2
THE BLOODY BATTLE WITH LORD KELSHINHA
SABIKUI
BISCO
SHINJI COBKUBO
Illustration by
K AKAGISHI
World Concept Art by
mocha
The Rust Wind eats away at the world. A boy with a bow matches its ferocity.

SABIKUI BISCO

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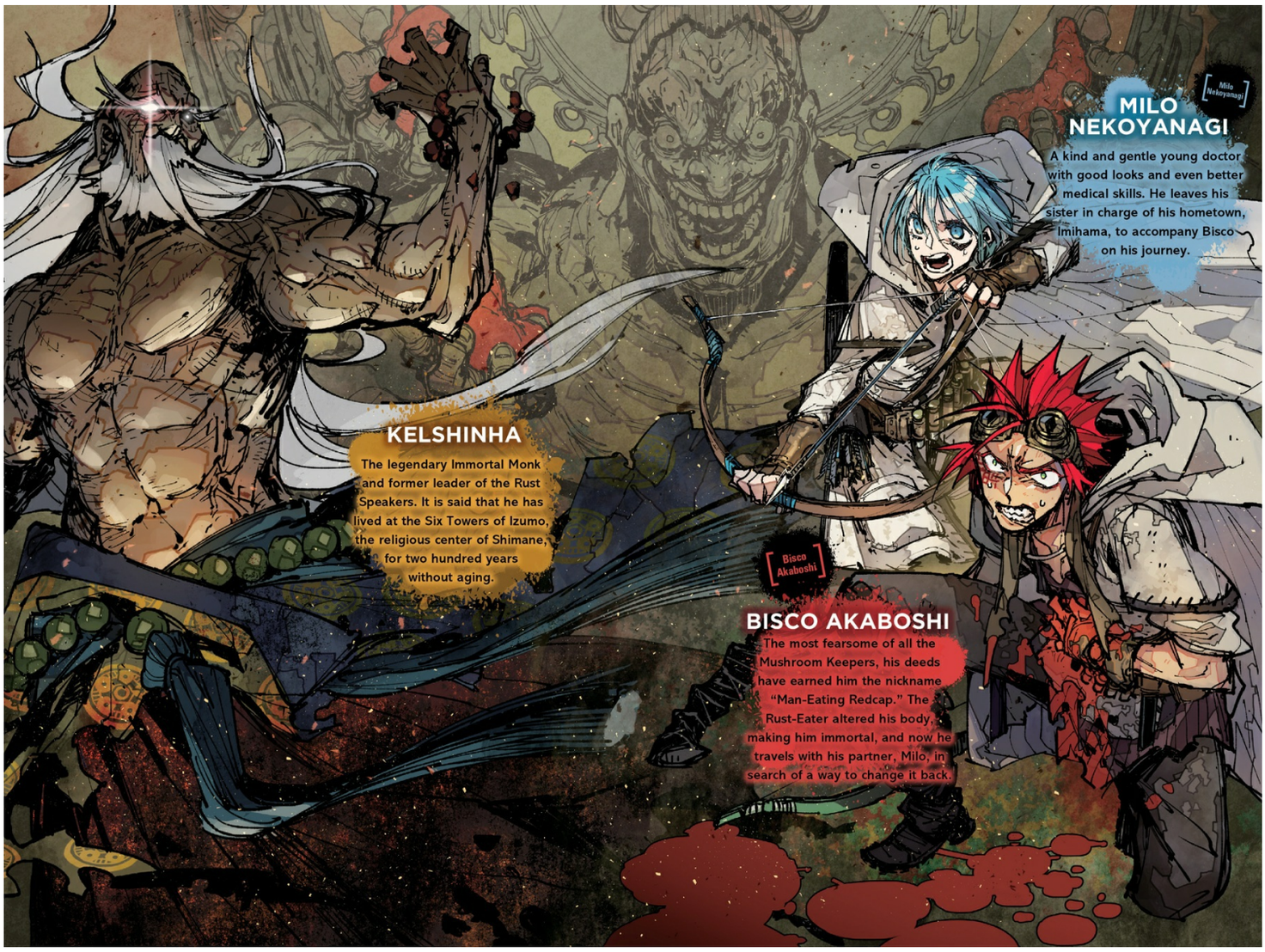
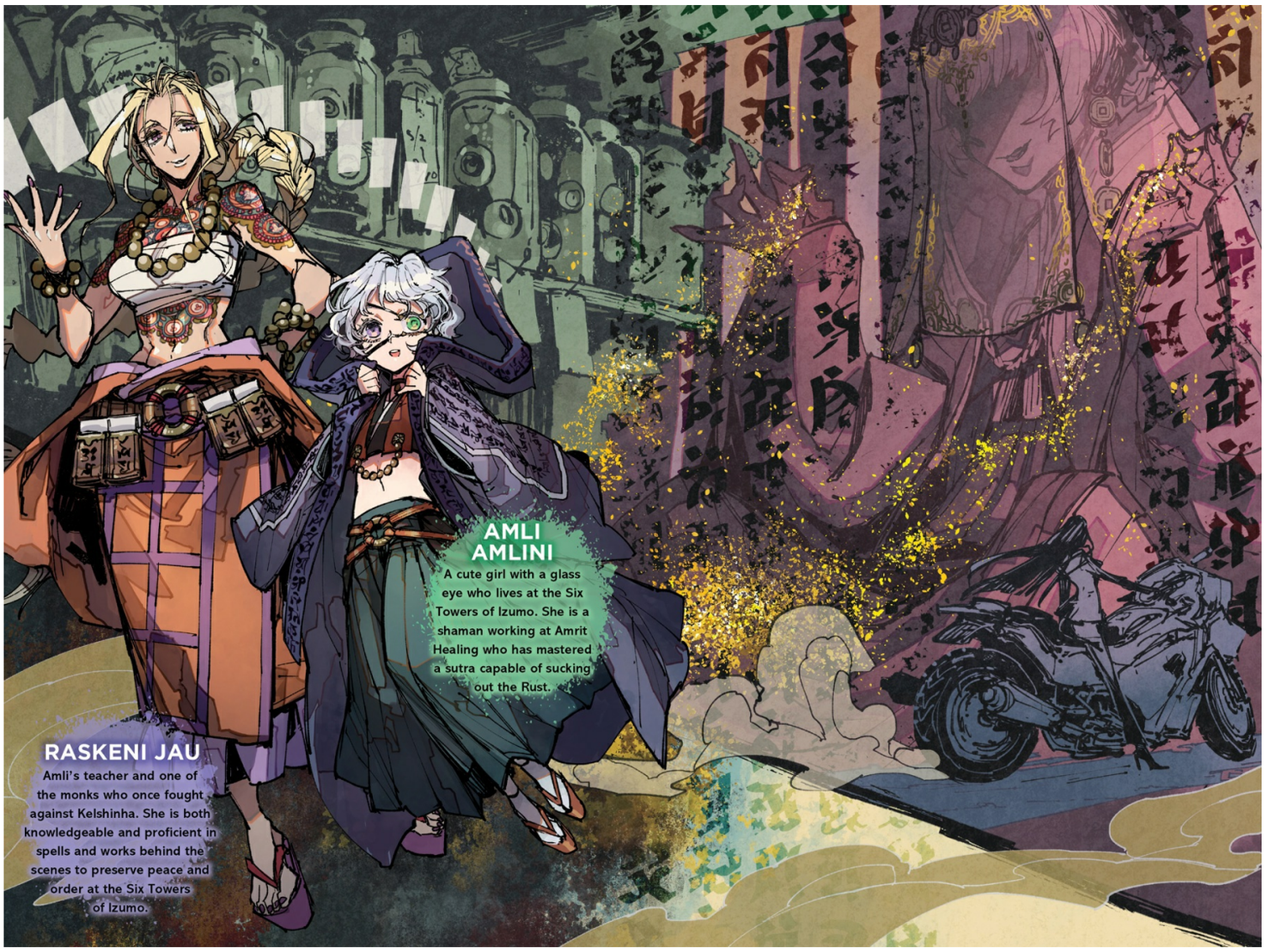
THE RUST WIND EATS AWAY AT THE WORLD — A BOY WITH A BOW MATCHES ITS FEROCITY


[Milo Nekoyanagi]
MILO NEKOYANAGI
A kind and gentle young doctor with good looks and even better medical skills. He leaves his sister in charge of his hometown, Imihama, to accompany Bisco on his journey.
KELSHINHA
The legendary Immortal Monk and former leader of the Rust Speakers. It is said that he has lived at the Six Towers of Izumo, the religious center of Shimane, for two hundred years without aging.
[Bisco Akaboshi]
BISCO AKABOSHI
The most fearsome of all the Mushroom Keepers, his deeds have earned him the nickname "Man-Eating Redcap." The Rust-Eater altered his body, making him immortal, and now he travels with his partner, Milo, in search of a way to change it back.


AMLI AMLINI
A cute girl with a glass eye who lives at the Six Towers of Izumo. She is a shaman working at Amrit Healing who has mastered a sutra capable of sucking out the Rust.
RASKENI JAU
Amli's teacher and one of the monks who once fought against Kelshinha. She is both knowledgeable and proficient in spells and works behind the scenes to preserve peace and order at the Six Towers of Izumo.

SHINJI COBKUBO
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K AKAGISHI
World Concept Art by
mocha
The Rust Wind eats away at the world.
A boy with a bow matches its ferocity.
• WANTED •
YOUR COOPERATION IS APPRECIATED
MILO
NEKOYANAGI
• WANTED •
AGE: 17
HEIGHT (APPROX. 168 CM)
PANDA-LIKE MARKING (ON LEFT EYE)
Reward:
500,000
about a million
Approx. 180 cm
Terrorism
about three million
SABIKUI
BISCO
2

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The Bloody Battle with Lord Kelshinha

SHINJI COBKUBO

Illustration by
K Akagishi

World Concept Art by
mocha (@mocha708)

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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Sabikui Bisco, Vol. 2

Shinji Cobkubo

Translation by Jake Humphrey

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SABIKUI BISCO Vol.2

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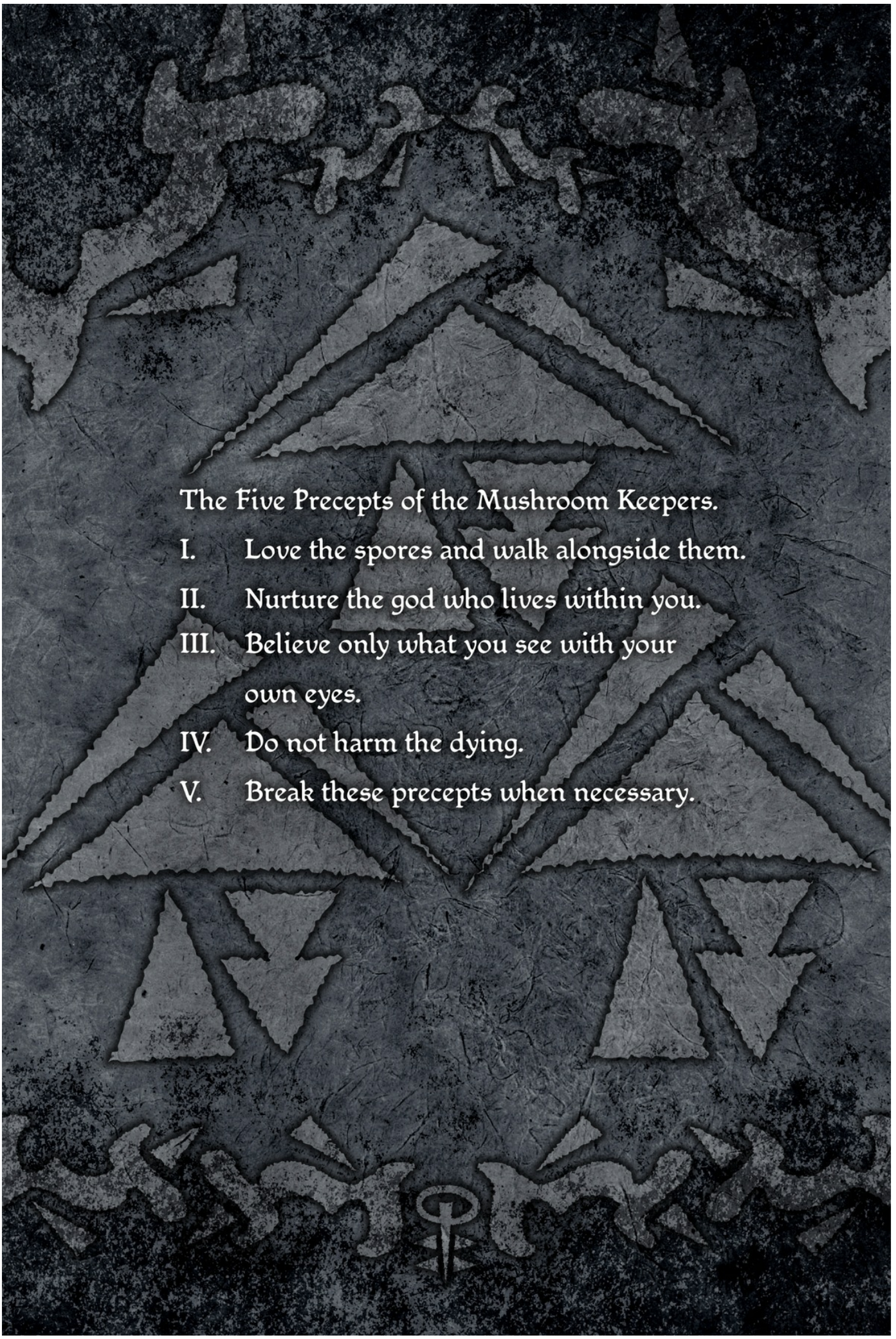
The Five Precepts of the Mushroom Keepers.
I. Love the spores and walk alongside them.
II. Nurture the god who lives within you.
III. Believe only what you see with your own eyes.
IV. Do not harm the dying.
V. Break these precepts when necessary.

