

Chip Masters, Ninja

Part 7

A Crossworld Short Story

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FROM THE MIND OF

RV A

“What are you rebelling against?”

“Whaddya got?”

– Mildred and Johnny Strabler, *The Wild One*

Hatsumi awoke like all ninjas did: eyes opening suddenly but otherwise, perfectly motionless. He listened to the song of birds in the musty woodland air before sitting up. He was inside the forest shelter he and Chip had constructed by latticing the leafy branches of nearby trees. Should some passerby spot it, it would seem to be nothing but an unremarkable bush against the trunk of a squat, aged tree.

Hatsumi stretched his legs out, popping his toes and his shoulders simultaneously. He sat up and scratched his midsection. He always itched when he slept in his shinobi uniform. He noted the empty pad pushed right up against his own. Hatsumi rolled off his sleeping pad and crawled through the tiny gap in the branches.

Outside, the dawn had broken. Songbirds sang amongst the lush leaves, their cheerful high-pitched notes traveling through the canopy. The bushy grass sparkled with the morning dew on the tips of the thick blades of green. A blue sky hovered overhead, half-obscured by the towering trees. The ceiling of the endless forest broke the morning wind that brushed up after rising from the plains and fields far to the south.

Hatsumi found Chip at the creek south of their camp. Dressed in a jungle camouflage like Hatsumi, he didn't wear any of the armored plates or ceramic adornment his partner did. Squatting down by the stream, he had a notepad and a charcoal stick. He scribbled a bit, his gaze distant. “Good morning,” he whispered without looking back at his partner.

Hatsumi looked beyond the stream, sharp eyes dancing over the forest floor. It took him a moment before he finally spotted the squirrels. Two gray-and-brown rodents with white bellies were scurrying around the base of a tree. They chattered periodically when they stopped, then resuming their running. Hatsumi couldn't tell if they were fighting or playing.

The two squirrels chased one another in rings around the tree, then went darting up into the branches. The rustling of thick, lush leaves accompanied them as they disappeared into the distant ceiling of the forest. Chip sighed and wrote the notes, then flopped down into a cross-legged sitting posture. He summarized the assignment succinctly. “This sucks.”

Hatsumi agreed with a nod. He got on all fours and bent over the stream, washing his face. "Punishments among the shinobi come in a lot of forms." He scrubbed his face and shivered from the chill of the crystal water. He shook his head like a dog shaking out its coat. "I once snuck out of home and had to detail a thousand cells before I was allowed to return. I was looking through that microscope for...sheesh, I don't know how long."

"I'd rather do microbiology than document the crepuscular mating patterns of forest rodents." Chip passed the notepad and charcoal to Hatsumi and said, "Your turn."

"This stuff can be valuable," Hatsumi told Chip. He looked at the notes and muttered, "I'm not sure to who, but I'm sure it can be."

Chip headed back toward their enclosure and yawned as he did. He sucked on bad breath as he looked at the forest, the view not bad but the loneliness getting to him. He rustled through some leaves. "Do we have any of the jerky left?"

"No, we finished it last night," Hatsumi called, searching the trees immediately around him for more squirrels to monitor.

"Dammit," grumbled Chip. He took out a piece of flint and crossed the forest to a sandy patch by a snarl tree. The great beast rumbled as he neared, one of the roots arching up. A mouth appeared on the roots, massive teeth flaring wide. Chip smacked the root and absently told it, "Quit it." The root recoiled and returned to the soil. Chip pulled over some of the wood he and Hatsumi had been collecting during their stay and he set it on the soil by the snarl tree. A few scrapes from the flint and Chip caught kindling, which caught wood, which became a small fire.

The snarl tree groaned again, this time appreciably. Several roots from the soft ground by the trunk rose and began to burrow themselves next to the fire. "Yeah-huh, see?" Chip told the tree like he was talking to a kitten. As the fire started to build, Chip left it on the sandy soil and returned to the bush enclosure. He returned with a half-dozen tubers and began to skewer them on his sword. The straight blade slid through the tough hides without trouble and Chip balanced the sword over the building fire.

The starchy breakfast beginning its long preparation, Chip sat back and sighed. He pulled from one of the pouches on his utility a small sparkly-red box. He opened the Gameboy console and pushed the activation tab. The screen the size of his palm lit up for a second, then went dark again. Chip's pale face was passive but his eyes widened. "No," he breathed. He pushed the tab again. The screen alit just long enough for Chip to sense relief, then it went dark again. "Crap!"

He rose and stormed away from the fire. He crossed back through the forest to where Hatsumi was standing beneath a tree. Paper and charcoal in-hand, the ninja with Asian features was staring up into the leaves with an expression that was equal parts attentive and self-loathing. "Hatsumi," said Chip, unaware of and indifferent to anything he might be interrupting. "My Gameboy's batteries are dead."

Hatsumi squinted up into the branches for a second, then scribbled. "...kay," he said absently. Chip clucked his tongue angrily for a second as his glare bore a hole through Hatsumi's head. The taller of the two teen ninjas finally noticed the silence and looked at Chip. "What?"

"My Game—" He clammed up abruptly before he said something he would regret. "I...they...I need to...my..." He fell silent again. He tapped his thigh with his hand a few times and tried to stay calm. "My Gameboy's batteries are dead. I want to remedy that."

"Again?" Hatsumi sighed. He gestured incredulously at Chip. "Come on, man. It's a video game. It's...it's a simulation. It's a handheld simulation with no..." He knew he was getting nowhere. He gave up on any more documenting at the moment and approached his partner. "Chip, we're here until Kagumi forgets why she's punishing us. Okay? We're not allowed to leave. And we certainly aren't allowed to go home, so you can charge the cylinders again."

"Batteries," Chip corrected.

"Yeah, remember how many chores you had to trade to Kevin to get him to charge them?" Hatsumi reminded Chip. "I had to help you with some of that too, man."

"Yeah, I know," Chip didn't like acknowledging. "But, look..." He fidgeted to find words but nothing but stubbornness could be found. "Come on, man. This is..." He gestured at the hand-held gaming console and its singular importance to him.

Hatsumi whined. "Chip..." He searched the forest for some idea of how to talk some reason into his counterpart. "What do you want to do?" he practically accused.

"I want to call Kagumi," he all but pled.

"What?! No!" Hatsumi yelled. "We were only given six shards to start with, and we've had to use two of them already."

"Yeah, but those were related to the assignment," Chip argued back. "We haven't asked for any accommodations since we got this rat-ass assignment."

"Yeah, because it's a rat-ass assignment," Hatsumi exclaimed, his voice raising in frustration. "You don't ask for accommodations when you're being punished."

Chip scoffed. "Maybe you don't." He turned to head back to the camp.

Hatsumi whined again. "Chip..." He sighed and followed the way back to the fire.

Chip returned to the sandy patch where the snarl tree had stuck two roots directly into the fire, the flames beginning to creep up the wood. "Dammit," he cursed, slapping out the flames, then paddling the slow-moving branches until they withdrew from the embers. "Quit it, quit it, quit it!" he repeated irritably, the mighty tree groaning as it acquiesced. It returned its scraggily roots to the forest soil.

Chip went back to their long-term temporary shelter and came back with a small black pouch. "I really don't want to do this," said Hatsumi. Chip ignored him. "What are you going to ask for?"

"To return home," Chip said as he tugged open the strings on the pouch. "Or at least to get a reprieve of some kind."

"You think our Chunin is going to approve a vacation?" Hatsumi laughed. "Chip," he groaned again. "You're going to waste a shard to fix your toy?"

"Shut up," Chip growled as he took out a tiny shard of crystal. "Why's everything in this place crystals?" he grumbled. He readied to toss the crystal into the fire.

