

## Graduation

Graduation day was here at last. There had been times when I wasn't sure I'd live to see this day. Now it was finally upon us.

Looking about, I noticed that on the stage to my right, Master Yoshiri did not seem to be looking well. I stifled my concern and continued to cast my gaze about. My fellow classmates sat before the small audience that was present for this ceremony. Those who had survived anyway. The fact that most had not was part of the reason the crowd was so small.

Located on a small patch of land in the Shichito Island chain on the world fragment known as Akitai, the ultra exclusive finishing school was broken into two parts which overlapped occasionally. Section one was the educational facilities where we learned about higher math, literature, the natural sciences and so on. Section two was the real reason the school existed. It dedicated to teaching the art of the ninja.

Thanks in large part to my heritage, I was a natural. My combat skills were unrivaled here in pretty much any one-on-one scenario thanks in large part to the training I'd received as a young girl from my father and my uncles. The school masters had been neither concerned nor particularly pleased by this. They simply added more people to the mix and occasionally brought in outside blademasters and martial artists to challenge me. To this day I have overcome all challenges. The thought brought a tear to my eye.

This would be the last time I saw most of these people. Master Nagamutsu gave a quiet cough into her hand. I would never see her mysterious smile again. Nor would I see three out of four of my classmates ever again.

We'd buried them yesterday.

The final challenge had divided the graduating student into groups of four called quads. Each of us were given a quarter part of an ancient symbol of death. The student who placed the intact symbol into the floor of the Hall of Silence would graduate. Any surviving members of the quad would be ritually dishonored, disemboweled, and fed to the dogs. It was understood that three members of each team would die...sometimes four. However, all that was now behind me and I still lived to tell the tale.

Master Emesaku leaned over and whispered something into Master Gudo's ear which earned him one of Master Gudo's belly laughs. I sighed. I had talked with the masters on several occasions trying to get them to change their mind about the quads. Losing three out of four students was a terrible waste of talent. Unfortunately, everyone at the school remained set in their ways and refused to even hear about changing. Tradition. Honor. Both twisted into a most unpleasant knot. Still, I would miss them in the days to come. They had become a second family to me.

Immediately after we had received our symbols, all of us senior students had gone to equip ourselves. Everyone knew there would be a lot of killing that evening. On the way to my room a reflection off of a vase saved my life as Mishu tried to skewer me with a sword removed from one of the walls. Mishu was a poet as well as a good ninja candidate. Her quiet laugh sounded like beautiful chimes on the wind. Her initial thrust having missed,

she tried an angled slashing attack. I allowed it to miss me by less than an inch and then took a half step closer to her. Looking into her eyes, I saw no fear. Only sorrow. I continued to look into her eyes for that eternity it seemed to take my hand to crash into her temple. It seemed to me that her eyes took forever to roll up into her head as she oh, so slowly sank to the floor. I stood over her for a long time trying to deal with the death of my friend at my own hand. I'd known it was going to happen... I just hadn't expected it to be so soon.

I noted all sorts of strange details. Her hair had been tied back into a traditional braid. The sword that had clattered off to the side was one from the wall in the south library. Somewhere far away, someone screamed but it cut off abruptly. The damned symbol piece was on a necklace around her neck. As I bent to kiss her cheek one last time, I was surprised to see tears fall on her.

My tears.

Wiping my eyes again at the memory, I looked to see who was in the crowd. Most of the people were folks I had never seen before. Parents and family of the students who had survived I supposed. At this school, there would be few if any introductions. One of my uncles, Crown Prince Marcus of Regillus, was the only face I recognized. I'd only met him a few times. Our most recent meeting had been seven years ago when I had stepped into the great machine from which we Diamonds received our powers. Those powers that weren't passed on by blood that is. I was rather surprised to see him here today. I wondered what he thought of a niece who now had added ninja to her résumé.