It was an odd-looking god, its enormous body a dull gray illuminated by the light of the braziers. It had finely honed muscles and six powerful arms that extended from its body. In five of its hands it held a heart, a kidney, a liver, a spleen, and a lung, and in its sixth it gripped a spear, pointing upward as if to pierce the heavens. Its eyes were wide, with a wicked smile so broad it seemed the corners of its mouth would tear. Coupled with its imposing height, it was the very model of wrath, ready to swallow humanity whole.

Before that god stood hundreds of monks, fighting for space despite the room's spaciousness. They threw themselves at the foot of the statue, repeating their prayers with harmonized zeal. Each of them bore tattoos across their necks and faces, dozens of tightly packed letters spelling out their holy scriptures.

"""Won-culvero-kelhasha."""

"""Won-halcuro-kelhasha."""

Individually, the monks' voices were barely above a whisper, but they combined to fill the room with sonorous chants, like ghouls screaming in the night.

Suddenly, the door opened, and in strode the leader of the sect, wearing a crimson robe. In a commanding voice, he declared, "Bring the five vital organs before the altar." In response, the monks in the room separated, forming a path. Two warrior monks escorted the leader toward the altar, dragging between them a small girl clad in a thin robe.

"Won-aspal-shad-karna…"

As the leader arrived at the altar and kneeled in prayer, the other monks followed suit.

"""Won-aspal-shad-karna. Won-aspal-shad-karna…"""

A strange mood descended on the temple. The monks grew more and more fervent. At the center of these prayers, the girl trembled, barely able to form the syllables on her lips.

"W-won-aspal…shad-ka-karna…"

The leader stood up, and beneath his crimson robe glinted the blade of a dagger. One of the warrior monks handed him a jar of dark-gray liquid, into which he steeped the dagger's blade before taking the girl's arm…and pressing the grip of the knife into her hand.

"The previous priestess granted us one of her organs. Her predecessor managed two before she died. Show us the strength of your devotion and let your soul be transformed by the cycle of death and rebirth."

The girl's breaths quickened, and her hands shook as beads of sweat trickled down her neck. With the warrior monks supporting her by the shoulders, she shed her clothes and brought the tip of the knife to the smooth skin of her stomach.

"…Ahh… Aaahhh…! Hahhh! Hahhh! Hahhh!"

As the monks' fervent chanting continued, the leader leaned over to his escorts and whispered into their ears, "*Her faith wavers. Assist her. We need at least two before she dies.*"

The two guards nodded. Meanwhile, the tip of the girl's dagger reached her soft skin, parting the flesh and drawing blood.

"N-no… I…I can't do this… I can't…!" she cried.

"All is prepared. Offer the five vital organs before the altar."

"Nooo! Heeelp! Somebody, help!" screamed the girl, and she swung the dagger, plunging it into the eye of one of the warrior monks. As he staggered back, she tried to run, but the chanting monks formed a wall and penned her in, and the other guard grabbed her by the ankle, toppling her over.

"Very well. End it quickly," said the leader.

"Understood."

"No! Nooo! Mother! Sister! Help meee!"

As one guard held the girl down, the other drew and slowly raised his sword. As he brought it down toward her neck, there was a glimmer of light and a metallic clang as something streaked through the air and snapped the guard's sword blade off at the hilt.

“…Rrrgh! What…?!”

The guard stared at the perfectly clean break, mesmerized, when…

Gaboom!

A brilliant red crimson tengu mushroom forced its way out of the hilt, knocking the guard off his feet and into the altar.

“Heretics!”

“Protect His Eminence!”

The monks moved to surround their leader when a red blur flew high over the crowd and pierced the chest of the giant idol. In an instant, crimson threads of mycelium swept across the figure before *Gaboom! Gaboom!* A host of deep red mushrooms shattered the entire statue in two.

“A-aahhh! Lord Mashouten!!”

As the warrior monks attempted to quell the followers’ panic, one last mighty arrow struck the nose of the statue, and *Bagooooom!* An explosive mushroom blew the god’s face to bits. Out of its neck now grew a brilliant mushroom cap, atop which landed a single human figure, his cloak fluttering around his shoulders.

Crimson hair that flickered like a flame in the wind. Eyes that gleamed like emeralds, around the right of which was a tattoo that glowed red in the light of the braziers. He had the presence of a god…no, a demon, and his soul seemed to rage with all the fires of Hell itself, striking fear into the hearts of the people gathered there.

With a glint of his menacing fangs, he yelled out over the crowd.

“You would sacrifice a child to atone for your sins…?! If an offering is what you need, then offer up your own heads, you heartless bastards!”

His voice, like lightning, gripped the monks’ hearts and echoed throughout the hall.

“I-it’s Igni!”

“It’s Susano’o!”

“He bested our Lord Mashouten!”

Spurred on by those screams of terror, the monks panicked and tried to flee the hall. One figure, however, started pushing its way back through the swelling tide of people, approaching the altar as the warrior monks fought not to be swept away by the crowd.

“Watch out! He’s not alone!”

“That heretic! He’s going for our founder!”

“Sorry, go to sleep!”

As a guard slashed at him with his sword, the strange monk deftly avoided the attack, twisting his body and swinging his foot right into the guard’s jaw. The guard flew back and rolled along the ground, crashing into one of the braziers.

The monk drew back his hood, revealing ghostly pale skin and a sky-blue head of hair as soft as silk. His childlike face, easily mistakable for a woman’s, bore a dark birthmark around his left eye, like a panda.

“Who…who are you?!” yelled a guard.

“Just a doctor passing by,” said the boy. “And it’s a good thing I did!”

Flashing a grin, the panda boy swept the little girl up into his arms. With a series of kicks, he fought off the attacking guards one after the other, before calling up to his partner atop the statue, who was still firing arrows, consumed by mad rage.

“Bisco! That’s enough! Let’s escape on the King Trumpet!”

“All right, it’ll come out of this guy’s chest! On the count of three: One…”

“Two!”

Milo jumped up the statue’s arm, still holding the girl, and landed near his partner. Back-to-back, they both yelled out in unison.

““Three!””

Then the two of them stamped their feet onto Bisco’s purple arrow, which was embedded in the statue beneath them.

Gaboom!

The King Trumpet mushroom erupted out of the statue at an angle, launching the three figures far across the temple hall. And then…

That was it. Nothing else happened. Apart from the tiny sounds of blossoming mushrooms here and there across the rubble of the great idol, the hall was silent, as if it had all been a dream.

Just as quickly as they had arrived, the troublemakers had disappeared. “Those blasphemers…! Were they demons, or evil spirits…?” muttered the warrior monks, shuddering in disgust, while their leader gazed at the damaged statue.

“…”

The leader was silent, but beneath his crimson hood, his eyes burned with rage.

Then there came a voice. “Let us call them…harbingers,” it said.

A small figure in an ornate white robe entered the hall, walked past the guards, and stepped into the light of the fallen brazier.

“…Heavenly Child! You should not be here; it is dangerous!” said the leader.

“You saw it, too, did you not?” said the figure. “That our Lord should fall so easily portends woe upon the Rust Speakers. You have no duty to my father. You should leave. Now.”

“There’s no need to be so rash,” said the leader before turning to his subordinates. “You fools! How could you let this happen…?!”

The warrior monks all hung their heads in shame. It was clear that this white-robed individual was of such a high rank, it was impossible to speak up in their presence.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” said the leader. “It’s only a statue. Now, come with me,” he added, extending his hand. The small figure in the white robe allowed themselves to be pulled along before turning and looking back at the pale form of the mushroom sticking out of the rubble, glistening in the night.

“It’s beautiful…,” they said, a violet spark in their gaze.

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The Bloody Battle with Lord Kelshinha
Illustration by K Akagishi
World Concept Art by mocha (@mocha708)

“Eeeeeek!”

The sound of the girl’s scream traced a parabolic arc through the night sky. As the three of them fell toward a nearby hill overlooking the temple, a large crustacean jumped up to meet them, scooped them up in his claws, and protected them as he hit the ground and rolled to a halt.

“…Pwah! Thanks a ton, Actagawa!” said Milo, rubbing the huge crab’s belly. Then he gave one last look at the miserable sight of the temple below with its collapsed roof. “Aww. Bisco, you went too far! You didn’t have to destroy the whole building!”

“Hmph. There’s a lot more I’d like to do to guys who slice kids’ bellies open,” said Bisco, standing alongside Milo and looking down at the temple with disgust. “They’re pathetic. A bunch of grown men fawning over an oversized doll.”

“…Still, we got all we could. That cult was just another shell. We didn’t find any leads on the Immortal Monk.”

Milo turned back and walked over to Actagawa, where the young girl was lying unconscious. Her own arms wrapped around her tiny body, and her cheeks were stained with fresh tears.

“She ain’t got any of those tattoos,” Bisco said. “’Cause she’s a priestess maybe?”

“What? Hey! Bisco! Don’t look! She’s naked!”

“…And? She’s just a kid, so… Hey! Oh, I get it. It’s okay for *you*, is it?”

“I’m a doctor. You go look over there! Go on!”

As Bisco turned to leave, Milo administered several injections to the girl, and eventually her trembling panic gave way to soft, peaceful breaths, and her troubled face relaxed.

“She’s not wounded, but the mental trauma has caused her body to atrophy. It seems she was brainwashed quite heavily. I mean, to be told to give up her own organs like that…”

“But they didn’t get to her soul. She was still screaming ‘No!’ ‘Help me!’ That’s

why I helped her, y'know. Otherwise, I would have left her to die."

"Suuure you would've, Bisco. Yeah, I don't believe that for a second."

"Sh-shut up! Grr…"

Milo picked the girl up in his arms and, following Bisco, leaped into Actagawa's saddle. The giant crab slowly lifted himself to his feet and built up speed as Milo muttered to himself.

"Imagine you discovered everything you lived for was a lie… What would have been the point of it all? What would you do? What would you believe in?"

"I'd believe in myself," said Bisco. Milo looked up at his face. "Gods live within all of us anyway. Even Mushroom Keepers. While we pray to the god of archery, we don't pray our aim is true. Our aim being true *is* the prayer."

Then Bisco noticed the smiling face of his partner and turned away in embarrassment.

"Bisco. You know, considering you can't read, you can be pretty philosophical sometimes!"

"What the hell's readin' gotta do with it?! Let's hear your philosophy then, genius!"

"Ah-ha-ha! I don't need one. I can just believe in *you*!"

Milo's innocent smile left Bisco lost for words. All he could do was grumble as he lashed Actagawa's reins. The sun was just peeking over the distant horizon, bringing an end to the night and bathing the two boys in an orange glow.

1

After the affair with the Rust-Eater, Bisco and Milo said their farewells to Imihama and set their sights on Bisco's homeland, Shikoku. In Hyogo Prefecture, while following a route across Mount Hachibuse, the two boys bumped into a caravan of Mushroom Keepers.

"Don't move. Drop your weapons and— Well, well, well! Do my eyes deceive me, or is that Bisco I see? Hey, everyone, come and see! It's Jabi's boy!"

"That old troublemaker's all grown up! And look, he's even gone and got himself a pretty wife!"

"He's not my wife, you idiots; he's my new partner, Milo!"

It appeared news had spread that Imihama was accepting Mushroom Keeper immigrants, and several of them from the nearby prefecture of Tottori had formed this caravan. The two were treated to a lavish welcome (at least by Mushroom Keeper standards), and while they were there, they had asked the elder of the caravan for advice regarding Bisco's condition.

"In this world, those you call 'immortal' are not as rare as you believe," the elder said.

"What?!" cried Milo.

"And I have also heard that such immortality can be granted."

"You gotta be shittin' me. For real?"

"Bisco! Language!"

The elder puffed from a long pipe and laughed "Hee-hee!" at Bisco's sprightly behavior. From her wrinkled smile, many tattoos, and piercings, the boys could see she was a venerable and seasoned Mushroom Keeper indeed.

"Long ago, we had a local god called Lord Kusabira," she said. "However, a man called the Immortal Monk came from Shimane, and his followers burned

down Lord Kusabira's temples and shrines."

"The Immortal Monk…?" asked Bisco. "And you fought against this guy?!"

"I know not if it was the same mushroom immortality you possess. All I know is I shot him twice with crimson tengu arrows and he survived. To me, it seemed like he was truly immortal, and so I fled in a panic."

As the two boys shared a worried glance, the old woman smiled, taking a few more puffs on her pipe.

