. His body moved like it wasn't his own, limbs coming aware out of sequence. He turned into the corner and backed into it like he was trying to crawl away from his own mind. As lucidity seeped in, Chip swallowed tightly, horror draining from his face. He grabbed the side of his head with his left hand. He checked his right hand, as though making sure it was still there. Upon seeing it, he sighed with relief and collapsed back against the corner. Tired eyes looked at the other shinobi and he apologized with remorse and embarrassment.

He got up and stormed for the door. He shoved it open but the wood caught on the stone step just outside. Chip shoved passed it and ran up the half-flight to arrive at the back alley of the street. The smithing shop opposite them was silent for once, a few trails of smoke still carrying into the air. The smell of chemicals and treatment permeated the air but it was lost

to Chip as he walked down the narrow, dark alley. Overhead, a sky full of stars was only slightly muted by the light of the city.

Hatsumi followed Chip out, rushing to catch up with him. "Hey," he called. "Hey!" He grabbed Chip's arm and spun him around. Expecting anger, Hatsumi was shocked to see Chip's face twisted with tears. He let out one sob and then latched onto Hatsumi, hugging him desperately. Stunned, Hatsumi could only stand there in the dark alley, completely taken aback.

Clutching to Hatsmi, desperate for something to give him strength, Chip let go his control. He buried his face in Hatsumi, losing himself, trusting his weakness to him. Through the sobs, through the sorrow and shame, he let slip, "I thought I was past this. I thought I'd gotten away from it."

Chip stared at his hand. He could feel the solitary tear rolling down his nose, down his cheek, to the edge of his chin. For so light a thing, its pressure was inescapable.

Next to him, Kagumi couldn't stop herself from wiping her own cheek with the palm of her hand. Only aware of what she was doing as she completed it, she averted her eyes. She faced down and tried to gather herself. "Adversity tempers us," she quoted absently. She wasn't sure if she believed it.

"Embrittlement occurs when metal is overtempered," said Chip, his voice like a ghost.

Kagumi closed her eyes. Though her face was placid, the effort it took for her to remain focused on the task at-hand took its toll on her soul. "What happened next?" she asked.

Chip didn't hesitate. "I killed him." Eyes met. Wills met. "He deserved to die, Kagumi."

She weathered his stare for a moment, then she faced away. She looked up at the nighttime canopy of the forest, listening to the songs of distant nightingales. "Maybe," she said guardedly. It was a calculated allowance. "But now we have revealed ourselves to the Ember League. Now they know we are on to them, know we know they exist in Crossworld." She nodded, swallowing slowly. "His death has jeopardized much." She looked to Chip now. "What has it accomplished?" He didn't venture an

answer, or even a response. He merely faced away into the night. "One or two slaves have the satisfaction of knowing their abuser died."

"That means the world to those one or two people," Chip assured her.

Kagumi withdrew her inquiry. She rose from the fallen tree, drawing Chip's attention over his shoulder. She paced away for a moment and exhaled into the sky. "How did you gain access to his bedchambers?" she inquired. "You're skilled in many ways but stealth...you're only middling. To kill him in such a fashion as his wife slept next to him took skill you've not demonstrated."

"It's amazing what I can accomplish when I'm motivated," Chip told her spitefully.

"How did you get into his bedchambers?" she pushed.

"It wasn't anything elaborate," Chip told her. She turned and glared at him. "What?!" he exclaimed, standing up. "It was the usual techniques, it wasn't anything specific. I found traps but I worked around them."

"You picked the lock on the door?" she asked. "You passed undetected by the magical field?"

"Yes," Chip insisted defiantly. "Is it so impossible to believe that I can get into a place without being noticed? I've been living on the street for most of my life."

"It isn't impossible, Chip," Kagumi told him patiently, maternally. "It's just that it isn't true."

"That I can't break into a bedroom?" he gawked at her insult.

"No, I believe you could have broken into his bedroom," she answered. She turned and faced him, despondent as though heartbroken that she'd seen through his deception. "If that is where he had been killed."

Hatsumi said again, "Go to sleep."

Passing his fingers over the back of Chip's head, he felt his friend go limp in his arms. Hatsumi held him close, cradling him against his chest. He protected him from falling, protected him from the world at large.

With weight on his mind, Hatsumi scooped Chip up into his arms. Carrying him back through the shadows of the alley, he descended the steps, disappearing back into the apartment. As the other shinobi slept, returned quickly to their own rests and their own worries, Hatsumi carried

Chip to his sleeping pad. Laying him in the bedding he called his own, Hatsumi pulled the blanket over the slumbering Chip and stayed over him. He watched the fitful sleep take Chip, driving his eyes to shift, his muscles to twitch, stealing from him the rest and relief he so desperately needed.