"Water," Hatsumi groaned, his eyes closed, his arms crossed.

"What?" Chip asked.

"You use water, not fire," Hatsumi reminded him unwillingly.

"Oh," Chip blushed. He left the fire again and went towards the creek.

Hatsumi turned to follow, stopped, and pointed at the tree. "Don't," he warned it before he followed Chip.

Chip crossed the forest morning, passing through leafy shadows and dusty sunlight until he reached the small vein of water traveling through the grass and fertile dirt. He hadn't even finished walking when he tossed the shard into the water. Hatsumi joined him a moment later, not-so-quietly pouting.

Chip picked at his eyes for a second, wiping away gunk before the creek began to sound different. The tiny stream began to flow backwards, then a section of it in the middle of the current stopped flowing entirely. The spot turned completely placid and the watery reflection shifted from Chip and Hatsumi to their Chunin, Kagumi.

The silver-haired woman was clearly halfway through applying makeup. The incomplete disguise emphasized her sharp cheeks and also made her appear noticeably younger. "Report," said the woman, her voice bubbling through the ripples of the creek. She kept applying cream to her cheeks, rubbing them into the fine lines.

"Hey, Kagumi, it's Chip and Hatsumi," he dove right in, speaking casually to his superior. "Look, we were wondering if we could get some time off? We've been here for..." Chip's mind struggled to process the time. "At least a month...I think?" He checked with Hatsumi. Hatsumi blanched, clearly just as unsure as Chip.

"No," answered Kagumi, checking the tint of her skin in a mirror that was just out of perspective of the reflection. In the span of a few applications, her ethnicity had traveled from eastern Europe to northern Asia. She looked squarely at Chip and Hatsumi. "Was that all?"

Hatsumi felt vindicated, if embarrassed, but Chip pled his case. "Come on," he groaned. "We've been stuck here documenting squirrel mating rituals for forever! Okay, my gameboy's batteries are dead, we've been eating forest lettuce and plains potatoes so long, we're peeing green."

"Chip," Hatsumi tried to rein him in, grabbing him at the elbow. "Come on, leave it."

Kagumi was still starring to the side, but she seemed pleased with the makeup job. "Well, to my displeasure, you do make a point. Not eloquently but reasoned speech is hardly your strong suit." She turned and looked at the two boys with a matron's glare. She started to speak but ended up just deflating with a sigh. "You have the weekend. Today, tomorrow, return by dusk the day after. Resume your duties by then."

"Holy crap," Hatsumi gawked, utterly amazed.

"Can we return home?" asked Chip.

"No," Kagumi told him flatly. "I'm still waiting for the embarrassment of being in charge of you to have returned to the normal levels of shame."

"Do we have a timetable for that?" Chip asked as Hatsumi clamped his eyes shut.

"It gets longer for every word you speak," Kagumi clued him in.

"Right," Chip mostly mouthed, retracting a bit from the edge of the creek.

Kagumi turned and looked away to her right. "Hatsumi, I assume Chip is the one who pioneered this bold endeavor?"

"Yes ma'am," Hatsumi said from behind Chip's right shoulder.

"Tell him thank you," she said before the water abruptly rushed into the correct current. Chip and Hatsumi were left staring down at the creek, both slightly agog at what had just happened.

"Holy crap," Chip said, slowly smiling. He looked up, his smile growing wider. "We got the weekend."

Hatsumi looked up as well, grinning even wider. "Yeah."

Chip was about to say more when he caught a whiff of burning leaves. He and Hatsumi both turned back around to see the snarl tree in flames. "Goddammit," Chip groaned, facepalming.

Asterborough was a small town situated at the mouth of the woods. With windows and doors facing out into the sunny plains to the south, most structures of the village were built within the giant trees. Wide dusty roads passed through the airy woods with cement liners along which people walked. The town was spaciouly laid out, with comfortable walks from one home to the next, with businesses located closer to the edge of the forest. A few carts rumbled down the roads, but none moved at a heavy pace. The sunlight was blocked by the canopy above. With the electric lights that lined the doors and windows of the homes, the whole town had a feel of perpetual summer twilight.

Chip and Hatsumi walked out from the depths of the forest, both dressed still in their ninja outfits: loose clothes tied tight at the joints and the color of forest shadows. Half a head taller than Chip, Hatsumi cast wary eyes this way and that, falling cautiously half a step behind Chip as they walked. He noted the residents here and there, none too concerned about the visitors. "We're going to have to get some local clothes," Hatsumi said. He spied a man crossing the main street in heavy work clothes stained with sawdust and mud. "Hey, they do denim here," he said, noting the man's pants.

"Denim, black leather," Chip remarked, nodding at a pair of teens about their ages. "Girls with ribbons and pink...I swear to god, this place is like a Grease remake." Hatsumi looked at Chip, unsure if he was making

things up again. He gestured at three men exiting a store. "Seriously, man, they look like greasers from the 1950s."

The trio of men they were watching paused on the sidewalk. They gathered close, with quick glances at their surroundings. Attention was quickly paid to what they shared between them. They broke and walked right into the next store. The rear-most of the three was popping his knuckles as he entered, shuffling his shoulders a bit, causing the chains of his leather jacket to jingle. Even down the street, Chip and Hatsumi heard the jostling. Both were wary of the trio, but it was Hatsumi who asked rhetorically, "Why are they going store to store?"

"Good question," Chip said. He slipped around Hatsumi, heading for the store, but Hatsumi caught his arm. "What?" he griped.

"We're still in uniform," advised his partner. Hatsumi looked at the quiet town with apprehension. "Let's get your batteries charged and get some clothes. We'll..." He looked at the door the three men had entered. "We'll go from there."

Chip retreated around the lip of the building carved right out of the tree. He looked at the hanging signs over the doorways of the assorted structures, not understanding the iconography of many of them and only guessing at others. "What's a residence and what's a business?" he asked.

Hatsumi checked the signs and pointed to one with a series of circles interlinked. "That's an apothecary; they'll know."

"How is that an apothecary?" Chip complained as he followed Hatsumi across the street. "It looks like the Olympic rings."

"You'll learn how to read eventually," Hatsumi told him as they pushed through the door. Inside was a white room with two rows of double-sided shelves. At the rear-most end, a man sat behind a counter, crunching roots into a powder with a mortar and pestle. He glanced up when the bell over the door jangled and he saw the two men in dark green outfits enter. "Hi," Hatsumi said with a smile and a wave, trying to ward off any hostilities.

"Well howdy, boys," said the man. He set aside the bowl and brushed back the strands of hair atop his balding head. "What can I do for you today? Looking for some working boost? Got some athlete's foot?" He came around the counter, squeezing through the narrow opening into the shop floor.

"We're from a logging camp, about halfway to the Barrier Mountains," Hatsumi told him. "We got a few days leave and...yeah. We, uh, we got some Tech-Noir stuff that we need some help with." He turned to Chip and gestured to him. "He's got this doodad that runs on lightning, but the power

cylinders are out. He...I...I don't know, you explain it," he said, handing the task off to Chip.

Chip took the batteries from his handheld game and said, "Yeah, they're electric. I need to get them recharged."

The apothecary accepted one of the batteries and squinted. He licked his fingertip and tapped both ends, prompting Chip to mutter, "Yeah, that's not gross or anything."

"You're probably going to want to go see the miller," said the apothecary, turning the battery over to read the small print. "The, uh, the crystallizer might be able to do it. I mean, she can do it, but she'll charge you more, assuming she doesn't try to get you to buy a crystal instead."

"Get a crystal, they're easier than the cylinders," Hatsumi advised Chip.

"Yeah, but I'm afraid it'll fritz the system and it'll erase the game or blow the operating system or something." Chip accepted the battery back and said, "Thanks."