"That was a long time ago now, though," she said. "There is a place in Shimane called the Six Towers of Izumo, where it was said a monk ruled for two hundred years without aging a single day. When I was a young girl, everyone knew that story. All who were plagued by the Rust, or who sought to be free of the shackles of their mortality, flocked to that place in droves. There they asked to join the Rust Speakers… Ah, in truth, their full name is the Speakers of Mashouten, the Rust Lord, but that is quite long, is it not? Everybody calls them the Rust Speakers instead."

"Elder," said Milo, "does this Immortal Monk still reside there at the Six Towers of Izumo?"

"I cannot say," she replied. "Recently I have heard rumors that the entire sect was destroyed."

Here the elder paused and blew her smoke directly into Bisco's and Milo's faces, cackling.

"Either way, the secrets of immortality will surely be there. If this Immortal Monk could truly grant it, then perhaps he could take it away as well. If nothing else, there must surely be some clues remaining."

The old woman grabbed Bisco's chin with a bony finger and pulled him close.

"Though, if it were me, I'd never throw away such a convenient body as yours!"

It was several months later, in the land of religion, Shimane. It was a curious land, culturally distant from the neighboring prefectures and even said to be on equal footing with the central government in terms of representation. This was

because of the mighty influence that the various religions possessed. Followers of sects such as the Flamebound and the High Hall were found all across Japan; if the central government ever put pressure on Shimane, it wouldn't be long before they saw the flames of rebellion sparking up all over the country.

Thus, Shimane was considered something of a neutral region. Some even called it an independent state unto itself. However, in these days, no land was free from conflict and subterfuge. Just as Japan's prefectures quarreled among themselves, in Shimane it was the sects who held the knives to one another's throats, and even now, the situation threatened to spill over into all-out war.

"Gosh, I thought my little sister would never come back home! I was thinking I'd have to close up the shop and become a nun! Losing her as well after Mom and Dad…"

The barroom lights were swarming with flies, to the extent you could hear the sound as they struck the dangling bulbs and knocked them from side to side. Below them, at the table, sat a merry group of farmers, sake cups in their hands and dirt caking their faces.

"I really can't thank you enough! Eat all you like! Our food is quite popular, even around these parts!"

"Hey, Palen. My cup's empty. Get us a refill, would ya?" asked one of the farmers.

"Get your own!" retorted the young landlady with a broad smile. "I'm takin' care of these customers today!"

She motioned to the seats in front of the counter, but the two young patrons she spoke of were already wolfing down their food without an ounce of restraint.

"This tofu's great!" said one. "Hey, sis, isn't there any rice?"

"I don't think you're supposed to have that on its own, Ritz," said the other. "I think it's supposed to go with this soba."

"Don't you know about liver soba?" asked the landlady. "It's Shimane's specialty, made from the livers of flying anglerfish."

“Slurrrppp!”

“Whoa, that’s disgusting! Why can’t you act more ladylike?”

Seated at the counter were two…girls. Hunters, going by their garb. One was a pretty, slender young thing with sky-blue hair as soft as silk that came down to her shoulders and bandages covering the left side of her face. She had a slightly mysterious air about her, but her smiling face was full of kindness. It would be hard to find a more charming beauty in all the lands.

As for her companion, however… She was a redhead with a rather imposing physique. Her crimson hair was scattered and messy, like a spider lily, and the right half of her face was wrapped in bandages, as if mirroring her partner. The remaining eye glimmered like jade, and her sharp look struck fear into anyone who made eye contact.

As for her makeup, well, it was difficult to say that it suited her. It was almost feral in its arrangement, but her face was pretty enough, and it wouldn’t be strange to see tough mercenary types who dressed as she did.

The two of them had deep scars on their necks and chests that the makeup couldn’t hide, and their cloaks, hung up on the wall, were weathered from long use. It was clear these two hunters were experienced, despite their young ages.

“Damn, I wish I’d known the food was so good. We could have gone from rest stop to rest stop instead of hidin’ and eatin’ dried lizard all the time.”

“Whose fault do you think that is? We wouldn’t have to hide if you didn’t make it so all of Shimane wants our heads, Bisco!”

“Watch it! It was you who said not to use our real names, remember?”

“Oh, um… S-sorry.”

If it wasn’t obvious by this point, these two women were, in fact, none other than the Man-Eating Redcap and Man-Eating Panda, and if you’re wondering why they’re in disguise, well…

There was little reason to fear the people of Shimane turning them in for the reward money. The borders of Shimane were open to all sinners seeking salvation, and their relationship with the central government was neutral at

best. However, after the chaos they'd wrought at the temple of Mashouten, the two boys were back to a life of being wanted criminals.

Having tracked down where the priestess lived, they were taking her back home when the smell wafting from the rest stop became too much to resist. Telling themselves they were waiting for her to wake up again, they dressed up for a sneaky meal.

"What the…? Damn, this white mush is freakin' delicious!" yelled the redhead.

"That's deep-fried catfish heart!" boasted the landlady. "Tasty, isn't it?"

"Come to think of it, all of Shimane's regional dishes are based on organ meat," said the blue-haired girl. "You think there's a reason for that? Hey, Ritz! Don't steal my food!"

The landlady answered her question. "There're a lot of different religions in Shimane, but they all believe that the five vital organs of Buddhist medicine are the source of energy in the body. They believe if you eat animal liver, your own liver grows stronger, and so organs are considered good luck. I believe this all grew out of the Rust Speakers, who venerated the five vital organs."

"…So these Rust Speakers…," the redheaded woman asked the landlady as her partner wiped her food-stained mouth. "What're they like? We heard it was this massive religion led by an immortal monk, but we've been all over the place, and we ain't seen this magic shaman dude or whatever at all. It just looks like a scattered cult."

The landlady paused before lowering her voice and replying, "You shouldn't be so loud about that. There are still some of them around. Never know when they're listening. The Rust Speakers fell apart ten years ago. That place you saved my sister from was where the remaining followers gathered. Before then, yeah, the Immortal Monk lived at the Six Towers of Izumo."

"So he really does exist?"

"Never seen him myself," the landlady said, "but the Rust Speakers were powerful in their day. The monk was a master of sorcery and could even bestow immortality upon followers he found deserving. All those who wanted to live

forever flocked to the tower gates."

It was the same story the pair had heard from the caravan elder. So it wasn't just the tall tale of a mad old woman after all, thought the redheaded girl.

"…But if they had all these crazy powers, how come they ain't still around?" she muttered.

"The monk could give out immortality, but he could just as quickly take it away again. So those who received it didn't stick around for long."

The blue-haired girl stopped eating and frowned.

"I wonder how much of that is true… What do you think, Ritz?"

"Don't ask me. If you don't know, I don't know. Hey, lady, can I get some more?"

"Sure thing! Ah-ha-ha! You worried they're gonna come after you? Don't be! Just a couple days ago, this massive shiitake came up outta the ground and blew their whole base sky-high!"

"It was a crimson tengu, not a shiitake—" the redhead began just as her partner elbowed her in the ribs and smiled. The landlady gave them a curious look before continuing.

"…There's just one thing that doesn't sit right with me," she said. "I don't like that those villains were done in by another villain. Mushrooms are the doin' of that Akaboshi group."

The two girls froze mid-bite and stole a peep at the landlord's worried face. Then, feeling something was not quite right with the way she said that, the redhead asked, "Akaboshi…group?"

"Oh, don't tell me you haven't heard? Lately…"

But before she could finish, there was a *Bang!* as the rest stop door was kicked open and a group of strong-looking men strode into the room.

"Well, you bumpkins sure seem to be in a good mood today," one of them said.

"Ugh, it stinks in here, boss. Can we go?" said another.

“You idiots. These farmers toil on their hands and knees day after day so that we can eat the food we eat. Show a little respect.”

A group of what looked like, and indeed were, bandits entered the bar. One of them snatched up the liquor bottle from the farmers’ table and downed it as the patrons looked on in shock. At the center of them all stood an even larger man with spiky red hair. He wore a fur coat over his fancy armor and helm, and a scantily clad, blue-haired woman hung off his arm.

“Tsk. Here they are. Speak of the devil,” said the landlady.

“Hey, Palen,” said the man. “You seen the news this morning? I couldn’t let a favor from my favorite landlady go unpaid. I know you hated those guys, so we…”

“…killed them all, didn’t we, Bisco? You sure struck a handsome sight on the battlefield, splitting those monks’ skulls with your battle-ax.”

“Ngh! *Cough, cough!*”

“Whoa, Ritz!”

Upon hearing the name *Bisco*, the redheaded woman choked on her noodles and went into a coughing fit. Her partner rubbed her on the back, trying not to show her face.

The bandit chief frowned and was about to say something when the landlady spoke up.

“Marvelous work,” replied the landlady, calmly defiant. “And I suppose you’ve come to sponge some grub off my bar? Well, sorry, but we don’t give out food for free here!”

“Watch your tongue, bitch,” said *Bisco*, striking the counter and sweeping away a load of glass bottles, which shattered on the floor. The displeasure was clear on his face. “Your head full of straw, farmer girl? Don’t forget it’s me who keeps things nice and calm around here. Awful lotta brigands and vagabonds ’round these parts, and it’d be a shame if something happened to a sweet little place like this.”

At this, the blue-haired girl stood up from her chair, but the landlady

motioned with her eyes to sit down, as if to say, *Don't worry, this happens all the time.* The eagle-eyed girl on *Bisco's* arm, however, noticed this and zeroed in on the table where the two girls were sitting.

"Well, what do we have here?" she said. "Looks like you got plenty of food and booze to me. How come you got enough to feed these two hicks, but not us, eh?"

"…Well, settle down, Milo. We wouldn't want to scare the newcomers, would we?" said the red-haired man with a sly grin. Then he approached the table and drew his hand across the jaw of the blue-haired girl sitting there. "Besides, look at what a beauty she is. Ain't no way she's from around here… So where do you hail from, cutie? Fancy a drink?"

The blue-haired girl attempted a glare, but her unintimidating look fell to pieces upon *Bisco's* sleazy grin. She let out a shuddering breath and gingerly looked back at her partner for support…

"Hey, lady, could you get me another sea urchin beer?" the redhead asked.

"Help me out, you jerk!" cried the blue-haired girl, striking her partner on the back of the head. As the redhead fell to the floor in pain, the man going by "Bisco" brushed aside the blue-haired girl and slowly walked over to her, lifting her up by the scruff of the neck.

"I don't appreciate you ignoring me," he growled. "Don't you know who I am? I'm Japan's most wanted public enemy number one, and I got a three-million-sol bounty on my head! They call me the Man-Eating Redcap, Bisco Akaboshi!"

In response, the redheaded girl bared her sharp canines, and her hair flared up like a bonfire. A ferocious smile appeared on her lips, as if the constricting pressure around her throat was causing her no discomfort at all.

"W-what the hell…?!"

"You're pissin' me off. If you're gonna do it, do it right," said the girl, or rather, Bisco Akaboshi. He slurped up a noodle from the corner of his mouth and continued, "Your tattoo artist was makin' fun of you, by the way… That's the sign of the Chinese hackberry tree. It marks a coward who only feels big when he's in a gang."

“W-what? Who are…?!”

“Bisco Akaboshi’s tattoo…,” said Bisco, tearing off his bandages and revealing the magnificent crimson inking around his right eye, “…is the sign of the Rust-Eater. It contains the divine protection of Acala, the Immovable. If you’re gonna use my name, then don’t fuckin’ half-ass it!”

Bisco’s bare fangs and emerald glare stole all the color from the fraud’s face. He was like a yapping pup standing before a bear.

“Y-you’re…the Man-Eating Redcap! The real one…!”

“When are you gonna get your dirty hands off me?” said Bisco, grabbing the wrists around his neck and squeezing them like a vise.

Crunch!

“Aaaggghhh!”

Bisco’s monstrous strength crushed the bones in the faker’s forearm to dust, and the poor man cried out in pain. Bisco then swung him by the arms, tossing him into the distance, whereupon his body didn’t stop but spun like a pinwheel, smashing through two bar tables and flying out the door.

“B-boss!”

After quailing in fright, his henchmen pointed their guns at Bisco, but Milo was too fast for them, and his bow was already drawn. His thin arrows pierced the men’s wrists, releasing a bunch of tiny blue mushrooms that incapacitated them in seconds.

“W-waaah! I can’t feel my hand! What’s happening?”

“I-it’s the mushrooms! These guys are Mushroom Keepers!”

Milo put away his bow and turned to Bisco, scowling. His partner was hurriedly trying to replace his bandages.

“Why didn’t you help me? How could you just sit there drinking when I’m in danger?”

“Danger, my ass. You coulda taken those guys yourself, easy!”

“You’re unbelievable! You’ve got no kindness or morals whatsoever!!!”

Suddenly, they heard the sound of a megaphone from outside. *“Listen up, you punks!”* The two Mushroom Keepers opened the door to find the fake Bisco sitting atop a military tank, its turret pointed right at them.

“Say hello to Actagawa!” he said, gesturing to the vehicle beneath him. “I’ll teach you to make fun of me! I’ll blow both you *and* that bar sky-high! Then *I’ll* be the real Bisco!”

“Uh-oh, I think we pissed him off,” said Bisco, unbothered, as the gun barrel swiveled toward him with a creak. Bisco whistled through his fingers, and something enormous swept through the air, casting a dark shadow over the pair.

“Fire!!” yelled the fake.