Once I had properly equipped myself, I went looking for the other two members of my quad. Iniri was a handsome young man with a perpetually curious look on his face. He seemed to enjoy learning more than anyone else I'd ever met. His room had been the farthest away from the gathering point of anyone in the quad. He would have to cross the campus and climb five stories up to his room. This would put him at a disadvantage and we all knew it... including him. I suspected that he would barricade the door and exit via the window. If he could circle around quickly enough, he had a chance of ambushing anyone coming up the stairs.

By this time it was now completely dark. Jumping out of my second floor window, I sprinted into the woods. Someone evidently thought I was coming after them because several shuriken came at me from out of the dark. I performed a low roll to go under them and threw a handful of throwing spikes in the general direction I thought the shurikens had come from. Someone yelped in pain but I ignored their cry and continued sprinting through the trees. Like everyone else, Iniri had walked calmly away once the quads had been set, but once we had left the hall he had begun walking very quickly. If he had continued that pace, he would already be in his room by now and probably mostly geared up. I stopped just inside the woods in a depression with a view of Fujitama Hall.

It seemed that the rooftops were busy tonight. As I watched, one person slumped over for no apparent reason. Another repelled down a rope and broke into a window on the

third floor of the Akima Building. Moving quickly and quietly, I ran over to the seaside wall of Fujitama Hall. It seemed likely that no other students would be climbing it. The five hundred foot drop to the sea below could be rather daunting. But then again none of them had ever run the road called the Wyvern's Gauntlet either. Goodness, but Daddy had been upset about that. Compared to that, a little cliff climbing was nothing.

Reaching the top of the wall, I paused to take out a small, telescoping mirror. I used it to check over the roof. Sure enough someone was sitting in the shadows with a crossbow out. Sometimes it pays to be cautious. I tossed a smoke bomb right in front of them and then vaulted over the side. I caught a glimpse of white jade as I went by. The symbol pieces for my group were made of onyx so I continued quickly past the ambush. Still moving fast, I found cover behind one of the many cornices that dotted the roof.

Ishiri was no fool. He wouldn't stay up here. It would be far too easy to become a silhouette for someone's sniping. Nor would he stay in his room. The rooms on the fifth floor had only one stairway leading up to them. I thought back to an earlier inspection of the building. The stairway didn't have any really good ambush points on the inside. It was too open. However, there were some good places on the fourth floor. Places that, as someone approached the staircase, would provide good cover and concealment. There was also a stained glass window on the landing between four and five.

That seemed promising, so I began a quick, low crawl across the roof. I found a dragon shaped rainspout that provided a little cover and looked down at the window in question. I wasn't sure if it was Ishiri or not but there was definitely someone standing on the narrow ledge next to the window. If I hadn't been looking for them I might have missed seeing them entirely. It looked like whoever it was had belted themselves to a bracket on the wall. I could also see from here that they held an MP10 close to the window. Close but not close enough for a shadow to fall over it. Not a bad plan. I just wasn't sure it was Ishiri. Almost a dozen senior guys lived on the fifth floor of Fujitama. Each of them would have several people trying to kill them this evening.

While the school certainly taught the traditional weapons of the trade, when it came to killing they could be progressive. Firearms were not exactly encouraged, however, neither was anyone dissuaded from using them. So far as I knew, only weapons of mass destruction were actually prohibited from our finals exercise. Of course, I could have used magic but none of the people here had the benefit of studying under my magically gifted aunts and uncles or an Edotoman education. Akitai was home to my second ninja school. The first had been on my home world of Edotoma and had concentrated on the use of magic to aid the art of the ninja. This school simply concentrated on the art. I'd made it all the way through my four years here without using magic even once. Well, at least not for anything ninja-related anyway.