"Miller's right...you'll find it," the apothecary waved. He turned to head back to the rear of the shop.

Hatsumi and Chip started to leave, but Hatsumi stopped halfway to the door. "Hey, um, we saw some guys down the street. They looked...unsavory," he ventured. "Are they local?"

The apothecary's eyebrows went up, not in shock but paternal worry. "Now you boys just steer clear of them. They're no good and you don't need to be dealing with the likes of them."

"Oh we won't," Hatsumi promised the man, nodding with a wide-eyed good-boy expression. "We just wanted to make sure that they were, you know, genuinely up to no good. You know, we'd hate to judge someone harshly for no reason."

The apothecary slowly nodded, not quite buying Hatsumi's act. He glanced at Chip who tried to look just as innocent, but landed a look that was more hapless than anything else. "You just stay away from them," the apothecary decided. He turned to continue about his business, leaving Chip and Hatsumi to theirs.

The miller plugged the pair of batteries into the metal prongs. She tapped them a few times with a nail, getting a spark when she did. "There they go," she said. She stepped back from the metal rig that was connected

to the waterwheel. She held her hand over the batteries for a second to make sure there was no heat, then nodded contentedly. "This is going to take half-a-day, be warned." She was a dark-skinned woman, with splotches of bright pink skin chaotically thrown across her face and arms. More than plump, she wore a heavy burlap coat over a green tunic that she had adorned with a half-dozen pockets and pouches holding odds and ends. "You say you're from the logging site up north?"

Hatsumi and Chip both nodded. They were standing just outside her mill at the mouth of the spring. A hot water spring bubbled up, the volcanic rocks almost a story high over the forest floor. A constant dribble of water descended the rocks, cascading down onto the wooden waterwheel that churned the machinery inside the mill cabin. The wooden structure, little more than a farmhouse stretched between two giant gnarled trees, was ancient and the color of forest stains. Vines traveled up the walls and dotted the roof with wildflowers.

The miller took a napkin from one of her pouches and wiped her hands. "You boys are a-ways off."

"We didn't want to go to the usual towns for our leave," Chip told her, lying as natural as breathing for him. "What'll this run?" he asked about the batteries.

The miller looked back at the rig, then crossed her arms. "Well, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. See, I heard, up north, you might find some of the forest spirits." Chip and Hatsumi did an adequate job of pretending like they were confused. The miller saw right through it, but played along. "They're a mischevious bunch, but they occasionally have been known to be more harmful. Death is something they've been known to deal in."

Hatsumi did a double-take. "D-death?"

"There's a theme for this month," Chip complained at him.

"Aye, death," the miller insisted. She crossed her arms over her chest. "I want you to work out a deal with any forest spirits you might know."

"What the in the world makes you think we know...we have any way to get in touch with forest spirits?" Chip griped, picking at his eye. He looked at the miller, who cocked a hip and an eyebrow at him. "And let's say for a moment we suffer from the same delusion as you; whose death are you wanting?"

The miller said with some gravity, "Solmon Turnit." Hatsumi and Chip's blank stares said it all. "He's the mastermind of the local thugs that run this town."

Hatsumi nodded slowly, pursing his lips as he did. Chip slowly said, "Yeeaaaah, so look, I appreciate the battery recharge but I don't think murder is a comparable value. Couldn't I, like, chop some wood or something?"

"Wash your dishes?" Hatsumi suggested.

"Wash your dishes?" Chip agreed.

"Wash your clothes?" Hatsumi added.

"Wash your...let's not get carried away now," Chip told his partner.

"Well, since I'm not asking you, I'm asking the forest spirits," the miller told them, "I don't see a problem." She maintained knowing eye contact with Hatsumi, then Chip. "Just ask them. That'll be my fee. Just ask them. And," she added as she turned away, considering the matter closed, "if you really feel like maybe this is an unbalanced request, perhaps just go forward with your little plan of staying here the weekend." She began to survey the rest of her chores at the mill cabin. "I'm sure you'll run into Solmon, or one of his...his representatives. They'll make the balance of the request obvious." She headed towards the back of the mill where sacks of grain waited to be filled. Leaving the two boys to conduct their affairs, she told Chip, "Your batteries will be ready tomorrow."

Unsure how to handle the proposal, Chip and Hatsumi saw themselves out. They exited the mill onto the gravel road that formed a wide loop through the airy woods. Their split-toed sandals crunching under the pebbles, they started back towards the town proper. "How'd we luck into this situation?" Chip remarked.

"I don't know. I blame you," Hatsumi told him.

"Yeah, me too," Chip agreed. "Damn me for listening to you and not steering you away from this place." He looked up at the early afternoon sky and asked, "What are we doing now?"

"Getting some clothes," Hatsumi told him. "I want one of those jackets."

Hatsumi pushed open the curtains of the dressing room and exited into the shop proper. Dressed in blue denim pants, low-riding slippers with textured soles, and a high-collared white shirt, he was pulling on the black

leather jacket. He nestled into it, the shoulders a bit tight but otherwise the fit was perfect. He pulled up the collar like he'd seen some of the locals wearing and then grinned, hands held out. "How do I look?"

Chip, sitting in the waiting area, snickered. "Like you're about to start singing 'Summer Nights'."

"Man, I bet your witty jokes just kill it back in wherever you come from," Hatsumi said as he turned to find a mirror in the bright store. He tugged down the collar of the shirt and turned a bit to see the way the jacket fell during movement. The jingle of the brass bell over the door caught his attention. Both he and Chip glanced subtly through the mirror's reflection at the door into the circular store.

The big guy who came in first had no neck. Just a massive set of shoulders that came up to his ears, he had a toothpick in his mouth and a broad nose that had been smashed flat. Behind him was a smaller man, though no less stout. He looked older, with the muscles of age and the skin to match, as well as the grouchy demeanor. Both men surveyed the clothing store, then stepped out of the way.

In came the leader. It was obvious by his slimmer build and nicer clothes. His leather jacket was cut to accentuate his shoulders rather than merely fit them. The material absorbed the light better, its texture betraying its higher quality. He had bright blue eyes and a handsome face, but there was a hint of maliciousness in his smile as he spotted the two newcomers. He looked at them in the mirror and nodded.

The door to the back opened and the proprietor of the shop appeared. The tall, skinny man stopped when he saw that he had new customers, then froze when he saw who it was. A worried expression was followed by a tight swallow and he said, "B-be right w-with you, Mr. Turnit."

Chip wiped his eyes, hiding his glance to Hatsumi. Hatsumi checked his reflection in the mirror, likewise checking on Chip. They both feigned distraction as they paid close attention.

The shop owner disappeared into the back, then reappeared an instant later with a small pouch. It jangled as he rushed to the front of the store. He headed over to Turnit, eagerly handing over the pouch. The pair talked; Turnit like they were good friends, the store owner like he was terrified for his life. And the two goons with Turnit scowled down at the owner all the time.

That fear seemed to be validated when, as Turnit opened the pouch, he grew displeased with what he saw inside. A somber, disappointed look rose to the store owner. The friendly demeanor was gone, replaced by a

low, earnest exchange. Hatsumi checked on Chip in the mirror, both of them still pretending to be engrossed in his selection of apparel.

The exchange got heated, a few words squeaking out. "Sales haven't been good". "Customers been driven off". "Be a shame". Then Chip picked out something different. "Not in front of customers."

Turnit seemed amused by that, like he was intrigued by the audacity of the store owner to suggest any course of action, but especially that one. "Hear that?" Turnit grandly asked his two buddies. "We shouldn't talk shop in front of customers. Shouldn't talk shop...in a shop." Turnit turned his good looks towards Hatsumi and said, "Hey, kid. You new in town?"