A huge orange meteorite fell from the sky and, swinging its massive claws, deflected the shell like a Ping-Pong ball before it could harm either Bisco or the rest stop bar. The projectile went flying off into a distant mountain, where it exploded in a column of smoke.

“That was close,” said Bisco. “Sorry for the short notice, Actagawa!”

“Wh-whaaat?!”

The fake Bisco yelled in surprise at the giant crab, but by the time he’d finished, the two Mushroom Keepers had filled the tank’s armor with arrows. Mushrooms sprouted all over the tank with a *Gaboom! Gaboom!* plucking off the armor plating—red ones out of the main gun and blue ones out of the engine block.

“Waaah! Waaaaahhh!”

The fake Bisco crawled out of the cockpit as it spewed black smoke, barely escaping with his life before the fake Actagawa exploded in a ball of flame.

“I won’t forget this, asswipes! I’ll kill you! I’ll freakin’ murder you!” he cried as he regrouped with his henchmen and fled. Bisco cracked his neck, exasperated, and called out to the blue-haired woman standing frozen in the barroom doorway.

“What’s the matter? You’d better get running, too. I’ll let you go this time but

tell that boss of yours to get his tattoo fixed."

"W-wait, s-so… You're really him? You're the real Bisco?"

The fake Milo, who had spent most of the previous few minutes cowering in fright, darted up to Bisco and hooked onto his arm, crooning.

"Wh-whoa! What the hell are you doing?!"

"Just look at these muscles!" she said. "There's no way you're a woman. I finally found you, Bisco! Hey, listen, that asshole tricked me, too. I'm a victim here! Everything's gonna be okay now that you're here. I'll take you back to our stronghold and we can…"

Bisco's face went red as the fake Milo continued to whisper into his ear. Suddenly, the real Milo clapped her on the shoulder and, with surprising force, ripped her away.

"H-hey, wait…! Ah… Ah-ha-ha… Oh, yeah. There's a real version of me, too. You can be…um…our cook…"

"…Your black mark. It's on the wrong side. It should curve around the left eye, not the right," Milo said, clenching his fist. "…Want me to fix that for you?"

He was a far cry from his usual timid self, and his voice dripped with venom. The impostor quivered in her boots before turning and fleeing, still half-dressed, into the night. Bisco was just as surprised as she was.

"Dude, why can't you always be that threatening?" he said.

"Because I'm not always that angry," Milo replied before heading back inside the bar. Standing in the threshold, he surveyed the damage. "Ahh, look at this place. It's a wreck." He sighed. Chairs and tables lay strewn about, upended and splintered in the wake of the fight.

"Oh, it ain't that bad," said Bisco. "At least it's still in one piece. That's more than you can say for some of the places we've been."

"Bisco! They fed us! How can you say that?"

After the landlady had recovered from her shock, she jogged over to the pair and vigorously shook their hands up and down.

“Wow! You got rid of Akaboshi! I didn’t know you two were Mushroom Keepers! That’s amazing! Oh, what a load off my mind!”

“I’m so sorry about your bar, ma’am…,” said Milo.

“Oh, don’t you worry about that! It’d have been much worse if those thugs had their way! I’m just lucky some big, strong customers like you two were here to stop them!”

The landlady laughed heartily. Not only was she unbothered by the damage, but she didn’t seem eager to kick up a fuss over the pair’s true identities as Mushroom Keepers, either.

Just then, one of the other customers spoke up.

“Why didn’t you two finish the job?” he said after tying up one of the bandits. “You let Akaboshi go! You can bet they’re gonna be coming back here with the rest of their tanks!”

“Don’t say that!” said the landlady. “These two saved our lives, you know!”

“But you know what those thugs do to rebellious women, don’t you? They take ’em away and sell them off at Six Towers. They been turnin’ a blind eye to us so far, but now…”

“What are you so afraid of?” said the landlady. “Didn’t you see the way that cur pissed his pants just now? He’s just a common thug, that’s all. Next time he comes by, we’re going to tie him up and get that three-million-sol bounty all to ourselves!”

At her brazen suggestion, the farmers looked at one another uneasily. Bisco watched the conversation unfold with indifference, but when he looked down to see Milo tugging at his sleeve, eyes pleading, he heaved a sigh and addressed the room.

“Where’re those guys hidin’ out, then?”

“Huh?”

“Akaboshi’s lot. Where’s their base? We’ll go and sort things out. It’s our fault things got heated in the first place…”

“Don’t be silly!” said the landlady. “If two girls go into that place alone,

there's no telling what they'd do to you!"

Milo glanced at his partner, who was sulking, arms crossed, before flashing a slight smile and replying:

"I think you should be more worried about what we'll do to them!"

Nearly half a year after the appearance of a new Rust-Eater forest in the center of the Northern Miyagi Badlands, the excitement was dying down. However, at the time, the news of this event, as well as the fact that it somehow involved Tetsujin itself, came as a shock to people all over Japan.

One of its consequences was an epidemic of Bisco Akaboshis.

From Japan's smallest village to its highest castle, there wasn't a man or a woman in the land who hadn't heard tales of the vigilante Bisco Akaboshi and his exploits. Exploits that had now earned the man a bounty of over three million sols. What the government had failed to predict was that raising his bounty and publishing news of his misdeeds had only elevated the Man-Eating Redcap to a living legend in the eyes of the people.

To those who were displeased with the government's rule, which was no small number, Akaboshi was something of a folk hero, a modern-day Robin Hood who mocked the government and stood up for the little people. And as days turned to months and Bisco did no such thing, some took it upon themselves to adopt his name and fly his flag, proclaiming "No, *I* am the Man-Eating Redcap!"

And as the months went on, more and more of these fake Akaboshis began cropping up all over Japan, gathering followers and taking to lives of crime: looting, pillaging, robbery. By this point, there was no doubt that they were the bane of every vigilante corps and police force in the land.

On the other hand, this was quite convenient for the real Bisco and Milo. Not only were the fakers throwing their weight around and keeping the security forces busy, but many of them looked even more fearsome than the real thing. There was no way anyone would suspect these two young lads of being the legendary brigands, and as a result, the pair had gotten quite adept at slipping across the borders unchallenged. There was only one checkpoint left in the land, nestled on the southern border of Gunma Prefecture, where the guards

would never, ever forget the faces of those two Mushroom Keepers.

“Hey, Bisco? What should we do after this? Carry on to Shikoku? Or should we try going after the sect again?”

Milo leaned over and wiped the makeup off Bisco’s face as he sat at the reins, steering Actagawa through the night with the aid of his cat-eye goggles.

“I’m curious about the Six Towers. If this monk really did have the power to remove immortality, then perhaps the secret is still there. I want to go check that out before we go back.”

“…Bisco, to be honest, I’m not sure we should. That place… It purports to be a holy city for all of mankind, but I’ve heard that the conflict between the sects still rages to this day. It’s too dangerous to go there just based on hearsay…”

“Shh. There, up on the hill.”

Milo followed Bisco’s finger to see a dilapidated two-story building faintly illuminated by the early light of dawn. According to the landlady, this was the hideout of the fake Bisco and his gang.

“Ugh, I can’t be bothered. I’ll just hit ’em with a crimson tengu from here and —”

“No, Bisco! There might be hostages inside! And you promised me you’d only kill if they really deserved it!”

“Well, that’s hard to judge. How do you even know who’s evil these days?”

“Well, you know, if they’re like Kurokawa… Or if they hurt cats and crabs.”

“Who are you, the Humane Society? C’mon, let’s go.”

Bisco and Milo dismounted and scaled the cliffs toward the hideout. However, they encountered not even a single bloodthirsty bandit. In fact, the place appeared to be completely deserted.

“Bisco, I smell blood. You think they had a falling-out…?”

“Perhaps, but…it’s too quiet. Let’s take a closer look.”

Sneaking right up to the building, they stole a glance through the windows, but there was not a soul to be seen or heard anywhere. Bisco looked at Milo,

who nodded, drew his bow, and slipped inside the building itself. In the large hall, several moths swarmed around a white lantern, casting fluttering shadows across the walls. And there, strewn across the floor, were the pallid bodies of the bandits.

…! They're dead…?!

Milo tried to collect himself and looked around the room, when his eyes fell upon the large body of the man who had been impersonating Bisco. Milo ran over to him. An unpleasant sweat tickled the back of his neck.

Wh-what in the world…?! What happened here?!

As both a doctor and a Mushroom Keeper, Milo was no stranger to death. However, none of those experiences had prepared him for the strange corpse of the fake Bisco before him.

His stomach was missing. Through the hole sliced in his belly, Milo could only see the rusted-over viscera that lined the cavity where the organ should have been. Even the blood had turned to rust.

"The skin is fine. Only his insides have rusted. I've never seen anything like it…"

Then Bisco leaped down from the second-floor balcony and whispered, "Milo. Something's not right. I can't find anything but dead bodies, and there's no signs of a struggle, either."

"Yeah. There's no external injuries. It's just his stomach that's been ripped out… It's weird. I don't like it. And it's the same with all of them…"

"I've got a bad feeling about this," said Bisco. "'Kay, I'm gonna look for prisoners and then we can get the hell outta here. You go get Actagawa."

"Okay!"

Milo began descending the hill, while Bisco slowly made his way down a stone staircase leading to the basement. He turned on his cat-eye goggles to search the dark room and found, through iron bars, a pile of female bodies lying limply atop one another.

Bisco clicked his tongue. The women's mouths were stained with blood, and

just like the corpses upstairs, their bellies had been sliced wide open.

So they weren't here for the women, and they weren't here for money… Who were they?

Bisco pondered before deciding it would be faster to pick his partner's brain about it. He headed back upstairs, leaving the corpses of the prisoners behind, when…

"…ru…kyurumon…snew…"

A faint groan echoed off the basement walls. So faint, only Bisco's keen hearing could hope to pick it up.

"…ru…snew…kyurumon…kel…"

Bisco nocked an arrow and slowly approached the source of the sound. He passed by one cell, and another. In the third, he found an old man, pale as a specter. He lay curled up in the corner of the cell, endlessly repeating a strange chant.

"Kel…kyurumon…kel…"

The man was little more than skin and bones, but the fiery glimmer in his eyes was enough to make Bisco sweat.

Who's this old dude…?

Bisco was so shocked, it was a while before the realization caught up to him. This man was the sole survivor. Bisco put away his bow and rushed over to help.

"Hey, Gramps. It's safe now; the guys upstairs are toast. Let's get you outta here. Where are you from? We'll take you home."

"Kel…kel…kyurumon…kugunotsu…"

"This is getting me nowhere. I need Milo…" Bisco sighed and lifted the old man onto his shoulder before exiting that foul place as quickly and quietly as he could.

"…I'm sorry, Bisco, but there's nothing I can do for him. The rust is too deeply ingrained. His insides are completely covered in it. It's a wonder he's even still alive."

“What if you use my blood?” Bisco asked.

Milo ran his diagnostic scope over the patient’s body and shook his head. “Even if we cure the Rust now, there’ll be nothing left of his organs. I can give him some wortshroom medicine, but even then he’s only going to last another two days at most.”

As a doctor, Milo was well accustomed to the crushing sense of helplessness that came with being unable to save someone, but that didn’t make it any easier to deal with.

“I see,” said Bisco. “I guess that’s it, then. At least we found him before he died.”

“Huh? But…we couldn’t do anything…”

“Everyone dies. It’s what we’re born to do. But he can at least be surrounded by his loved ones when he goes. He must have a family, a grandkid or somethin’, right?”

“I… I guess so. But how are we going to find them? We don’t have much time, and we’re fumbling in the dark.”

As Milo spoke, Bisco rummaged through his pockets and pulled out a wooden slab that looked like a keychain. In the center of its brightly lacquered front was the word *Izumo* in bright-red letters. It was clearly an item of significant value.

“T-that’s a promissory note from Six Towers!”

“It’s all he had on him. Musta been important. I guess that means he’s from there, right?”

Bisco tossed Actagawa a handful of Shimane oysters he’d picked up at the rest stop. Actagawa caught them in his pincers and stuffed them, shell and all, into his mouth.

“Bisco… You’re not thinking we’re going to take him all the way to the Towers, are you…?”

“It’s perfect. We needed an excuse to get inside anyway. And if we take this guy with us, we won’t even need a disguise…”

“You haven’t been listening to a word I’ve been saying, have you?!”

Milo grabbed Bisco by the lapels and yelled into his ear. Before Bisco could put together a response, Milo spun him around and shouted at him to his face.

“Didn’t you see what they did to those bandits?! That was the worshipers’ doing, no doubt about it! You’d have to be insane to consider going into the belly of the beast right now!”

“You still think sanity matters, Milo? Besides, it’s you who likes helping people so much! Didn’t you want to take this guy back to his family?”

“I…I do, but…”

“Listen. I’m not just talkin’ outta my ass,” Bisco scowled as he rubbed his stinging ear. “I know it’s dangerous. Everyone knows Mushroom Keepers are polytheists, so they’d really have it out for us in Izumo.”

“Right! So then why…?”

“Because you’re with me!” Bisco said, turning and looking Milo in the eye. “I could never do it alone, but with you at my back, nothing’s impossible. Let’s do this. Together.”

“Wh-whaaat?!”

Milo’s face went bright red at Bisco’s words, and all the thousand comebacks he had prepared vanished from his mind.