Hatsumi rose from Chip's side, taking with him his sword. He departed as silent as a shadow and as resolute as the night.

The man was bent over the drawing table, the angled surface set low in the dark room. The four corners of the table were glowing, the light derived from crystals set into slight pedestals. The soft light was magnified at the center of the desk where he was comparing two documents.

He removed a monocle from his right eye and stood up, engrossed in his work. So engrossed, he didn't notice the thin wire loop around his neck.

With a single pull of his hands, Hatsumi drew the wire beyond tight. The garrote didn't constrict the man's neck; it beheaded him. The sliver of wire cut through skin and sinew alike, biting all the way through the muscle. It wasn't until the wire dug in the man's spine that Hatsumi grasped the seriousness of the wound. The head fell forward and slammed into the table, rolling off the angled surface. The neck sprayed blood like a fountain into the air, painting the ceiling and wall before the body fell to Hatsumi's side, blood pooling quickly on the floor.

Hatsumi backed away from the body, in a strange haze. He watched the body lay there on the floor, twisted as though still alive, as blood continued to pump out from the neck. He backed away as the soupy red neared his tabi, then towards the door of the office itself. Without even thinking, he backed into the hallway. The house was at rest, the lights dim or out entirely. The hall was draped in shadows, except for a pair of candles at either end, not including the one carried by the Jem'dar.

The young boy froze when he saw Hatsumi. The ninja turned to him, just as surprised, just as stunned. But wearing the ceramic half-mask over his mouth, the only impression Hatsumi left was a pair of eyes locked on the Jem'dar. The child only barely on the cusp of adulthood stood perfectly still, the flame of the candle in his hand all that shifted. His jaw hanging open, the shadows of the candle emphasizing the scar on his face, the house slave glanced to the floor and saw the blood seeping out from the door, beginning to part and slide down the hall in either direction. His young eyes rose back to Hatsumi and he sighed. "Thank goodness," he whispered. Eyes despondent with relief, he simply turned his scar-covered back on the shinobi and headed back down the hallway the way he had come.

Hatsumi's expression matched the shadow he cast against the wall. He blinked slowly as he faced away from Kagumi. "It wasn't the first time I've killed." He laughed suddenly. "I mean, come on, I grew up in the woods. I...me and death..." He scratched at his chin, his mind latched onto that singular memory. "This was the first time I've murdered."

He looked up from his recollection, to Kagumi seated on her knees in the middle of the room. "It's honestly not the, the death that gets me. The wire, the blood, none of that," Hatsumi admitted to her. "It was the way the guy looked at me." A long moment passed as Hatsumi tried to find words to express so alien of thoughts.

"The target?" Kagumi asked.

"The Jem'dar," Hatsumi clarified. "The relief...but it was...it made me feel guilty for not having done it sooner."

Kagumi was quiet for a long time, her attention on Hatsumi even when her gaze was not. Eventually, she said, "You were not authorized in that action." Her statement seemed to have little effect on Hatsumi, effect or really even interest. "I'm shocked, Hatsumi." Her use of his name did get his attention. "I've never known you to be so disobedient."

He didn't say anything. He considered her assessment and looked away. Still sitting in the corner, he faced the opposite wall, the wall to her left, and weighed her statement. "Is this a behavior I can rest knowing will not be repeated?" she asked like a parent to a child.

He was a long time in answering. When he finally looked at her, he told her honestly, "I really don't know."

"You will be punished," she told him firmly. He only nodded. "You may be exiled." He didn't bat an eye. "Banished," she repeated. He just nodded, confirming his understanding. "You may be executed." His look of reservation spoke to how serious he took matters, but his silence endured. "Have you anything to say in your defense?"

Time stretched on as his eyes glazed over. Into the distance he looked, then he settled his gaze on Kagumi. "Will Chip be able to stay?"

"You will be punished," Kagumi told Chip. She was standing away from him, her arms crossed in a matronly posture, even as she stood with her legs together, her back straight. "You may be exiled."

"Good," Chip told her. The sincerity in his voice was enough to stun her. "If what went down is that big of a deal, is so wrong to you," he told Kagumi, "then this clearly isn't a place I want to be. You clearly aren't a group I want to be a part of."

"You speak like you are above us," his Chunin said flatly but angrily.