Hatsumi turned, looking as wide-eyed and innocent as a farm kitten. He pointed at himself and asked, "Who, me?"

"Yeah, you," Turnit asked. He smiled as he descended the single step onto the main floor of the shop. He approached, left hand in his pants' pocket, right hand extended. "How you doing? Name's Solmon."

"Hey, I'm Hatsumi," he said, shaking Solman's hand.

Solmon smiled, like he was liking Hatsumi more and more by the minute. "Hey listen, kid. You're just visiting? In town getting one of our fine jackets from this fine, reputable establishment?"

Hatsumi glanced at the shop owner who looked positively terrified. Terrified, for Hatsumi. "Yeah?" the ninja answered with faux uncertainty. "Is there a problem with that?"

Solmon exaggerated his fake surprise. "Problem? No!" he insisted, primarily to his two goons and the store owner. "No problem. No problem to any fine establishment that pays its insurance, am I right?" He asked the store owner. It was clearly a rhetorical quest. "But if the establishment doesn't pay its insurance..."

"P-please, sir," the man stammered, on the verge of tears, he was so terrified.

"Why, you look scared," Solmon told the man, curious and confused. "Why would you be scared?" His smile returned. "Nothing bad's going to happen, right?" Hatsumi glanced to Chip. He was still seated on the bench, still pretending to be bored, and still poised to attack if needed. With a glance, Hatsumi urged him to wait it out.

"Nothing bad's going to happen," Solmon insisted to the store owner. "You don't pay insurance, you got to have faith. So have some faith. Have some faith that nothing bad will happen." He smiled wider, his head tilting over towards one side. "Or pay your insurance."

Tears dribbled down the man's face as his chin warped inward. "It's all I have," he stammered.

Solmon only smiled, like the fear and heart-ache born of total and absolute terror was the most beautiful thing in the world to him. "Then have faith," he told the storeowner. Quietly, he added, "Because faith's your only hope." He turned back around to Hatsumi and smiled at him. With a snap of his fingers, he gestured out, leading his two goons to follow him.

The instant the store's front door closed, the owner ran quickly to the back. He threw himself through the door into the stockroom and didn't bother to close it. Terrified and humiliated sobs came from the back as the man lost all emotional control. Chip and Hatsumi looked to each other, neither saying a word.

"And then Solmon just walked out," Hatsumi explained to the reflection of Kagumi in the bowl of water. The pair of ninja were alone in the tiny closet of a room, wooden slates making up the walls, ceiling, and floor. The handmade bed was alone in the square of a room with a bedside table that held a basin of water. It was here that Chip and Hatsumi leaned, looking down at the half-transparent visage of Kagumi. "This is extortion of some kind. Whether they're protecting these people from a legitimate threat or not, the intimidation is painfully obvious. Amateurishly obvious."

Kagumi nodded, weighing the gravity of every reported detail. "And you say a local identified you as shinobi?"

Chip fielded that question. "She seemed very comfortable with keeping the secret."

"Still, failures like that are not to be tolerated," Kagumi told them both with a stern look.

Hatsumi took the lead in defending them. "We're not that far from home," he said. "We're north of Crossworld and it's not unusual for these people to make accusations of any strangers being forest spirits. Like, she could have been blindly guessing."

"Or hoping," Chip added. "These people kind of look like they're in a bind."

"Crossworld would do something were that the case," Kagumi told him, her face leaning against her left knuckle. "Queen January has made stomping out such corruption a platform of her ascension to the throne."

"Yeah, that's great, but the Castle Guard is a long ways away," said Chip. "And even if they were right outside, if you're too scared to call for help, fat lot of good it does."

Kagumi displayed rare emotion as she looked away, conflicted. Her narrow brows were tense, their auburn color still vibrant compared to her duller hair that was beginning to silver. "The existence of an extortion operation is important intelligence. And it could undermine our ability to operate within the area."

"Undermine, or at the very least complicate it," Hatsumi added. "And I mean, come on. I know we're not exactly altruists but..." He shook his head as he glanced away. "This just seems like something we could handle easily."

"Because we can do a thing, and because a thing should perhaps be done, does not necessitate our action," Kagumi told him.

"Opinions vary," Chip told her with a hard glare.

Kagumi returned his glare with her own indifferent stare. Her gaze summed up her reminder of the punishment and events that led to the two junior ninjas being in the town to begin with. She relented, though and looked away with a slow exhale. "Whatever the course of action that must be taken, it is clear that this variable needs to be accounted for. I will forward these developments upward and see if they are worth our notice and worth our involvement."

Chip and Hatsumi simultaneously drew back from the water basin, blinked, looked at each other, and blinked again. Chip mouthed, 'well damn'. Hatsumi seemed equally impressed. He looked back down into the basin, through his reflection at Kagumi. "What do you want us to do in the meantime?"

"Stay on-site," she ordered, straightening up. "You are no longer on leave; you are on assignment. Begin to ingratiate and establish contacts. Whatever the Jonin decide, I cannot imagine any scenario that does not involve monitoring at the very least. Be prepared to be replaced; be prepared to establish residence."

Chip and Hatsumi both blinked, then looked at each other. "...okay?" Hatsumi said.

"Those are vague orders," Chip complained.

"True," Kagumi nodded. As her watery visage faded, she concluded with, "But they are still your orders."

Dusk fell over the forest town. The domestic lights from windows and walkway lamps pushed back against the shadows and darkening sky of twilight. A soft evening breeze slipped between the trees and turned the leaves. A gentle rustling filled the air as the treetops tried to follow the solitary clouds floating towards the horizon. The town was filled with the smell of cooking and hearths, the night dotted with conversation and laughter.

Chip exited the small town inn, adjusting the tie around his collared shirt. Wearing denim pants like Hatsumi, he was rolling the sleeves up to his elbows, looking like an accomplished young professional just starting his climb up the corporate ladder. His blonde hair was brushed and slicked back a bit, a fresh bath having turned his pale skin even brighter and more vibrant.

Hatsumi exited with him. He was dressed in his new clothes of the black leather jacket, white high-collared shirt, and the blue jeans. He sniffed at the air and decided against the skull cap, sliding it into the pocket of his jacket. Hair stood straight up from static cling, prompting Chip to pat him roughly like he was a cat. "Quit it," Hatsumi griped, but didn't do anything to physical stop him.

The street was bustling a bit, with pairs and small groups of locals heading this way and that. The night was alive with the freedom of the evening, the workday passed and the respite of the night available. A few business doorways were opened wider than usual, the main thoroughfare of the town showcasing the opportunities for entertainment.

Hatsumi stepped off the stoop of the inn and followed his interest down the road. The gravel and hardpacked dirt was lined on either side by consistent stone walkways, allowing for a flat and even stroll. "So, day two of operation middle-of-nowhere-surveillance: what do you want to do tonight?" Hatsumi asked Chip. He turned and looked a half-step back where Chip walked. "Get dinner?"

"Communities like this tend to eat a lot of woodland animals; I've had enough of that," Chip remarked, his hands in his pockets. He looked around at the twilight community and spotted a small gathering of a half-dozen similarly-aged residents entering an establishment. "What's that?" he asked.

The two ninja-in-disguise crossed the street and approached the building. A white structure built between two large trees, it had a gigantic

awning that covered the recessed entrance. The entryway angled inward towards a pair of doors that led into a darkened space.

"Magic show?" Chip guessed as he and Hatsumi stood on the path.

"I'm guessing theater," Hatsumi said.

He approached the entry and touched a metal plate next to the door. The plate began to glow in sequence, words appearing. "The tale of two couples whose hearts are torn apart by the uncertainty of paternity," he read. "I bet it's one of those romance stories with songs," he guessed.

Chip rephrased, "It's a rom-com musical."