“Still, if you really don’t want me to go, then I won’t. You’re way smarter than me, and I trust your judgment. So? What’ll it be?”

“…B-Bisco…,” Milo stammered with crimson earlobes before finally managing to string together a response. “O-okay. I…I understand. W-we’re partners, after all…”

“Well, I guess if Jabi were here, that’d work, too.”

“Oh, come on! Say it *has* to be me, even if it’s not true!!”

As the two bickered, the old man lay behind Actagawa’s rocking saddle, using the tent as a blanket. In half sleep, he muttered his verses as if in delirium.

“Rin…shulk…karna…”

“Rin…shulk…karlo…”

2

“There it is,” said Bisco. “What a crazy-looking place.”

“…Urgh. I don’t like it,” said Milo. “Look, once we get the old man home, we’re leaving, okay?”

Atop an empty hill, the two looked out across the settlement. In its center, they saw six towers stretching up into the night, as if to pierce the clouds. At the base, a high pentagonal wall surrounded the towers, each of which was visually distinct from the others, such as the dazzling beauty of the gold tower, or the flickering flames of the red tower.

These were the Six Towers of Izumo. Shimane’s Mecca.

The wall that surrounded the towers was itself surrounded by another defense: a steep pit, long and deep, that circled all the way around the inner city. The only way across was a single thin bridge, which also appeared to be in use as a guardhouse.

“That checkpoint only opens in the morning,” said Milo. “We’ve got a bit of space around here, so let’s set up camp and get some rest. We’ll have to find somewhere to hide Actagawa, too. We won’t be able to smuggle him inside.”

“Gotcha,” replied Bisco, dropping down from the crab and helping to set up camp. “Hey, old dude! Tomorrow we’re gonna let ya die with yer fam, so just keep on kickin’ till then, okay?”

The old man gave a feeble groan that was either a reply or a cry of pain. It was hard to tell.

“Hey, Milo. Even if we have that guy with us, the guards at the checkpoint aren’t just gonna wave us through. Don’t you think we should disguise ourselves or something?”

“Yes, we should. We’ll dress as women.”

“What?! Again?! You really like that idea!”

“Look, I don’t want to, either, but if anyone catches sight of your scars, our cover’s blown. If we say we want to become nuns, though, they won’t give us a full search, because it’s a holy place and there are harsh punishments for touching women.”

“I know… I just don’t think I’ll ever get used to it.”

“Ah-ha-ha! Besides, who would expect the fearsome Man-Eating Redcap to be dressed in women’s clothing? Hey, maybe you should wear earrings this time. Oh, and eyeshadow, too! Want to try?”

“Why you gotta switch it up every time? Let’s just get it over with!”

After making the beds, Bisco headed over to Actagawa to help the old man down. He went to lift the man’s fragile, rusted body, when…

Ba-dum!

A chill ran down Bisco’s spine and stole his breath. The old man’s eyes were wide open like an owl’s, staring back at him in the darkness.

“Akaboshi,” he said with a crescent-shaped smile across his wrinkled face.

Bisco clicked his tongue. The old man must have heard part of their conversation and learned their true identities. He wasn’t as senile as he appeared. His unending gaze was starting to weird Bisco out, so he picked him up to carry him to bed as quickly as possible.

“Akaboshi. Want. Akaboshi.”

“Yeah, that’s me, Bisco Akaboshi. Don’t say anything at the checkpoint, you hear? There ain’t no point turning me in for the bounty if you’re just gonna die in two days anyway.”

“I want it…”

Bisco laid the old man down in bed. Noticing the lantern by the pillow was out, he called to his partner.

“Milo! The light’s gone dead! Go fetch more firebeetles!”

“How many?”

“Two! …Just wait a bit, Gramps, we’ll get that light back…”

Fwoosh! As he turned back, the old man lunged at him like a coiled-up viper. Bisco instantly sharpened his senses, dodging the attack and retaliating with a roundhouse kick as deadly as a knife blade. The kick snapped off the man’s arm, but he was undeterred and twisted around, slipping through the gap in Bisco’s kick and plunging his other arm into Bisco’s abdomen.

“Graaargh?!”

“Won-sharmd-uleshingha-knew!”

The snake’s eyes gleamed like lightbulbs, and his mouth hung wide open. As he slowly pulled back his arm, he drew out Bisco’s innards, still pulsing and gleaming brilliant and orange like the sun.

“It’S rEaL…!”

“What the hell are you?!”

Quick as a flash, Bisco drew his bow and fired off a glimmer of light that sliced through the night. The old man twisted like a snake once more and dodged it, the shining viscera leaving a neon trail.

Gaboom!

“Ngh…?!”

But Bisco had predicted the old man’s movements. The oystershroom arrow he fired exploded beneath him and launched the old man up into the air. Bisco took aim once more as he fell helplessly.

“You’re the one who struck first!” cried Bisco. His victory assured, he pulled back the bowstring.

…What? It… it’s so heavy…!!

He felt weak. As soon as Bisco noticed something was wrong, *“Gblh!”* Blood erupted from his mouth like a waterfall, dripping down his chest and forming a puddle at his feet. His arrow fell short, hitting only the old man’s flank and failing to bloom.

“Kha! Kha! Khah-ha-ha-ha-haaaaa!”

The old man laughed even as he fell with a splat to the ground. Bisco dropped to his knees and glared back, but the blood kept coming, now gushing from his mouth.

“I took it! Akaboshi’s stomach! I took it!” jeered the old man, tenderly rubbing Bisco’s glowing organ against his cheek.

At that moment, Bisco finally understood why his body was racked with pain and just what grisly fate had befallen the bandits in their hideout.

“You bastard…! That’s mine, give it back!”

The old man only grinned eerily, raised Bisco’s stomach high above his head, and opened his mouth wide as if to devour it.

Just then, an arrow flew in like a gale and pierced the man’s throat.

“…?! Gblh!”

Once again, the man twisted like a snake and avoided the successive arrows, yanking out the arrow from his neck without a second thought. In his eyes was reflected the blue-haired Mushroom Keeper.

“What have you done to Bisco?!” Milo cried.

As the numbing poison seeped into his throat, the old man decided to retreat and leaped off across the plains like a lightning bolt.

“Watch out, Milo!” yelled Bisco. “He’s not just some old dude!”

“I can see that!” Milo replied. His blue hair rippled like fire as he sprang into the air in pursuit of the old man and leveled his bow for the finishing blow. The arrow punctured the old man’s thigh just as he landed, and with a *Gaboom!* a blue mushroom burst out of the flesh.

“Nneeeeee!!”

“Next, it’ll be your head! Now, tell me! What did you do to Bisco!”

Clutching his leg in pain, the old man wailed and cried as Milo pulled his bow tighter. Eventually, in a husky voice, he began to laugh.

“Heh. Hee-hee. Hee-hee-hee-hee! Akaboshi… It’s real…”

He took something from Bisco’s body! Is he even human?!

As Milo held his bow tight, beads of sweat danced on his forehead. The old man's arm had been torn off at the shoulder, his neck pierced, and his body was riddled with rust. Yet he kept moving. Milo wanted to finish him off, but he still held the glowing sphere in his hands. Milo couldn't fire for fear of damaging it.

"The Man-Eater… Akaboshi… The Rust-Eater… The Rust-Eater's…stomach…"

"What…?!"

At the word *Rust-Eater*, Milo faltered. The old man seized that opportunity. He raised the arrow he had pulled from his throat and hurled it toward Bisco.

"No!!" cried Milo, and he darted back and threw himself in the arrow's path, taking it in the shoulder. The surprising force behind the projectile was enough to knock him off his feet and send him skimming across the ground like a stone on a lake. Even as he slid, he drew his bow and loosed an arrow back toward the old man's head.

Swsh!

The old man swung his hand like a knife, slicing off his mushroom-riddled leg and springing into the air with the other, dodging Milo's arrow by a hair's breadth. Then he let out ringing laughter before dropping off the hill to the rooftops of the town below, leaping across them toward the towers.

"W-what's up with him…?"

"Milo, hurry! Use the mushroom vaccine!"

Milo swiftly produced a syringe from the pouch at his waist and stabbed it into his own shoulder where the arrow had struck. After a few ragged breaths, he suddenly remembered Bisco's state and ran over to his partner, who was clutching his gut and staring out into the night.

"Bisco! What happened to you?! T-there's so much blood!" Milo's voice trembled as he injected the Rust-Eater cure into Bisco's neck.

"Ghh… Ghah… I feel a lot better after coughin' up all that blood. That old guy…he made off with my stomach."

"Your stomach…? Bisco, what are you talking about?!"

"See for yourself. You're the doctor," said Bisco, rolling up his clothes to show

Milo his wound. His rippling abdominal muscles had been torn open, creating a fist-sized hole in his stomach. By now the bleeding had stopped, caking the rim in a solid clot of blood and rust, but the organ that should have been inside was completely gone.

“Th-that’s… That’s impossible!” Milo cried. It was exactly the same as with the bandits he’d discovered at the base.

“How does it look?” asked Bisco. “Though I guess I know the answer to that.”

“Your stomach’s gone! How… How did it happen so quickly?”

“Oh, what a shame. I’d finally got some solid grub in there, too.”

“This isn’t the time for jokes, Bisco! How are you still okay?!”

“It’s the Rust-Eater. That’s what’s keepin’ me alive. That injection just now awakened it.”

Bisco was right. After Milo’s injection, golden sparks flew from his body, bathing the surroundings in a luminous glow. His hair shone and flickered as the color gradually returned to his face. Inside his stomach cavity, the spores latched on to the pipes and veins, seemingly attempting to re-create the missing organ, but the swirling rust particles prevented them from doing so. Instead, the Rust-Eater spores clumped together and began breaking down the rust a little at a time.

“It’s tryin’ to regenerate my stomach,” Bisco said. “I’ll see if I can help it along.”

“Wh-what?! Bisco, what are you doing?”

“Grrrrh…!”

Bisco strained and strained, focusing on his stomach. Just then, the golden spores inside his belly surged and began tearing the rust apart.

“Wh-whaaat?! Bisco, you can birth new spores?!”

“Don’t make it sound like I’m some kinda weird mushroom man. Just watch.”

As the glittering spores engulfed him, Bisco relaxed. Just then…

Crack!

“Gwah! Wh-what?!”

There was a violent ripping sound as the magnificent stem of a Rust-Eater burst through Bisco’s back. It was followed by a second and a third. From his arms, his sides, all across his body, the Rust-Eaters blossomed, tearing holes in his flesh.

“Bisco! Stop them! Stop the spores!”

“Rrrgh! I’m tryin’! Shut up!”

Milo swiftly retrieved the mushroom vaccine from his pouch and thrust it into Bisco’s neck. As the liquid flowed into Bisco’s veins, the Rust-Eater spores slowed down and gradually settled.

“Whoa… That was crazy. I mean, some tiny mushrooms have been poppin’ up here and there, but *that’s* never happened before.”

“…Maybe it ate so much rust, it went amok…!” Milo racked his brains trying to think of how to help Bisco as he pruned off the mushrooms with his knife. Sweat dripped from his brow. “I never expected your regeneration to backfire like that. If we don’t do something about it…” Milo’s pale face grew even whiter as he muttered to himself.

“Hey, quit your mumblin’ and explain it so I can understand,” said Bisco. “It ain’t gonna reflect well on the world-renowned Dr. Panda if he’s more panicked than his patient!”

Bisco seemed unflappable while Milo drew closer and, in a shaky voice, tried to put his thoughts together.

“Bisco,” he began. “Right now, you have no stomach. Instead, there’s just a concentrated lump of rust, which the Rust-Eater spores are feeding on.”

“Then what’s the problem?” asked Bisco. “Just leave it. The Rust-Eater’ll take care of it all, won’t it?”

“That’s exactly the problem!” Milo cried as he shook Bisco by the shoulders. “You can’t withstand that! The mushrooms will destroy you from the inside out! …I’ve never seen a case like this. What’ll I do…? I know! I’ll give you my stomach!”

“Where’d that come from?! We just have to get mine back off the guy who stole it, right?”

Bisco motioned with his chin to the distant lights of the Six Towers. Milo looked out to see a single dark shadow engaging with several Izumo warrior monks and advancing in the direction of the gate.

“He’s still going…!”

“You don’t suppose *he’s* the Immortal Monk we’re after, do you? After all, he didn’t seem to care much that we chopped his arm and leg off. Also, look what he did to me…” Bisco patted the spores that formed a thin film over the hole in his abdomen. “It ain’t just any rust that can withstand the Rust-Eater like this. Must be some crazy monk magic. Maybe if we put the screws to him, he’ll be able to tell us how to fix my immortality, too.”

“Maybe so, Bisco, but…how can you stay so calm?! The Rust and the Rust-Eater are still fighting inside you! Another mushroom could come bursting out of you at any moment! Don’t you have any sense of danger?”

“Of course I do. You’re just way too panicky. The enemy wants us to panic. That way, it’s obvious what we’ll do. If we get too worked up about it, we’ll be walkin’ right into their trap.”

The logic was sound. Still, Milo couldn’t help but be struck with wonder at Bisco’s steely determination. He never cried, never lamented his fate, never accepted death as the only option. His concentration was unbreakable, like a tightly pulled bowstring, and his aim absolute, like an arrow in flight. It was that willpower, more than anything else, that was his greatest weapon. More than his muscles. More than even his bow.