With a smart, practiced look, the figure swung out to the extent of their belt and began blazing away with the silenced weapon through the stained glass. I could hear the glass falling inside as well as quiet thumps from the weapon, but that was all I heard. Maybe fifteen shots later, the figure stopped and looked into the window. It wasn't large enough to climb through. The figure muttered a curse and I knew it was Ishiri. Would he go up or climb down? I watched from shadow as he began climbing up very quickly. Surprise makes a kill all too easy. Uncle Victor sometimes seems to think that killing is a contest. The tougher the challenge the better. I enjoy tough challenges as well but not when killing. Killing is killing. It should be done quickly and cleanly. The dart hit Ishiri behind the ear

just as he climbed onto the roof. He fell over without making a sound. I pulled the mask away from his face as I took his piece of the symbol. Even dead, he looked determined. It seemed to me it would have been more appropriate had he worn his usual curious look one last time. I sighed and moved on.

Finally, the graduation ceremony was about to begin. Masters Akida and Sado were the last of the twenty masters to show up. Mister Otomu, who was now the gardener but had once been the headmaster, gave a nice welcome speech to the guests who had made the long journey here. It was a nice bit of oration. For those of us who'd attended yesterday's funeral services, he gave a quick tribute to those we'd left behind. He then segued into a brief history of the school.

With Ishiri dead, the only one I had to find now was Jiro. Just thinking about it made my heart ache. Was it fate that had put my highschool sweetheart into the same quad with me? Or was it by someone's design? Everyone wanted me to be the best. All the masters. Daddy. They all knew that being the best required sacrifice. I knew it too. Did someone want me to experience that now or was it just a cruel twist of fate? I'd likely never know. An eighteen year old shouldn't have to make a choice between her heart and her destiny. It wasn't fair. Which may have been the whole damned point.

Using Ishiri's rope, I repelled down to a fourth floor window which I unceremoniously kicked in. Rolling upright I spun around just in case the room was occupied. Thankfully, it wasn't. A quick check of the hall revealed no sign of anyone. I drew my sword and with three throwing knives in my other hand moved quickly out the door and towards the landing. Two under-classmen were sitting on the stairs. Dressed all in white, they were ghosts to those involved in this last exercise. Inviolable. They would continue to sit there until the symbol had been removed from the body I suspected was on the landing just above. Once someone had taken the symbol, they would wait until morning and take the body to begin preparing it for the funerary services that would be held the day after next. Continuing past them, I found the body quickly. There was a lot of blood slowly dripping downstairs from the corpse. Hanima. Her mask was open and her eyes stared emptily ahead. Not a particularly pretty girl nor a particularly nice one. I would not miss her. Not beyond the fact that her death was a needless waste. Through the blood and gore, her pink jade symbol piece was barely visible. Her chest had been shredded, and due to bullet expansion, I was pretty sure there wasn't much at all left of her back. Ishiri had been a very good shot and had evidently been using some nasty ammunition.

Not knowing where Jiro was, I began searching around. I looked through every ambush point I could think of that might have yielded a hope of catching Ishiri off guard but Jiro wasn't hiding in any of them. I repeated the process over at Mishu's room just in case he hadn't found her dead body. No luck there either.

Moving silently and with extra care, I canvassed the area around my own room. Still no sign of Jiro. Could he have been killed by someone else? Ishiri shooting Hanima certainly wasn't going to be the only accident that happened tonight. Could he have been

the person who threw the shuriken at me? I moved back into the woods to find out.

Mister Otomu turned the ceremony over to Master Haido. Master Haido began talking about the accomplishments each of us had made to get to this most esteemed point in our young lives. Master Haido was notoriously long winded. Master Nagamutsu coughed quietly behind a fan.

It took all of my courtly training to stifle a yawn.

With great care I turned over the body in the woods. Two ghosts stood a respectful distance away. My hand was trembling slightly as I pulled the mask away. Sasebo. Not Jiro. I breathed a small sigh of relief.

Gliding through the woods, I arrived at a reflecting pool. Jiro sat on a bench there, his mask laid next to him. We had spent a great deal of off time making out by this little pool. I don't know how long I stood there before leaving. I couldn't kill Jiro. Not yet anyway.