Hatsumi turned and stared at Chip slowly. "Sure," he finally allowed, utterly lost. He glanced behind him at the rest of the offerings on the street, then looked at Chip. Chip looked at the doors, then finally just shrugged. The pair headed in.

At the door, a young girl in a green dress was handing out leaflets when the two approached. "A coin each, please," she asked of them.

Hatsumi fished out a pair of discs, checked their composition by holding them to the light, then extended them. "Are these good? They're Seir-reth change."

To Chip and Hatsumi's astonishment, the girl bit into one of the coins. She bent it with her teeth, but then contemplated what she felt or tasted. "Meh," she decided. "They'll do." She pocketed the coins and extended pamphlets to the two. "Enjoy the show."

They both accepted, mildly frightened of the child. As they departed, Chip remarked to Hatsumi, "That girl's hardcore."

"For real," Hatsumi agreed.

The theater was a simple affair with seats aligned in groups of sixteen in a wooden auditorium painted not-quite-black. Candles flickered in the chandeliers overhead and a few tables lined the walls where some patrons had brought drinks and even a few meals. There was quiet chatter and some laughing but the crowd was mostly waiting for the red curtains to draw back from the stage a few steps raised above the floor.

Chip led the way to a standing table near the back. He and Hatsumi stood casually, even as they surveyed the crowd like they were sizing up the locals. Chip nodded subtly towards the front. Hatsumi checked passed Chip's shoulder and saw Solmon Turnit spread out across two seats. His two goons were with him, as were a few others with whom he was laughing.

"He's a manspreader?" Chip snickered sickly. "Man, I'm really starting to hate this dude."

"I don't know, the more I think about this, the odder this seems," Hatsumi said. He masked his worry with facial expressions like he was amused by the chandeliers. "This is a podunk town on the northern skirts of the Crossworld territory. I mean, it's a nice town. It's a bit big, but it's not anywhere. So why the protection racket? Why—" He clammed up until a few passing patrons were out of earshot. "How much money is there really to be made?"

"Maybe it's not about the money," Chip speculated. Hatsumi seemed as confused as he was curious. "It's control," Chip said, like it was obvious. He leaned over the table a bit, his elbows on the edge, supporting him. "It's power. It's...it's having a lock on a community." He looked at the theater. "Being able to control a place can be worth a lot more than raw riches. To some little fish, it can be worth moving to a smaller pond, just to be able to run it like they're a shark."

Hatsumi didn't quite understand the analogy, but the gist was obvious enough. "Could be," he allowed. "Or it could be a piece of something bigger." Now Chip was curious. "Control this town. Get control of these two over here. Soon you've got influence over the region. That gets you power in Crossworld."

"Or with the Embers League," Chip concurred.

"Or the Ember's League," Hatsumi nodded. He looked out at the theater house again. "Assuming he isn't Ember's League already."

Chip turned and looked at the crowd as well, a growing unease inside of him. "What are the chances we've stumbled into something big?"

Hatsumi took a long, slow breath. "Not great," he said honestly. With a second of thought, however, he allowed, "But I'd say a little better than fair."

The hallway light fell onto the bed of their rented room and Chip entered first. "Like, I think Donnie was a better match for Yvonne than Sarah." He walked to the far side of the small room as Hatsumi shut the door behind him. "I agree that Baku was a better singer, his songs were better, but Donnie was just a better person." Chip tapped a square board set into the wall, the board beginning to grow in light until it lit the room better than a candle.

"Baku was the basis for the entire show," Hatsumi maintained as he took his jacket off. "You're responding to his copious negative traits simply because he was the most well-developed of all the characters." His words trailed off a bit, however, and he began to glance around the room. "Do you...hear...something?" he asked. Chip listened for a second, then shook his head. "Did we check the..." He and Chip began to shift around the room, quickly checking their traps to establish if they were being spied on, or if anyone had entered uninvited. Stray hairs strategically placed were in the proper alignment. An inconsequential bit of magic remained untouched, even unnoticed. They found no evidence of any invasion, deliberate or casual.

Confident the space was secure, Chip asked, "What do you hear?"

Hatsumi exhaled and listened, staring off to his right. "Like somebody's calling my name."

"It's probably Kagumi," said Chip.

Hatsumi did a double-take. "What? How do you know?"

"Because..." He just shrugged, exasperated.

Hatsumi accepted the likelihood and went to the water basin. He took a crystal from the pouch and dropped it into the ceramic tub. The rivulets of the disturbed water wafted back and forth, the sheen of light over the water fast intensifying until the transparent image of their superior appeared. She seemed surprised and said as much. "I'm impressed," she told Hatsumi. "I expected it to take longer for you to notice your summons and respond."

"So that was a test?" asked Hatsumi, leaning over the basin.

"You really should be used to that sort of thing by now," Kagumi informed him sourly.

Chip muttered, "I mean, she's right."

"Shut up," Hatsumi grouched. "What's up?" he asked the reflection in the water.

"The Jonin convened and approved your operation," Kagumi said.

Chip and Hatsumi both exclaimed in simultaneous surprise. "Wait, say what?" half-shouted Chip.

"They concur that the request by the miller seems of value. And they also want to ascertain your ability to follow orders," Kagumi told them both. "Your previous mission saw deviation from protocol."

"That's putting it mildly," Hatsumi muttered.

"Let's not go there," Chip defended at him.

"Agreed," Kagumi chimed in. "You are to remove the leader of the local organized crime group in whatever manner you see fit, so long as you are not exposed as shinobi and your presence is not outed to the larger world. All other variables are left to your discretion."

"Understood," Hatsumi nodded. "We should be able to handle the matter within a fortnight."

Kagumi betrayed a look of surprised disappointment. "I trust that's a generous overestimation." Her reflection faded from the water.

The moment Kagumi's face disappeared into the placid water, Chip smacked Hatsumi on the shoulder. "Man, something's going on. This is not...this is not how things normally work."

Hatsumi took the crystal from the water, shaking his fingers to rid himself of the excess water. "Well, let's be fair. I'm really not sure we have a standard operating procedure. Have we ever gotten an assignment the same way twice?"

"Not like this," Chip said. "Something's definitely going. I feel like they must think we're idiots to make their, their...machinations so transparent."

Hatsumi seemed amused by the higher-tier vocabulary from Chip, but considered his point. He ventured, "You think its Kageryu?"

Chip considered it but didn't seem comfortable with the suggestion. "No, because...because Kageryu's...he's like stupid like yelling in a grocery store is stupid. This is stupid like...like going in on a timeshare is stupid." Hatsumi's stare slowly tensed as he tried to reason what Chip was talking about. "Nevermind," Chip waved it off. "Either way, we've got a local goon to assassinate."

"Right, okay, so here's what I'm thinking," Hatsumi said, springing into action. He sat down on the bed and gestured at Chip. "They've got a hideout, right? They've got a base of operations. So what we do is we identify where they are located. We figure out what time they eat; and then we plan an infiltration four hours after their last meal. I'll enter from the top level, you enter through the bottom, and we canvas the entire base until we locate our target. I'll carry out at the attack by way of a laceration across the throat. We then—"

"—fight out way out through the whole place," Chip completed in a disinterested tone. "Nah, man, you've got this all wrong. This is a greaser street gang."

"I don't know what a greaser is," Hatsumi insisted.

"They're thugs!" Chip said with a laugh. "We don't need to reinvent the wheel. We just need to play on their ego and get the guy to agree to something stupid. We egg him at the right moment and down he goes. We, I don't know, challenge him to a race around Dead Man's Curve and at just the right moment, you blow out his tires, and he goes careening over the cliff."