“If you’ve calmed down now, then let’s hear it. You’re the one who comes up with the plans,” he said.

“…Right. Okay, we’ll go after him! The checkpoint looks to be in chaos right now, so we should be able to slip in undetected!”

“Great. So we goin’ right through the front door?”

“No way! We still have to avoid standing out; that’s the most important thing! Come here, Actagawa!”

At his master's voice, Actagawa scuttled over, and Milo whispered something in his ear. The giant crab bubbled in response before striking his huge claws against the ground as if in preparation for something.

"Milo…don't tell me…"

"Yeah. He's going to throw us. It'll be obvious there are Mushroom Keepers around if we use the King Trumpet."

"…Don't be stupid! The Tornado Throw is Jabi's thing! Without him here to guide Actagawa, who knows where we'll end up!"

"If you keep thinking like that, you'll never get anywhere with Actagawa."

Bisco was stunned. Milo had shut him up. Just then, Actagawa grabbed the two of them in his enormous pincers and lifted them high overhead.

"All right, Actagawa! Aim for that bridge over there!" Milo said.

"Come on! This is way crazier than anythin' I said! Let's come up with something else! This is gonna make my stomach turn!"

"What stomach?"

"Listen, you—"

Bisco was unable to complete his comeback before Actagawa launched himself up into the sky with incredible force. Then, like a typhoon, he spun around wildly, and with all his might, he released his masters, flinging them far out over the rooftops. Through the night sky of Izumo flew a twin pair of streaks, red and blue, heading directly for the center of the pentagonal region containing the Six Towers.

3

The Six Towers of Izumo were isolated from the outside world by steep cliffs and an imposing black pentagonal wall. The only opening on this wall was found on the south side, from where it was possible to glimpse the interior. Inside, the area was divided among the Six Towers that were the town's namesake, alongside a complicated interconnection of stairs and walkways that gave the whole place the feel of an oversized ants' nest.

Suddenly, toward that tear in the south wall, a pair of dark shadows came tumbling out of the sky at a stupendous speed.

"Bisco, parachute!" cried Milo, unstrapping his cloak and tossing it into the wind.

"*Now* you tell me!"

Bisco aimed his anchor arrow and fired. The arrow pierced the cloak and, with a *Gaboom!* exploded into a white, cloth-like substance that caught the air and expanded into a huge dome. He caught Milo as he slowed, and the two of them drifted softly toward the towers, rolling as they hit the ground.

"It worked!" exclaimed Milo. "The balloonshrooms and steelspider silk! They were really hard to combine!"

"Don't use us as your guinea pigs! Ugh…get outta the way… My stomach…!"

Milo gave his partner some space and set about removing the parachute with his knife. Just then…

"Bisco."

At his partner's whisper, Bisco turned to look. What he saw entranced him.

The pair looked up at a giant paper screen set deeply into the central tower. On it, the thin silhouette of a person stared back down at them. He was lit from behind, his expression too shadowy to make out, and yet something about the

figure seemed calm and composed, even amused.

“Rin-kel-shad. Rin-kel-snew…”

Above the sound of the screen shaking, Bisco could hear something else, the whisper of a verse. From the voice, Bisco could tell it was the same old man from before, but something was wrong.

“That old fart…! Look at him laughing at us from up there! He was about ready to keel over and die just a few minutes ago!”

“Something’s not right, Bisco. Look at his arms and legs!”

As Milo pointed out, the old man’s missing limbs had completely grown back. Not only that, but his hunch had straightened, and he seemed much livelier than before.

“It is proof of my divinity,” he croaked, interrupting the pair’s thoughts.

“What…?”

“Proof of my virtuous deeds. As I lay dying, heaven saw fit to lead you to me. The power of the Rust-Eater will allow me to stand once more at the apex of the Six Towers! Yea, God has granted me another chance! Heaven wants me back!”

“Says who?!” cried Milo. The dark shadow laughed. He kicked aside the screen and leaped down nearly twenty meters to ground level. Then, wrenching free one of the many pipes that ran between the towers, he twirled it like a spear and faced off against the two.

“You seem quite lively for a man without a stomach, Akaboshi,” the old man taunted. “But no longer will you taste even a single drop of gruel. I had intended to leave you to die, but…”

The neon lights illuminated the old man’s face. He grinned a wide grin that exposed all his teeth, and his beady eyes glittered in the darkness. Even his limbs and torso, which used to be nothing more than skin and bones, had gained a little muscle.

“I see the spark of divinity in that Rust-Eater stomach of yours. Perhaps you are more than a meddling little imp after all. I had better dispose of you here.”

“…You talk a lot of shit for a scrawny old man,” Bisco retorted with a glare, baring his white fangs. “I took pity on you ’cause I thought you were dyin’, but if you wanna fight, I’m down. I’ll wipe the floor with you.”

“Hee-hee-hee. Such disrespect, Akaboshi. But I’ll overlook it. I’m in a good mood.”

“Well, you won’t be for long!”

The old man’s taunts spurred Bisco into action, and he reached for his bow, but before he could even draw it…

Splat!

The old man took the pipe he was wielding and plunged it, unbelievably, into his own stomach.

“Wh-what is he doing…?!”

As Milo reached for his bow, too, the old man’s peculiar behavior made him stop in his tracks. Suddenly, Bisco fell into his arms, shaking and coughing up globs of blood.

“Bisco!!”

“You piece of shit, that’s *my* stomach…!”

“Keh…heh-heh…ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

The old man cackled as a warm golden light spilled out of his belly. As he twisted the pipe free, Bisco cried out in pain again and coughed up even more blood.

“You bastard…!” Milo screamed as he landed an arrow in the old man’s shoulder. The old man stopped, frowned, and pulled the arrow free with his other hand, before tossing it away. Mushrooms began growing all along his arm.

“What a strange art,” the old man mused, stroking his beard as the fungi devoured his arm. You’re no mewling stray. I shall have to kill you at once.”

“Bisco, can you fire?! We need the King Trumpet and the Rust-Eater!”

“Got it!”

The two Mushroom Keepers readied their bows and faced the old man. The smile had now disappeared from his face.

Just then, a voice cried, “Over here, Kelshinha!” and out of nowhere flew several small, talisman-like slips of paper with razor-sharp edges that lodged into the old man’s head and body, freezing him.

“Nrgh?!”

Two figures dropped from the tall tower, clad in felt robes, and landed with nary a sound. The larger of the two unleashed a rapid-fire barrage of the knifelike tags, as the old man batted them all aside with only one hand.

“Master! I’m going to blow them up, get down!” said the smaller one.

“Got it, Amli!”

“Skerva-shad-snew!”

In response to her shout, the tags glowed red, and then, *Boom!* The old man’s top half was bent backward by the explosion, but his feet stayed planted firmly on the ground.

“Hmm. The swine,” he said. “I didn’t think you’d still be alive.”

The explosion tore off half his face, exposing the bone and brains within. Yet the old man seemed unbothered as he turned to face his new opponents.

“Did you crawl back up from Hell itself?” asked the tall figure. “There is no longer a place for you here at the Six Towers.”

“Heh-heh. And you mean to stop me? You two remnants cannot hope to stand against my power.”

“*We’re* the remnants? You’re the coward who fell from grace.”

Kelshinha easily dodged the next barrage of knifelike amulets, but an arrow from the side very nearly pierced him. Sweating, he turned to see the red-haired Mushroom Keeper loading another arrow.

“*Rin-kel-shad…* Akaboshi, you’re a man to beware. The time is not right.”

The old man glared at his missing arm before twisting like a snake to avoid the next arrow. Leaping between the buildings, he disappeared into the upper levels.

“Son of a bitch!”

Bisco aimed his bow high overhead, and as if waiting for that exact moment, a glittering Rust-Eater stalk burst through his back. The force knocked him to the ground, and Bisco wailed through clenched teeth in pain.

“Aaah! Bisco!!” Milo called out.

“God…dammit…! These damn mushrooms…!”

“It’s the Rust-Eater again! Hold still, Bisco! I’ll cut it off!!”

As Milo lopped off the golden mushroom, the larger of the two figures landed beside him. From her cloak, she took out a thick bundle of paper amulets and launched them in the direction the old man went.

“Skerva-krik-shad!”

The talismans all froze in the air, forming a long staircase. Just then, a group of masked men gathered around her.

“Kelshinha has returned. You know the plan. Go!”

At the taller figure’s command, the masked subordinates all disappeared up the staircase in pursuit of the old man. Just as she, too, was about to follow, the smaller of the two landed beside her and whispered something to her. Her eyes were on the two Mushroom Keepers, and there was a sense of pity and unease in her voice.

“…It seems Kelshinha took his stomach. He will become a walking corpse ere long.”

“I see. I must follow Kelshinha. Can I trust you to finish him off? I know it’s not a pretty job, but…”

“…It’s not my first time.”

The larger one took off up the paper staircase, while the other turned toward Bisco. Her pretty face peeked out from beneath the hood of her robe, and her

lips were tightly pursed. With brisk steps, she made her way over to the two Mushroom Keepers…whereupon she stopped and frowned.

Usually, a human in this state would be either half crazed with panic or already dead.

Bisco, however, was neither.

“I removed the Rust-Eater, Bisco! Does it hurt anywhere?”

“Argh! My stomach…!”

“Your stomach hurts? Hold on, I’ll grab the syringe…”

“I’m so damn hungry…! That’s why I can’t fight…!”

“You what?!” cried Milo in hysterics.

The small figure’s eyes went wide in shock. The pair’s conversation was ridiculous enough, but on top of that, the red-haired man still seemed full of life. His eyes blazed like stars as he wiped the sweat from his brow.

…How is he still alive? His stomach has indeed been taken, has it not…?

“Please excuse me.”

“Mmmeh?!”

Before Milo could even turn around to face her, the small figure swept over to Bisco and gazed at the hole in his belly.

“…It’s gone. I knew it. But…what is this? Inside, it’s like the sun…”

“Wh-who the hell are you…?”

“It is I who should be asking that. What manner of creature are you?” asked the small figure, lowering her hood. Her face was struck with puzzlement.

She was young, perhaps thirteen or fourteen, with clear white skin and a cherubic face adorned with silver curls. Her robe was covered in strange markings—characters, a spell of some sort? Her clothing exposed her smooth stomach, and her hakama was tied up with a simple belt, with none of the fiercely individualistic eccentricities such as a religious figure might usually wear.

But there was one strange blemish that marred her otherwise perfect appearance. Her left eye was made of glass. Not only that, but it was held permanently open by four thin belts that extended from her eyelids in a cross. That green eye, totally motionless even as her violet right eye darted around, created a very strange impression.

“Um… He’s Bisco Akaboshi, and I’m Milo! Milo Nekoyanagi. Do…do you know something about that elderly gentleman from before? He took Bisco’s stomach!”

“I know that!” she shot back. “That’s the whole reason I’m… No. I must deal with this first. I’ve never seen a doctor who could bring the dead back to life…”

The girl took out a paper tag from her pocket and held it in front of her face, muttering a spell. The paper began to flutter in an unseen wind and flew toward Bisco’s stomach, where it stuck.

“Wh-what on earth was that? Can everyone here use magic?” asked Milo.

“You earthly folk are very quaint. This is nothing more than a bandage. You will not last another twelve hours. We must get you to Master at once. Mr.… Milo, sir, was it? It seems you are still healthy. You must carry Mr. Bisco and come with me.”

“Th-thank you so much! You’re a lifesaver, Miss…”

“Amlini. My name is Amli Amlini.” Amli did a somersault and curtsied, pinching the hem of her hakama like a dress. “I deeply apologize for the inconvenience. I would have liked to end your suffering immediately, but it seems you may yet be saved.”

Turning around, she took off at top speed across the rooftops. Milo panicked and raised the immobile Bisco onto his shoulders before following after her.

“Hey!” Bisco whispered to his partner. “You sure we can trust her? She seems like a psycho to me.”

“We have to!” replied Milo. “What else can we do?”

And so, stepping across the telegraph lines that spanned from building to building, the pair flew deeper and deeper into that strange land of neon lights

and unfamiliar faiths.

They were probably around five stories up by now. Milo carried Bisco on his back, as Amli led them across an old, beaten-up walkway that jutted out from one of the towers and had no guardrail.

“Oh, please don’t touch the goldfish lanterns. They may not look it, but they are, in fact, divine beasts, you know.”

“Th-they are? Oh, I…I’m sorry!”

Milo pulled his hand away from one of the fish. They were rather large and drifted through the air like paper lanterns.

“Heaven would strike you down most swiftly if you were to end up hurting one. More than that, though, they are the only source of light around here, so please do not scare them away.”

“Th-this walkway looks like it’s going to collapse, light or no light. Aren’t you worried, Amli?”

“I was born here. I could navigate these walkways blindfolded if I had to. Everyone could. It’s only about once every three days that somebody falls off.”

Milo didn’t look too impressed. Meanwhile, Amli seemed quite excited about the two outsiders, and she spun around to face them, her silver hair bobbing.