I moved back towards the school this time using all of the abilities I had learned... magical and otherwise. In turn I visited each of the master's rooms. Each of the masters had very nice quarters that were richly appointed. Of course, none of them were actually there. I had suspected as much. Silently, I argued one last time with each of them to change this wasteful policy. The policy that sent so much talent into the afterlife. The policy that would end Jiro's days on this earth tonight. Each time my silent arguments fell on deaf ears. Just as they had done earlier when I had spoken to each of the masters. They would not listen then and were not here to listen now. Their minds had been made. Still, as I moved through their rooms and looked over their personal possessions, I continued to silently argue my points until I left the last of the master's rooms. Had any of them been in their rooms, I would have argued with them one last time. But they weren't. They were out supervising the slaughter.

My sweet Jiro was going to die tonight.

Even without hurrying, the trip back through the woods seemed to last only a moment. Jiro still sat on the same bench in the same place he had been in earlier. I placed a knife blade against the side of his neck. He did not start or even seem surprised.

"I knew you would find me," he said calmly.

"I know," I sighed sadly. Using my left hand, I pulled off my concealing hood.

"I have come to the conclusion that I cannot kill you," he told me. "Perhaps I delude myself, but I think I might have been up to the challenge. But my heart has ruled otherwise. You are a part of me and I cannot kill you any more than I could kill myself. You are special. An angel or a spirit... I haven't decided which. Most of all I love you. If I somehow managed to kill you, I could not live with myself. Even ninjas have to have some ethics."

"Yes they do," I agreed and then I bent down and gave him a long, hard kiss. It was a kiss full of passion and regret.

"You're going to kill me aren't you?" he asked matter of factly.

"No my love," I answered as tears began running down my face. "I already have."

"Ah?! Your kiss. What a wonderful way to die. We all must succumb to death my sweet Clarissa. Not everyone has a chance to die well and happy. Thank you for this last gift. One last kiss?" I kissed him again and my tears ran down onto his face.

"Tears of an angel. I can see that this is eating you up inside my love." He was beginning to become short of breath. "I would tell you not to feel guilty about this. This had to be. But I know you would ignore me. Perhaps, this will take the edge off of your guilt."

And with that he stabbed me in the side.

I didn't scream but it was close. His blade had just missed my kidney. I felt sure he'd missed on purpose. He fell off the bench and pulled me down on top of him. My face pressed against his.

"Thank you," he whispered one last time.

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I walked across and accepted the black bladed knife that was my reward for graduating. My reward for becoming what I now was. An artist, a dealer of death in the night or by broad daylight... a ninja. As I took my place with the other graduates, I looked around but Uncle Marcus was no longer there. A small eternity later and the ceremony finally finished.

I spoke quietly with the other graduates about our plans for the future. The masters came around and several of them asked if anyone had been able to pay the exorbitant asking price they had suggested I ask to contract out my services. Thinking back on Uncle Marcus' visit, I suspected that they might have but I didn't tell them. I just smiled and said that the future looked bright. Master Nagamutsu's cough seemed to be getting worse. I tried to hide the concern from my eyes but I think she saw it anyway.

Master Yoshiri left the gathering early. He didn't look well. After a little mingling, I found Mister Otomu and gave the frail old man a gentle hug. We walked over to a bench and I asked him about his own plans for the future. He smiled and said that he was becoming old and would have to hire some new help. I wished him well and promised to drop by every now and then to check on him. He told me not to waste time visiting an old man when there so many worlds out there to explore. I kissed his forehead and stepped off into the woods. Using my full set of skills, I removed myself to a quiet point where I watched the sun set and the moon rise.

I thought about the life ahead of me. About Jiro, who was now ashes on the wind. About Uncle Marcus and what his being here meant and what it might yet mean. I wondered again just how much Daddy knew about all of this. Pretty much everything, I rather strongly suspected. Eventually, the stars faded and the sun came up.

With a new determination I stood up and moved quickly back to the school. Master Otomu would need help taking care of the final preparations for the other masters' bodies. Without a doubt, by now the poisons I had planted throughout their living quarters had finished killing them all.

I had now truly graduated.