Hatsumi nodded, accepting the idea. "Okay, yeah, cool, I'm pretty on board. Couple of questions, though. One, where is Dead Man's Curve? Two, why is it named Dead Man's curve? Three, what are we racing in? Four, why am I blowing out the tires and not you? Five, what cliff?"

Chip didn't bat an eyelash. "It's the super-dangerous curve where local greasers test their mettle by taking the road at a super-high speed. It's named because people crash there all the time. We're racing in Studebakers or other cars out of Rebel Without A Cause. Because I can drive and you can't. And..." Chip's mind trailed off. "And I think I just realized none of this will work, will it?"

"The important thing is you realized it eventually," Hatsumi told him with a sage but patient nod.

"No, man, but look, we're nobodies and this is a nobody," Chip told him. "Let's not complicate this. We start a fight with the dude. We call him out. Things get rough, we off him, and we run. Easy. And don't sigh and shake your head like that."

"Like what?" Hatsumi exclaimed.

"That condescending way you always do when you think my plan won't work but it will work because they always work," Chip told him.

"You want to just walk right up and pick a fight, go right ahead," Hatsumi told him, relenting and letting Chip have as much rope as he wanted. Delighted, Chip turned away with a clap his hands, rubbing them in eagerness at the possibilities.

The pub was bright, shiny, and smelled of vanilla. A mosaic floor was capped with bright shiny steel chairs around hard red tabletops that were shined to a gleam. The waiter was dressed in bright white as he rushed to and from the kitchen, carrying trays of food to the tables full of men and women in hoop skirts and black leather jackets.

Chip stepped inside, Hatsumi right behind him. Wearing the jacket Hatsumi had purchased, Chip surveyed the pub until he spotted Solmon

Turnit. Chip popped his knuckles and started across the joint. As he crossed, the clap of his boots on the shiny floor seemed to get the attention of the other patrons. By the time Chip was nearing Turnit, most of the place had fallen silent. Everyone was turning to watch. Solmon's two goons noticed Chip approaching and they shifted in their chairs. Turnit didn't notice until Chip was standing right over him. Eating from a platter of lightly fried vegetables, the man looked up at Chip, slightly surprised. "Hey there," he told the stranger.

"Hey," Chip said back with an earnest look. "A little birdie told me that you were the big man on campus around here."

Turnit squinted a little. "Big man...on...what?" Behind Chip, Hatsumi sighed and facepalmed.

"I'm new in town," Chip said, not letting on his shifting of mental gears. "I've seen the way you talk to others, the way you handle this town like it's your own personal playpen." He shook his head. "I don't like it."

Solmon slowly wiped his hands on the cloth napkin. He set it aside casually. "Well that's too bad, now isn't it?" The diner had fallen silent. Every head was turned towards the conversation. "What you like doesn't concern me. Doesn't concern me and doesn't interest me."

"Oh it concerns you," Chip said down at him. "It concerns you because I fix what I don't like."

Solmon nodded slowly. "Fix," he repeated.

"Fix," Chip said again. "You know, like a squeaky door. Or even a dog that humps everything in sight. Fix."

"That a fact?" asked a voice behind him.

"That's a fact," Chip confirmed for Solmon. He glanced over his shoulder, then did a double-take. He spun around to find the town's sheriff right behind. An older man with deep lines on his face, he seemed none too amused by Chip's aggressive posture.

The cell door closed and Chip and Hatsumi were left sitting together, facing the door that sealed them in. Both exhaled in frustration and embarrassment. "Okay," Chip relented. "We'll do it your way."

"Good to know," Hatsumi said. He stood and appraised the tiny reinforced cell they were now held in. Iron bars ran vertically, with a few horizontal slats for good measure. Hatsumi shook the door for a second,

checking its sturdiness. "Kind of wished you'd come to that conclusion before we got arrested, but whatever."

"I'm a slow learner," Chip grumbled.

Hatsumi backpedaled and flopped down on the cot. "Wasn't a complete waste," he said. "Everybody was scared," he recalled.

"Yeah, I noticed that too," Chip agreed. "Like, not that I was going to get my ass kicked. Like...like I might do something to him. Like, they were afraid for Solmon." Chip's face contorted in confusion. "Dude's a bully and a, like a wannabe gangster. Why would they be afraid – like, legit afraid – that he'd get beat up?"

"And arresting us?" Hatsumi wondered. "For making a scene and generally talking tough?"

"And arresting US," Chip also agreed, emphasizing the plurality. "Why arrest you too? You didn't do anything."

"I know!" Hatsumi agreed. He flopped back, his head against the brick wall. "Something's up with this place. This whole situation seems..."

Chip leaned back against the wall as well. He waited a second, then asked, "How long you want to wait?"

"I figured we'd let the sheriff check in on us once and then we'd sneak out."

Chip concurred with a nod.

The Forest Wind Mansion was located just outside of town. Four stories of wood and brick, it was the largest structure in the whole village by far. It was painted white and lit by candles on all four sides. Well-maintained red roofs sloped to deal with water, falling leaves, and periodic snow. The ground around it was manicured and cleared while the trees were cultivated to grow to uniform heights and with regular branches.

Out front, a man with a bow and quiver paced by the door. Wearing a long dark brown coat to his knees and a black-and-green outfit beneath, he appeared almost like the forest shadows he was more accustomed to. As he turned and looked to the west, he scarcely noticed a wisp of shadow leaping across the mansion porch. The motion barely caught his attention, however.

He turned and looked down the opposite end, towards the east. As he did, another wisp of shadow leapt through the nearby window.

Chip and Hatsumi both landed inside in adjacent rooms. The curtains behind them both fluttered, their dark blue ninja outfits quickly fading to a cream-colored and burgundy to match to the walls and the carpet of the ostentatious house. Hatsumi was alone, the room he was in quiet and dark. Chip, however, had landed right behind an older woman.

Dressed in dark brown slacks and wearing only a sleeveless shirt, the woman had bright silver hair and thick lines on her face. She was carrying a platter of cookies and a candle. She stopped when Chip leapt through the window, letting out a shiver. She turned to the window, turning at Chip. He silently leapt up and shifted around her, standing right behind her. He covered his mouth, then his nose as well, so that his breath wouldn't be detected.

"Blasted chills," complained the woman. She set her snack down on one of the tables in the room full of cabinets and antiques. She went over to the window and pulled it down, the frame squeaking as it lowered. Chip used the noise to cover his departure, sneaking out through the shadows into the hallway of the inner house.

Twin shadows ascended the steps, rising through the house like smoke. Chip's head rose over the edge of the stairwell edge first, spying the floor. With a step, he rose and was followed by Hatsumi, his ceramic mask hiding the lower half of his face. The pair silently came into the main hallway of the third floor. A long stretch of multiple doorways awaited them. The floor was half-covered with a burgundy runner carpet. The walls were painted with heroic scenes from legend and myth, the tales of seven nations and twenty-five knights.

The doorways were all closed, the trim all dark. Chip approached the nearest door on the left, Hatsumi going to the right. Chip put his ear to the door, listening. Hatsumi held up his hand, very slowly crossing his palm over the surface of the door itself. At nearly the same time, both ninja glanced to their partner and confirmed the rooms were empty.

They broke from the initial doors and moved to the next set, Chip leaning close and Hatsumi waving his hand over the rim of the door. Chip held up a finger and the two fell even quieter. Very gently pressing the door handle, Chip guided the door to open. Through the crack created, he could spy inside and saw a canopy bed, a couple fast asleep. Chip pulled the door closed and shook his head.

They found the room they wanted at the far end of the house, in the largest of the rooms. In the master suite, a large opulent bed in a circle took up the majority of the room. It was there that Solmon Turnit was passed out, his legs splayed wide, an arm thrown over his face. He was snoring noticeably.

"Why is this town just bending over for this guy?" Chip asked from the doorway.