“I’m quite surprised, though, that you were able to land a hit on Kelshinha,” she said, smiling sweetly. Her glass eye gleamed. “I’ve heard of you two. Akaboshi and Nekoyanagi, the Man-Eating Mushroom Keepers. To be honest, I despise mundane matters…but the power of the Mushroom Keeper arts is no lie. Take care, though. Here, at the Six Towers of Izumo, you must cast aside what you think you know about this world. If you have any questions, I will answer.”

Before Milo could respond, Bisco yelled, “Who the hell are you? Let’s start

there. How come you can use all these crazy powers when you're just a kid?"

"Like I said, my name is Amli… Oh, you want to know what I do here?" A cheery smile crossed the girl's pretty face. "I may not look like much, but I'm a healer, along with my master. Our specialty is in dispelling curses and mantras. You were lucky we happened to be passing by. If we had not saved you, your insides would have been completely consumed by rust, Mr. Bisco, sir."

"D-dispelling…?"

"Can you fix him, Amli? I'm a doctor, myself, but to be totally honest, I've never seen anything like what's happening to Bisco. I'm not sure what to do. Please, Amli," he begged, "there's no one else I can turn to."

Amli brought her hand to her chin, pondering as she walked. "Please watch your step," she said as she hopped over a gap in the walkway. Looking down, Milo could see they were already so high up that a fall would mean certain death. Precisely how high was hard to say, as the ground below was shrouded in darkness.

"I cannot say for sure," she said, answering Milo's question at last. "He is the first human ever to survive having their stomach stolen by Kelshinha… I must ask my master for guidance."

"Kelshinha. Is that the name of that old dude?" asked Bisco.

"We are here," said Amli, ignoring him and slipping into a back alley. There, in neon writing, were the words Amrit Healing. Amli stopped and twirled on the spot for no reason. "Master can tell you more about Kelshinha, but our priority right now is your stomach, Mr. Bisco, sir… I suppose you must be hungry, are you not?"

At Amli's words, Bisco remembered his hunger pangs, and he rubbed his belly, groaning. Amli giggled and led the two of them inside. As she shut the creaking door behind her, she muttered a spell, and in place of a lock, a slip of paper glued itself to the frame and held it shut.

Inside was a place that looked like a cross between a doctor's clinic, a research laboratory, and a Buddhist temple. Bonecoal lamps littered the room, lighting up the gloomy interior. There were shelves packed with books written

in various languages, cages wherein strange creatures writhed, and jars containing what appeared to be eyeballs suspended in a mysterious liquid.

“Oh, Amli. You back?” came a voice from within.

“I am, Master. Erm, in fact…”

“I know. I watched you climb. Dear me, what a rare thing indeed.”

The person Amli called her master stepped out of the shadows. She was a tall woman, with a cloth tied around her chest but the rest of her muscular upper body left bare. Across her skin was tattooed a *mandala*, an arrangement of circles representing the path to enlightenment, and in each of her ears she wore a large, hoop-shaped earring.

Her blond hair looked tough as needles and was tied up behind her in a long braid. She was clearly strong, but the look on her face as she stood before the two Mushroom Keepers was gentle and kind. No doubt it was she whom the pair had seen facing off against Kelshinha earlier.

“H-hello,” Milo began meekly. “We’re—”

“I know who you are. Or at the very least, I know the two of you together are worth five million sols. My name is Raskeni Jau… Call me Raskeni.”

As the four of them exchanged greetings, the two Mushroom Keepers looked at each other uneasily. Raskeni laughed. “Don’t look at me like that. I know, I know, this place is a bit of a mess.” She swept a table free of clutter. “I’m afraid all our beds are full at the moment, so lie down here. Let’s take a look at you…”

Bisco grimaced in hunger and glanced at Milo. It was clear he was unwilling to let his guard down around these two women after their unfavorable first impression. Milo understood how he felt—painfully so—but the pair had no other option. Milo gave a tentative nod, and Bisco laid himself out on the table.

“…”

Raskeni peered into the hole in Bisco’s abdomen, then stood back up and pondered, biting her thumb.

“…Well?” asked Milo. “Did you figure anything out?”

“He’s dead.”

“Whaaat?!”

“Ha-ha, sorry. I guess I should say he *ought* to be dead. Normally when Kelshinha steals an organ, the rust contaminates the surrounding body and kills them. That’s if they even survive having their insides ripped out in the first place. However, in this case, there seems to be some sort of fungus keeping the rust from spreading.”

“That’s the Rust-Eater. It’s a mushroom that feeds off the rust…,” said Milo.

“A mushroom that feeds off the rust…?” Amli repeated. “But why is that inside a person’s body…?”

“Let’s hear him out,” said Raskeni. “The fact remains that, one way or another, the gentleman lives. Our good friend Milo here seems to be telling the truth.”

Milo heaved a sigh of relief at her words and continued.

“It’s true that the Rust-Eater saved Bisco’s life. But now it’s putting him in danger. The rust keeps coming out of nowhere, and the Rust-Eater keeps feeding on it relentlessly. And while this is going on…”

“…The big mushrooms keep going *Boom!*” answered Amli gleefully. At Milo’s cold stare, Raskeni chided her and turned back to Milo.

“Okay, I understand now. First things first—we need to remove the rust that’s building up inside him… Amli?”

“Yes, Master?” answered the young girl.

“We need the rust-extracting mantra. Can you handle it?”

“It’s been a while since I last used it, but I can give it a try.”

Amli flung off her robe, stripping down to only the bandages around her chest, and cracked her neck. Then she leaped into the air, landing on the table above Bisco. Bringing her face close to his, she stared deeply into his emerald eyes.

Bisco had been mostly keeping quiet until now, putting up with the discomfort, but at Amli’s invasion of his personal space, he suddenly yelled, “Whoa, what the hell are you doing?!”

“…You have such pretty eyes. Like gemstones…,” she whispered as her violet eye gazed, transfixed. “Mr. Bisco, sir. This is a dangerous procedure. I will do my utmost to keep you alive, of course, but…on the off chance…”

Amli seemed to pause there for a moment before her face broadened into a smile that sent a chill down Bisco’s spine.

“On the off chance I should fail, would it be okay for me to keep your eyes?”

“…I don’t mind,” Bisco replied. “But I should warn you, people always call me shortsighted.”

“Don’t humor her!” yelled Milo. “Forget it, I’ll do it myself!”

Amli flinched at Milo’s sudden advance when Raskeni called out, “Come on, Amli! Don’t scare the poor folks.” Then, to Milo, she added, “Sorry, that’s just a bad habit of hers.”

Amli pouted. Then she shook her head, and the glass eye fell from her socket and onto the floor. With her empty cavity, she stared into Bisco’s stomach hole.

“’Twas only a joke,” she said. “Please hold still, Mr. Bisco, sir…”

“Milo, what the hell are these freaks doin’ to me? Can I afford to just stay still?”

“Raskeni, please explain!” yelled Milo.

Raskeni placed a hand on Milo’s shoulder and lowered her voice slightly. “We’re extracting the rust, just like I said. This is a special technique only Amli can perform. If you still want to back out, then go ahead, but you must have come here for a reason. Don’t you want us to help your partner?”

Amli, in contrast, paid no heed to the boys’ concern. With her empty socket plunged deeply into the hole, she began muttering under her breath.

“…Ule…shad-amrit. Ule-amrit-shad…snew.”

“Get off! What the hell are you d—?!”

But as Bisco tried to sit up, he felt strange, as if something inside him was trying to get out. The unpleasantness made him hurl up more blood, and Milo ran over to his side.

Shllllorp!

There came a sound oddly similar to that of a weed being pulled from the ground, roots and all, as the rust rose out of Bisco's body and into Amli's eye socket in one long stream, like a waterfall in reverse. The two boys could only stare in shock, dumbfounded. It must have lasted about twenty seconds in total before the stream finally slowed, and at last only a few vestiges still lay scattered about Bisco's abdomen, which Amli sucked up like a dog licking its bowl clean. At the end of it all, she appeared quite dizzy, and she slapped her cheeks a few times and let out a burp.

"Wh-whoa… What was that…?" asked Milo with wonder.

"She sucked up the rust…into her own head?!"

The two simply stared with mouths agape at the scene they had just witnessed.

"That was Amli's Mantra of Rust Extraction. I suppose it must be quite the show for a pair of outsiders not familiar with our methods."

Milo and Bisco had heard tales of the magic the practitioners at the Six Towers commanded, but to see it firsthand was another matter entirely. It was a bizarre, inexplicable art.

"…Hey, Milo. Why can't *you* do that? Didn't you go to school?"

"Th-they don't teach anything like that at school! That's impossible…! It's basically a miracle!"

"…That sure was a lot of rust," Raskeni mused as she fished out a new glass eye from one of the many jars. Then she noticed her student was acting strange and rushed over to her side. "…Amli, what's wrong? Does it hurt?"

Her pale cheeks were completely flushed, and every so often she would tremble, hugging her shoulders and panting with a strange look on her face.

"Hahh… Hahh…! Th-that was…so *good*…!"

"Was it, now? Perhaps the Rust-Eater spores are having an effect on you. I think you should rest…"

"Mr. Bisco, sir…" Amli squatted on all fours over her immobile patient,

running her finger along the edge of his wound. “What…powerful life force you possess. It burns…no, blazes like the sun. I was almost burned to a crisp…”

“Gwaaagh! Stop! Don’t put your finger in… Gaaagh!”

Amli’s youthful face was flushed with passion, and she ignored Bisco’s screams as if they were little more than background music. She stroked her fingers up his muscles and caressed his chin before Milo cut in and yelled, “Hooold it, hold it! You’re done, aren’t you? Get off Bisco already! I’ll take it from here!”

“Don’t worry, this is part of his treatment…”

“What a lie! Get off Bisco! H-he’s engaged, you know!”

“…Oh, is that right? I apologize. It was just so amazing…”

Amli looked disappointed as she clambered off Bisco. She staggered, as though the weight of her head was too much for her, before refusing the eye in her master’s hand and picking out a green one from a jar on a shelf. She placed it in her socket and smiled, her fingers to her lips.

“What do you mean, I’m engaged?” asked Bisco.

“I had to say something… Hasn’t anything happened between you and Pawoo?”

“With that gorilla? You mean like a banana-eating contest?”

“I wouldn’t talk behind her back if I were you. She can hear everything we’re saying through the listening device in my ring.”

“What?!”

“Just kidding.”

“You piece of shit! You’ll really look like a panda when I’m done with you!”

As strange and unsettling as the process had been, Bisco did indeed seem to be back to his usual self, fresh-faced and cracking jokes. Milo breathed a sigh of relief while Amli gave the pair a rather jealous look and whispered into Raskeni’s ear.

“Master, I removed all the rust I could, but the roots are still in there. His stomach cavity will be infected again soon enough.”

Raskeni nodded in understanding and peered into Bisco’s belly once more. Inside, the golden spores seemed to have clumped together to form some sort of small organ where Bisco’s stomach had once been.

“Is it trying to re-create it? Just what sort of superhuman is he…? …But this is no good; soon the rust will come back and cause it to collapse.”

She pondered for a moment, putting her thoughts in order, then turned to the two boys and spoke.

“That was the easy part… You should be able to eat now, from what I can see, so let’s get some food in you as soon as possible.”

Bisco and Milo were led up to the second floor into Amli’s room and seated around a dining table. All around them were jars of eyes, an unimaginable number. Amli twirled merrily as she filled the boys’ bowls with a thick red soup, like blood.

“I’m so glad, Master. It’s been so long since we’ve had guests.”

“I just wish we could offer you something more than this,” said Raskeni, “but that stomach of yours doesn’t look like it’ll last very long. Gruel is probably all you can tolerate for now. Just bear with it. It shouldn’t taste too bad, at least.”

Milo peered into Bisco’s bowl. Floating in the thick crimson sludge, Milo could make out scraps of an unknown meat and mushy grains of rice. That wasn’t so bad by itself, but it didn’t just look like blood; it smelled like it, too, as Milo could attest from his time at Panda Clinic.

Bisco, however, wolfed down the food, desperate to get any sort of nutrition into himself, as Milo watched, his eye twitching.

“Oh, look, Master! Mr. Bisco *loves* my food! Won’t you have some, too, Mr. Milo, sir? This here’s kidney stew…”

“O-oh? And what kind of kidney, may I ask?”

“…? A healthy one, of course! It helps digestion and gives you strength!”

Milo suddenly found he had no appetite, so he waited until Amli had left, then he passed his bowl to Bisco. She returned with a bunch of charts, which Raskeni spread out on the tabletop and studied carefully.

“So you two know that old guy, huh?” said Bisco. After polishing off Milo’s portion, he finally looked himself again. “We heard he can give and take away immortality. Do you guys have crazy magic powers like that, too?”

“…You heal scary fast, you know. Oh well, I suppose that’s better for us.” Raskeni asked Amli to clear away the bowls, at which the young girl puffed up her cheeks reluctantly but did as her master had requested. As she went downstairs, Raskeni addressed the others. “No offense, but there’s a lot going on that you two don’t understand. It’s going to take a while to bring you up to speed. I hope you don’t mind.”

“You tryin’ to say I don’t have the patience to sit through a long explanation?” Bisco scowled.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Is that not the case?”

“Grr…”

“Hee-hee-hee…”

Raskeni narrowed her bewitching eyes ever so slightly and scrutinized the two young men for a moment…before opening her lips and beginning to speak.