"Not above, just outside," Chip told her back, equally as angry. Again, Kagumi was stunned. "I'm not a shinobi. I'm not a ninja. I'm Kageryu's pet project." His words oozed with disdain. "And as soon as he forgets I'm here..." Chip shook his head. "And yeah, if that monster getting offed is some kind of serious deal-breaker, then you can go to hell. Each and every last one of you."

For an instant, Kagumi betrayed hurt, but it was too brief for Chip to notice. She turned and walked away, leaving him alone in the clearing. He watched her go, expecting her to fade from sight but she didn't. Instead, she physically departed, step by step, until it was distance and darkness that swallowed her, not a magical separation.

Alone through the forest, Kagumi walked. Through shade and shadow, the thick canopy over her, she walked. Her footsteps made no noise, unintentional sound a thing she was incapable of making. Instead, she glided silently through the underbrush until she knew for certain she was beyond Chip's sight. Once alone, she clutched her eyes shut and a single sob escaped her. She bent forward, the emotional toll too much to muster.

"Kagumi," came a woman's voice. The Chunin inhaled sharply and stood up, brushing her cheeks to make sure no signs of tears would be found. When she turned to the speaker, her face was as stalwart and stoic as ever. Walking out from the darkness was a dark-skinned woman with bright green eyes. Her head smooth save for a short stripe across the top in a mohawk, she wore a dark red ninja uniform bereft of armor or weaponry. "Report," said the higher-ranking ninja.

"Ester," Kagumi said respectfully, with a bow of her head. "The two genin have reported the same tale, as corroborated by the other agents within Crossworld. The only deviation was..." She paused, a hesitation Ester took notice of. "Understandable," Kagumi decided. "It is in the nature of the young, and of partners, to want to protect one another."

"A lie is a lie," said Kagumi's commander. She shook her head, then paced away from Kagumi. Her gaze whipped back and she glared at the chunin. "What's happened? You've never had any issues before. None of your Genin have ever disobeyed you, and certainly not like this. Yours are among the most effective and capable shinobi we have operating."

Kagumi stayed silent, simply expressing, "This was unexpected."

"Your judgment has lapsed, Kagumi," Ester accused as she turned back towards her. "You should have not allowed them access to the city life so soon."

"Many operations have they been sent on, of all varieties," Kagumi defended: herself, her judgment, and her subordinates. "I had no indication this one would be..."

"Would be what?" Ester demanded.

"...problematic," Kagumi decided.

Ester laughed sickly. "Problematic? You call this problematic? The death of an Ember's League informant? The murder of our first real lead on their involvement in Crossworld? We had the chance to gain a true lead on their information! And never mind that two of your Genin took matters into their own hands, in defiance against the wishes and orders of their superiors!"

"Children," Kagumi stated evenly. "And children make mistakes."

"Mistakes that have cost the shinobi dearly," Ester leveled furiously at her.

"Oh let's not get carried away now," came a deep, powerful voice. Both women turned their attention behind Ester as Kageryu walked up. Striding out of thin air and into their conversation as easily as crossing through an open door, the leader of the shinobi stood a head and a half over both of them. Swarthy skin and indistinct features clashed with Ester's dark black skin and Kagumi's muted Asian traits. The tall man wore a ninja uniform similar to theirs, only missing sleeves and carrying a massive katana on his back, the handle ready over his right shoulder. "Chip Masters and Hatsumi carried out a matter that was likely premature, but I would not exactly deem it unexpected."

"They defied orders," Ester said, standing tall even as Kagumi reverently bowed her head to Kageryu.

"Implicit orders," Kageryu dismissed. "Which of the two lied to you?" he asked Kagumi.

"Chip, sir," Kagumi answered.

"Of course," the tall shinobi muttered. "They need to be punished. That goes without saying."

"Does it?" Ester exclaimed. "I cannot believe you are being so flippant with the order of operations."

As if entertaining a toddler, Kageryu asked, "What do you suggest?"

"Execution," Ester told him. Kagumi's eyes clamped shut but her head remained bowed and her posture submissive towards Kageryu. The leader of the shinobi cocked an intrigued eyebrow. "An example must be made," asserted the Jonin.

Kageryu considered it for a moment, clearly not ruling it out. "Interesting," he decided as he mulled over the options. "Any other ideas?" he asked. "I feel like that's...let's call that 'the one to beat'." He gestured putting demonstrative execution aside as an idea, at least for the moment.