Hatsumi gave him a hard look, urging silence before he slipped inside. The pair closed the door behind them and very carefully crossed the room. It was full of treasure, mostly local crafts and wares that had been taken out of sheer avarice and then discarded. Fine clothes and expensive jewelry were forgotten on the floor.

Hatsumi approached the bed, taking a vial from a pouch on his belt. He silently twisted the top off and slipped his gloved finger into the dark brown bottle. Lightly wetting the tip of his finger, he leaned across the bed towards Solmon. As the young man snored, scarcely older than the two of them, Hatsumi very gently spread a thin film of the liquid on his lower lip. Before he'd even retracted his hand, Solmon had licked his lips. He shifted in his sleep.

As Hatsumi returned the vial to his pouch, he turned to Chip and nodded. "How long does it take?" Chip whispered, mostly mouthing.

Hatsumi mimed snapping his fingers. As he did, Solmon coughed. Chip and Hatsumi looked down to him as the coughing intensified. He started to sit up, but shuffled ungracefully and collapsed against his pillows with finality. Chip and Hatsumi looked at each other, pleased with their work. They returned to the door, prepared to sneak out of the house with no resident the wiser, when at that moment, a volcano erupted.

"Oh what the hell?!" Chip exclaimed at the universe in general.

The pair ran past Turnit's still-warm body and threw open the shutters of the window. From deep in the forest, a fiery light had erupted into the sky. A burning heat was pushing through the leaves, hot gusts buffeting the house. "What the hell is that?" Chip exclaimed.

"Bad news, whatever it is," Hatsumi told him. He stuck his hands into his belt and withdrew them with climbing claws attached to his palms. He swung out the window and began to quickly descend the sheer brick of the exterior wall. Chip took a more express route and swung out onto the window and stepped off. He caught himself on the ledge and used that to toe his way onto the frame of the second-story window beneath. With a quick balancing act, Chip dropped down around that window, then onto the lower lip and repeated.

The pair of ninja reached the ground at the same time, Chip hitting the grass and rolling up while Hatsumi collapsed into a bush. Both nighttime infiltrators froze as the house around them awoke. But none of the guards and family members paid any attention to the pair. Instead, the house's occupants turned horrified eyes towards the deep forest from which the bright light and scalding heat was intensifying.

"No!" screamed a woman above them, clutching at her face as if to hide the terror. "He's awake!"

Chip looked at Hatsumi. "Who's awake?" Hatsumi shrugged.

And then a massive beast stood tall.

Rising up from within the forest, a glowing monster set three eyes at the house. Made of magma and burning stone, the lava monster was misshapen and constantly melting in on itself. It took a step forward, the heat from its body causing trees to burst into flame from sheer proximity. Its steps shook the ground, rattling the house, toppling people, cracking windows, shaking the very foundations of the world.

Hatsumi stared in abject terror, but Chip grabbed his hand and yanked him away from the house. "Come on!" he yelled. The pair started running, sandaled feet carrying them through the manicured lands of the Forest Wind manner. They raced over the grassy yard and into the wild forest, heading towards the town. Behind them, they heard and felt the stomps of the lava monster as it closed in on the mansion.

"You got any ideas?" Hatsumi yelled as they ran.

"I'm open to suggestions!" Chip yelled back.

"Well, if it's not too strong, maybe we can—" Hatsumi was midway through theorizing when the massive lava monster stepped on the mansion. "Okay, Plan B!" he yelled as he vaulted over a falling tree. "If all we have to worry about is its arms, then maybe we can handle this thing. It's not like it can—" A flaming ball of lava and magma went flying over their heads, striking at the very center of the village.

Chip and Hatsumi skidded to a halt and surveyed the damage. Eyes wide, they both stared at the flaming crater that had been an entire town only moments ago. Hatsumi turned to Chip and said, "Well, I'm out of ideas. Your turn."

"Maybe it's just on a giant rampage and if we get out of the line of sight, it won't kill us?" Chip guessed. Grabbing Hatsumi's hand again, he raced laterally, running to get away out from the lava monster's direct path. They only made it a few dozen steps before another massive ball of fire went

shooting ahead of them. Chip and Hatsumi both skidded to a halt and saw the monster staring right at them. "Random shot," Chip determined. They started to run back the other way when yet another shot went just feet in front of them. The very air they were inhaling seemed to ignite as the forest was set ablaze by the fiery and heat of the monster.

"Okay, it wants us dead," Chip deduced. He looked at Hatsumi. "Your turn."

"Duck!" Hatsumi screamed, pulling Chip down at the last second before another ball of fire and stone could smash them. "We got to get out of here!" Hatsumi said from the ground.

"Know how to ninja teleport?" Chip asked as they got back to their feet.

"Teleportation isn't real," Hatsumi argued.

"Now you tell me!" Chip screamed. He grabbed Hatsumi and ran for the village. Reaching it, they arrived to see buildings burned and trees roasted at speeds so great, they seemed to simply dissolve into the superheated air. Into the fire, Chip leapt through flames and landed by a churning inferno. "Maybe it can't see us if we hide in the fire."

"You mean, try to wait out the giant flame monster by staying low among the smoke and the vacuum of breathable air?" asked Hatsumi.

"Better risk choking than the certainty of being squished by a lava giant." Chip rolled onto his back and stuck his hand into his belt. He pulled out a crystal and popped it into his mouth. He sucked on it for a second, then took it out. "Come on," he told Hatsumi. He pulled down Hatsumi's half-mask. Before he could protest, Chip stuck the crystal in Hatsumi's mouth.

The instant it was in his mouth, there was a gust of air into Hatsumi's cheeks. He inhaled unexpectedly, surprised by the chilled, brisk air. He took only a few breaths before he realized what Chip intended. He removed the crystal and passed it back to Chip.

The two crouched low by the large fire and watched the black smoke rise into the sky. They heard the heavy stomps of the great beast as it slammed through the forest. Trees burst into flames by the beast's sheer presence. Waves of flame were pushed out with every step the behemoth took. The sickly light of burning rocks reflected off the sky, the stars stolen from the night by the intensity of the flames.

The monster stomped heavily on the forest, crushing a tree faster than it could burn down to ash. Leaning forward, the beast punched the ground,

sending up a wave of magma and liquified flame. It swung its arms, tossing out flaming debris that scattered more fire and destruction. It howled, bellowing hot smoke and radiation that only burned the air. Its very call was like scalding heat given sound.

“How long?” Hatsumi asked Chip as he handed back the crystal. Chip accepted it as he shook his head. “We can’t wait this out for much—”

The ground shook again, the heavy stomp not a step but a strike. Hatsumi and Chip couldn’t stop themselves from looking up. They saw above the treetops the lava monster stomping down everything. Stamping its feet, it was crushing every last fiber of the forest floor. As it did, gusts of scalding wind blew the flames. Chip and Hatsumi leapt back from the fire they’d been hiding behind. They emptied out into a barren field of ash of rubble, the destroyed remains of a familiar shop.

And the eyes of the great lava monster fell upon them. Chip looked around for some direction to run, but each was as meaningless as the next. Hatsumi backed up half a step, the eyes of the lava beast fixed on them both. “What do we do?” Hatsumi asked.

Chip reached to his side and drew his ninjato sword. He whipped the blade clear of the sheath and settled into an aggressive stance. “I’m not going down without a fight,” he said. “You go. I’ll buy you some time.”

“How?!” Hatsumi asked.

“Go!” Chip yelled, breaking into a sprint. He raced at the lava monster, charging it like its final moments were upon it. Reaching into his soul, Chip screamed in fury. Only as he charged, the scream that billowed from within his burning lungs raged forth in unprecedented power. The scream of a mortal was accompanied by a shriek of the cosmos. A thousand million voices rose up like a symphony of might and majesty as Chip’s scream erupted into life.

From the space between Chip and the lava monster appeared something epic. An aquatic blue light came into being and then exploded. Out from the intense pinprick of light came rising a crystal-thin line of pure power. Shimmering like the waves of the ocean catching the daylight, the blinding light blew back all flame and fire, all heat and fury. The beam rose into the sky, coiling around itself. It settled into the sky, becoming a single infinite shape. And then, like the crystallization of ice, the shape shattered and the impossible became manifest.

The Lord of the Sky and the Water had arrived.

Leviathan had awoken.

The massive blue dragon dwarfed the very stars overhead. As it manifested, it turned its serpentine body. Over and over, it coiled in and around itself like an impossibly long snake slithering in the warren of the sky. The pointed, angular head of the dragon appeared within the writhing blue coils. Its gaze fixed predatorially down upon the lava monster. The two eyes shone like blue-hot stars. Its anger intensified and its mouth opened. The gaping maw parted, a powerful light appearing from within its throat.

Staring into the heavens up at the great majesty of the dragon, Chip barely had time to utter, "Oh shi—" before Hatsumi grabbed him from behind and threw him to cover. Hatsumi leapt atop his friend just as the dragon spoke.

The pencil-thin ray of light pierced through the night. It drove back the darkness and black smoke, casting away clouds like a bomb. In an instant, the heavens were cleared. Fire and flame were silenced. The air was still. Even heat fell away from the razor beam of light, a beam which bisected the lava monster.

The lava monster instantly went cold. Where a walking volcano had stood, near-immediately was it rendered into a massive stone monument, a testament to the subtle power of the Sky Dragon. Taller as a mountain and heavier too, the misshapen thing stood for barely a moment before its oblong shape caused it to teeter. The ground beneath its feet succumb to its weight and the great mass collapsed and fell backwards.

Chip and Hatsumi pulled close to each other as the shockwave from the fall caused the ground to bounce up and down, rattling the whole of the world. A thousand earthquakes were condensed into one single instant as the ground itself threatened to shatter from the violent upheaval. Dust and ash were kicked up yet again, blasting into the two ninja as if they were struck with a tornado.

Once the only thing the two boys could hear was the ringing in their ears, they opened their eyes carefully. They glanced to each other, then rose cautiously. They peeked out around the rubble they'd hidden behind to survey what remained of the world. There wasn't much.

What had been a forest was now a barren wasteland. Nothing lived. No grass. No trees. Not even soil, merely lifeless dust and ash. The sky was clear. Not a cloud, not a pillowing plume of smoke. Not even any appreciable breeze. For as far as the eye could see, all was still. All was quiet.

Except for the armored warrior approaching them.

Chip rose first, Hatsumi beside him. They faced the bright-skinned man with blonde hair. He was dressed in full-plate armor made of aquamarine and royal blue. On his back, a long halberd was secured into the armor itself. He was tall and physically imposing. But most frightening were his eyes. They glowed a haunted blue and they were set on the two boys like he could see into their souls, see their pasts, see their futures. He neared them and his brow furrowed. His thin lip curled slightly on one side, then he turned slightly away, as if he'd heard something.

Chip stepped around the debris, his hand inching towards his sword. The armored figure noticed and smirked. He turned towards Chip and reached over his shoulder for the halberd. Tensions mounted and Hatsumi readied to strike.

"What are you idiots doing?"

Chip and Hatsumi's attention snapped to their right as Kagumi approached. The middle-aged woman was joined by the dark-skinned Ester right behind. The Jonin bowed her head to the warrior in blue armor, but didn't break stride as she followed Kagumi towards the two Genin. "Show respect to Lord Leviathan."

Hatsumi immediately bowed his head and dropped to one knee. "My lord," he told the warrior.

Chip noted Hatsumi's deference before he glanced at the blonde man. His head snapped up half an inch, saying, "Sup."

The warrior smiled and he glanced towards Ester.

"Yes, my lord, this is Chip Masters," Ester answered the psychic question. Her eyes were set on Chip as if trying to decide how to kill him.

Kagumi instead turned Chip to her and studied his face. "Are you two okay?" she asked. When Hatsumi rose, she inspected him maternally as well. "I feared the worst."

"You were confident," Ester chastised her inferior.

"I was confident they would succeed. I was certain," Kagumi said with esteem, even as she looked at Hatsumi's with a mother's worried eyes. "I was not confident they would survive." Her ever-hard gaze softened slightly and she brushed Hatsumi's forehead. "I am glad that they did."

"What was that thing?" asked Chip, pointing to the fallen monument.

"A foe to be slain," Ester told him curtly. "It is done."

Chip didn't fight the answer, but wasn't satisfied. This prompted Leviathan to step forward and say, "It was a wild thing." His words were like

a thousand people speaking at once, voices booming from the heavens and the ground itself. And yet by the end of the sentence, the cacophony had melded into the voice of a single young warrior absolute in his skills and might. "That thing had been growing under the soil for ages, but we weren't sure how to lure it out. Your intel provided us with the perfect method."

"We knew that the local was tied to the monster," Kagumi explained to Chip. "Somehow, through some way, the local tyrant that you silenced had bonded himself to it. His life was needed to keep the beast in check."

"That's why nobody did anything," Hatsumi told Chip, smacking him on the arm with the realization.

"Then why'd the miller want us to kill him?" Chip asked.

"The point is, with his death, the beast was unleashed," said Leviathan, crossing his muscular arms. "Exposed, I was able to use my might to put him down."

Kagumi turned halfway to Leviathan and corrected, "Technically, it was a she."

"Whatever," the dragon dismissed.

"Any further questions?" Kagumi asked her two wards.

"Nothing not husbandry-related," Chip said, glancing again towards the fallen statue.

"Why the obfuscation?" asked Hatsumi. "Why give us an assignment under the guise of a vacation, and without full disclosure?"

"Legend has it that your target could not be killed by anyone knowing of his connection to the beast," Leviathan said.

Ester added, "And we think they also had to be a virgin."

Chip and Hatsumi both stiffened. They looked laterally at one another and swallowed.

"Yeah, about that," said Chip. Hatsumi looked equally concerned to address the detail.

"It's no matter," Leviathan dismissed. "The beast is dead." He turned and, in doing so, faded away.

Chip stared at the vacant space where Leviathan had been. "Are all the dragons like that?"

"Show respect," Ester warned.

Kagumi just mouthed, 'Yes', with a tired nod.

Ester surveyed the unending damage that spread to the horizon. She just exhaled fatalistically. "I must meet with the others." It was as much a statement as a lament. "We need to survey how extensive the damage truly is, how far this new desert goes. And we must anticipate the fallout from Crossworld."

"Queen January will not be pleased," Kagumi told her.

"Understandably," Ester agreed with a nod. She looked to Chip and Hatsumi and started to speak, stopped, then considered her words. With the subtlest change in her tone, she said, "I am not unsympathetic to the...the irritation of being what was essentially bait in this operation." She turned away and faded not unlike Leviathan had done.

Chip's eyebrows rose practically to his scalp. Hatsumi nodded, just as amazed. "Wow," he said. "That's...coming from her, that's seriously..."

"...generous-adjacent," Chip completed. Hatsumi nodded, agreeing. Chip turned to Kagumi and asked, "So, about that 'virgin' thing. Just how critical is that?"

"Yeah, for real," Hatsumi added. "The fine print on prophecies are killer."

Kagumi turned and started walk. "I followed orders, same as you. If they mis-selected, that's their problem." She faded noticeably slower than Ester and Leviathan, but she faded away all the same, disappearing into thin air. Chip and Hatsumi were left standing together in the vacant field of dead soil.

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