"Certainly exile," Ester insisted. "Chip at least. He lied. That is a more egregious transgression than an unauthorized assassination."

Kageryu seemed to concur. To Kagumi, he asked, "What say you?"

Her eyes and face aimed down, she said, "I believe they should stay, sir. It is my opinion, however ill-experienced that they—"

"Oh for heaven's sake, stand up," Kageryu groaned. He asked Ester, "Why do you perpetuate this thing about bowing so much?" She seemed too annoyed with her superior to answer.

Kagumi stood tall, her gaze the last thing to rise. Looking up to meet Kageryu's eyes dead-on, she spoke simply. "Chip and Hatsumi must not be separated." A face that had seen many seasons betrayed her apprehension. "I plead," she admitted with a quake to her voice, "these boys..." Her eyes shut in resigned certainty. She took a long breath before standing tall yet again. She opened her eyes and once more faced Kageryu. "Separating them, keeping them apart – if we could even manage that – would adversely affect them. As would it adversely affect the shinobi as a whole." She turned her attention to Ester. "We are stronger with them. We are stronger because of them."

Ester's face was still but her anger was obvious. Kageryu simply nodded. He informed the Jonin, "There will be no execution."

"Yes sir," Ester confirmed, even as she glowered at Kagumi.

"Nor will they be exiled," Kageryu added. "Nor will they be permanently dismantled. I don't want anybody cutting fingers off or whatever it is you tell young fools to do." Ester didn't confirm the order except to nod curtly, still glaring at Kagumi. "Beyond that," Kageryu allowed, "I'm prepared for you to level whatever appropriate punishment you feel is warranted."

As though a bit validated, Ester spared Kageryu a look and said with only partial sarcasm, "Thank you, sir."

To Kagumi, Kageryu said, "You may release Hatsumi from his prison and inform him of my decision."

Kagumi closed her eyes again, hiding the elated gratitude she felt. "Thank you, sir."

"I will speak with Chip Masters," Kageryu said. He left the two ninja to attend to whatever matters they felt, and turned. In doing so, he traversed the distance with magical ease and found himself in the clearing, standing over Chip. The teen rose from the fallen tree, surprised to see the ninja who towered over him. He readied to speak, just to say Kageryu's name, when he was grabbed by the throat.

"All that stands between you and death is me," Kageryu growled, the voice of a celestial dragon speaking not just through the air but into Chip's very soul. His words were clear and only a fraction as certain as his intentions. "If you ever dare to challenge the authority of your superiors – my proxies – a thousand galaxies shall live and die in the time it takes you to merely conceive of the agony I will inflict upon you."

Chip leaned towards Kageryu and, staring him right in the eyes, told him, "Do it."

The Shadow Dragon, master of the shinobi, was stunned. His mouth fell open and his eyes widened as his hand slipped from Chip's throat. Chip Masters stood defiantly before Kageryu, ready for whatever came next. When nothing but silence followed, Chip shook his head. He backed away from Kageryu and spoke honestly. "I'm sorry," he told the bigger man. "For lying, I really am. I really and truly am. I won't. Not again. Not to Kagumi. She...she's a hardass and she's kind of a bitch but she, she didn't deserve that. I'm sorry. But Kageryu...as genuinely and as honestly and as serious as you were just now," Chip told him with no illusion that the threat had been hyperbolic, "I pledge to you, if I ever even suspect that you are going to stand by while innocents are hurt..." He held up his hands and backed away further.

"And look, man," he quickly added, almost hysterical to not be misunderstood. "I get it. I do. I get it. I get, lesser of two evils. I get...I get it." His eyes were wet with tears, not of rage, but of fear that his adamancy might be underestimated. "But if...if, if we're talking genuine apathy in the face of evil..." He clapped his hands and wiped them clean. "Son, I'm done. I'm done and I'm gone."

Kageryu's shocked face softened. His eyes lit and a smile appeared, however subtle. "I would expect nothing less of you," he told Chip. He turned and gestured behind him. As he did, the forest clearing faded away to reveal home. Three massive trees lifted impossibly into the endless forest

canopy. Within the trees, an arboreal metropolis awaited amongst the branches. "Home awaits," he told Chip.

With a relief that he had dodged death once more, Chip walked passed Kageryu, heading for the steps into the ninja citadel. Just as he crossed the path of the great ninja, Kageryu said, "Chip..." The young man turned and looked up at Kageryu, and he down at Chip. The seriousness they both conveyed was mutually understood. Chip nodded and then walked on, heading into the city where Hatsumi waited.

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