“Let me introduce myself again. My name’s Raskeni, and I’m one of the six disciples who first fought Kelshinha the Immortal and expelled him from the Towers. I’ve since withdrawn from the public eye, and now I make it my mission to keep the peace around here.”

“Kelshinha the Immortal…”

“That’s right. It was once he who controlled the Six Towers and ruled over the Rust Speakers. But his ambition was too great, and so we six conspired to take him down. We banished him from the Six Towers and restored peace to the land…until now, that is.”

Bisco and Milo recalled the stories they’d heard from the caravan elder and the rest stop landlady, and they nodded to each other.

“S-so then… Raskeni, you’re worried because Kelshinha is back after you left him for dead?”

“That’s the long and short of it, I guess. It’s obvious he wants revenge against the six who betrayed him. If he stands atop the Six Towers once more, the peace we’ve worked so hard to obtain will be gone, and we’ll go back to the Dark Ages.”

As Milo trembled in a cold sweat at the disaster the two of them had awakened, Bisco folded his arms defiantly. “Then it’s simple,” he said. “All we gotta do is take down that old bastard, right?”

Raskeni paused for a moment and nodded. “Well, that’s certainly one way of putting it, but yes.”

“Perfect. He has something of mine anyway, and until I get it back, I can’t have any tasty grub. I’ll make him regret messing with me.”

“…While I appreciate your support, there’s something I must ask. Why were you looking for Kelshinha in the first place? I can’t imagine there’s much here in Izumo that would interest a couple of Mushroom Keepers like yourselves.”

While Raskeni was talking, Bisco got up from his seat and wandered over to the cylindrical pot containing the gruel. Peering inside, he scraped the last remaining dregs from the bottom of the pot and scooped them into his bowl.

“You’ve seen for yourself what my body can do. We’re looking for a way to cure my immortality. We were thinking we’d nab that old man and force him to do it for us.”

“Cure…immortality? While all others here seek it? Ha-ha, how very noble of you…” Raskeni gave a mysterious chuckle, while Bisco glared at her. “…Oh, I’m sorry. I understand how you feel, but…”

“Come on, Bisco! Now’s not the time! We have to get your stomach back! We can deal with the immortality stuff afterward!”

“Calm down,” said Bisco, “I can eat, can’t I? It’s not like it’s going to kill me right away.”

“Actually, it is.” Raskeni laughed as the two boys argued. “It’s supposed to kill

you instantly. It takes about a day for the rust to consume one of your vital organs, so…I'd say you've got five days before the rust spreads to all of them."

""F-five days?!"" the two cried in shock.

"Crackkk!"

An enormous Rust-Eater mushroom shot through Bisco's neck.

"Aaarggghhh?!"

"Waaah! Bisco!"

As the two boys panicked, Raskeni raised her voice.

"Five days… And that's if the Rust-Eater doesn't kill you first."

"Th-then what are we waiting for?" said Milo. "Let's go capture Kelshinha at once!"

"These towers are complex. You will not be so lucky as to stumble upon him by chance. If you want to live, I suggest you follow my commands to the letter. Is that okay with you?"

"You want us to just shut up and do as you say, huh? Who do you think you are?"

"Leave it, Bisco! We'll cooperate. Does that mean you know where he is, Raskeni?"

Raskeni nodded and rose to her feet. She beckoned the others to come stand with her by the upstairs window. A gentle breeze drifted into the room, and outside, the pair could see the other five towers. At their base, they were a jumbled mess much like this one, but following Raskeni's finger to the upper reaches, they could see that the towers became much more refined and stately, and each tower was marked with its own distinctive color.

"It all began when the six of us defeated Kelshinha and gazed upon the source of his power: his five vital organs. Fearing his return, the other five each took an organ for themselves and withdrew to the tops of the five outer towers. That includes the Metal Tower, where we are now."

"So right now, Kelshinha's organs are stored at the five outer towers?"

“That’s right. We call them the Scriptures, and they are kept under heavy guard. Kelshinha will be seeking to take them back. If he regains his former power, he will be unstoppable. We must take the Scriptures for ourselves before that happens.”

“That’s too complicated!” said Bisco impatiently. “Why can’t we just go beat him up right now?”

“Because with the five Scriptures, Amli can also bring you back to full strength. It may be roundabout, but this is the fastest and surest way of beating him.”

Bisco stared out the window as he tore the mushroom from his neck. Raskeni pointed over to the neighboring tower. Its upper levels twinkled, the light bouncing off the highly reflective surface.

“You two should head to the Water Tower and—”

Raskeni’s words were interrupted as all of a sudden the top of the tower she was pointing at exploded into a torrent of rushing water, breaking off the ornaments of the temple and sending glittering rubble plummeting into the darkness below. The three could only watch in shock as the blue tower collapsed before their very eyes, sending a spray of water that misted up the windowpane.

“…What Water Tower?” asked Bisco.

“Shush. My messenger is returning.”

Raskeni frowned. As she placed her hand to the window, a large body came crashing through the glass and rolled along the floor.

“What happened?!” she yelled. “Are you the only one left? What happened to Kelshinha?”

“Rgh… Boss…”

“You’re hurt…!”

Raskeni had no words for the man’s pitiable state, his body riddled with holes. The inside of his mask became stained with blood as he struggled to cough up the words.

“Kelshinha has…taken the Water Tower. He has…killed the leader of the Mercurials and laid waste…to the shrine. He has likely…already taken…the pancreas…by now…”

“I understand. Rest now. May your soul pass in peace.”

Raskeni’s face contorted in grief. As her long eyelashes trembled…

“Gruuuh!”

Suddenly, the masked man rose from the floor. Blood still streaming from his mouth, he grabbed Raskeni by the neck.

“…?! Damn—! Necro…mancy—!”

The paper tag fell from her fingers as the masked man tightened his grip and lifted her up off the floor. Without an ounce of restraint, her former subordinate tightened his grip on her throat.

“Gr! Agh…!!”

Just then, there was a *Gaboom!*, and a King Trumpet mushroom burst out sideways from an arrow in the wall, knocking the masked man off his feet and into a nearby bookshelf. The heavy shelf wobbled and collapsed on the man, sending a spray of pitch-black blood and scattering pages into the air.

“…Damn, he can control dead guys? These mantras really let you do anything,” said Bisco as he put away Jabi’s bow and cracked his neck. Milo rushed over to Raskeni and injected a lurkershroom concoction into her swollen throat.

“…*Cough, cough.* This technique is a high-level necromancy only Kelshinha can perform. I didn’t think he’d regain the ability so quickly…”

“I don’t know much about this guy,” said Bisco, “but even I could tell he was desperate. He’ll destroy everything in his path. If he has you backed into a corner, you’ve already lost.”

“You’re quite right,” said Raskeni. As Milo finished wrapping up her bandages with a “There, all done!” she gave a self-deprecating smile. When Amli rushed into the room from downstairs, concerned, Raskeni simply smiled at her student and turned to address the boys.

“I’m sorry. Looks like the Water Tower fell sooner than I expected. We’ll have to advance the schedule. We need to secure the other Scriptures before Kelshinha gets his hands on them.”

Bisco nodded. Raskeni glanced at him, then whispered only to Milo, “However, it’s not just me who’s to blame. Your friend’s stomach has given Kelshinha more power than I could have predicted. Without it, he would never have made it this far.”

5

The Six Towers of Izumo each represented one of Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, Water, and Rust. The upper reaches of the towers were reserved only for the most pious of monks, while the rabble lived and worked in the residential and commercial districts below. This clinic, Amrit Healing, was in the latter category.

Aside from the fact that the city's three-dimensional layout made it almost impossible to find anything, it wasn't so different from Imihama, with its curio shops selling questionable wares, pubs and bars, and even brothels. For a holy city, there was no shortage of earthly necessities.

This did not apply to the upper levels, however. There, the structure of the buildings was completely different from those below. In order to gain access, adherents of the six sects needed to identify themselves with branded marks containing their vows. The six upper districts were not all interconnected as below, either. Each tower stood alone, with no walkways between them, and security between the upper and the lower levels was even tighter than at the checkpoint at the bridge.

"The six of you banded together to defeat Kelshinha before, didn't you? Couldn't you do that again?" Milo asked Raskeni.

"If only things were so simple," she replied. "The sects have been at each other's throats now for as long as I can remember…and I have been in hiding for so long. They will never listen to what I say."

"Yeah, that makes sense. You're never gonna get a bunch of religious people to agree on anything anyway. We might as well just sneak in and nab these Scriptures, or whatever they're called, while they're not looking."

"That would be faster, I agree," said Amli, sitting across from the two boys. "But now that the Water Tower has fallen, the other towers will be on their guard. It will be impossible to sneak in. Besides, you might be strong, but right

now you're not half the man you used to be…so to speak. The point is, if we try to fight the other four sects, the Rust-Eater will tear you apart before we ever succeed."

"You hear that, Milo? We can't steal from 'em, and we can't fight 'em. We're screwed."

"Those aren't the only two options, you know. Let's hear what they have to say."

"There is one other, exceedingly simple method," said Amli. She turned to Raskeni sitting next to her, who nodded, before continuing. "You must join the sect as a believer. No matter how high the security, they will not turn away one of their own. All the sects are obliged to accept those who come seeking salvation. You may simply walk straight through the front door, curry favor, and gain an audience with the high priest."

The two stared back, astounded. Amli simply smiled and swung her legs. "Any priest who builds up enough virtue is brought before the high priest to be shown the inner mysteries. When that happens, the Scriptures are sure to be close by. That is when you must strike. Master?"

"Well…I guess that'll work," said Raskeni.

"Like hell it will!" yelled Bisco. "Us, become monks? Do we look like we've got a shred of virtue between us?"

"Speak for yourself," said Milo.

"Just give it a try," said Raskeni. "I think you'll find the sects aren't quite as pure as you're imagining. You just need your wits, and a bit of luck, and I'm sure you'll make it work." She finished writing a spell on her tag and stowed it in a pouch at her belt. "As for me, I'll join the others and go after Kelshinha. We don't know what he'll do to take the other Scriptures, but he'll definitely beat us there if we don't do something. We're counting on you. Get there before he does."

"And what if we don't have wits or luck? What happens then?"

"Then you die, I suppose." Raskeni smiled and met Bisco's fierce gaze. "But you do have them. I can see it in your eyes. You wouldn't have lasted this long if

you didn't."

And so, one hour later, the two boys presented themselves for inspection at the Metal Tower, the domain of the Gilded Elephants, at the border where the upper and the lower levels met. They dressed themselves in felt robes, hidden among a crowd of chanting believers, awaiting their initiation. Bisco scowled as he chewed on a dried shiitake mushroom, trying to keep his endless hunger at bay.

"Never thought I'd join up with the monks. Don't you dare tell Jabi about this, or I'll never live it down."

"Lighten up, Bisco. It might be good for you. Can't you feel your soul becoming cleaner already?"

"What you tryin' to say about my soul, huh?!"

Suddenly, their conversation was interrupted by what appeared to be a small child, wrapped up in robes like a matryoshka doll so that only one eye peeped out.

"It's a lovely thought," she said. "But I'm afraid this sect isn't going to make your soul any cleaner. Quite the opposite, I expect."

The child looked up at her puzzled entourage and beamed. Bisco grabbed the back of her robe, lifted her up off the ground, and sighed.

"…Why did she have to come along anyway?"

The matryoshka—or rather, Amli—spun as she hung from his grasp, her one eye darting around.

"Of course I must accompany you, Mr. Bisco, sir. The rust is once again building up in your stomach. I must extract it twice a day or you shall surely die."

"But it's dangerous!" pleaded Milo. "A young girl like you shouldn't be coming along on a spy mission like this!!"

"Well, I do know magic, you know. I can protect myself just fine, thank you very much." Amli pulled back her hood, showing Milo a devious smile beyond her years. "Or are you saying you can treat Mr. Bisco yourself with your meager

arts?”

“…Ngh!!”

Amli’s teasing sent the blood to his head. It was the monk doing the initiations who brought him back to reality.

“Yoo-hoo, next, please!”

Amli broke free of Bisco’s grip and waddled over to the initiator. There, she showed him a slip of paper of some sort, whereupon the man nodded and waved her through.

“You two,” he said as Bisco and Milo tried to pass, “come over here a moment.”

“Hey, we’re with her,” said Bisco. “Aren’t you going to let us through?”

“I’m afraid not. You’re the first young men we’ve had in a while. We must search you *thoroughly*.”

The two were lined up in front of the elevator leading to the upper levels and strip-searched by a group of monks wearing thick eyeshadow and lipstick.

“My, what defined muscles you have. And your face…look up for me, please. Oh…take a look at this one, darlings. What a handsome young man.”

“Oh my, what a nasty glare he has. That’s so sexy. Give me more, honey…”

“That’s not fair, ladies… I want to brand *him*, not this weed of a boy.”

Bisco and Milo simply seethed in silence at the monks’ exchange (who were all male, by the way). They only grunted a little when the branding iron was placed to their collarbones, imprinting their skin with the image of an elephant that served as the sect’s insignia.

“Ugh… this is worse than I thought. I hope it comes off…”

“We can just cut it off with a knife, no sweat.”

“I don’t have your body, Bisco!”

As the two whispered to each other, the monks proceeded to check their luggage.

“As I’m sure you already know if you read the notices we put up, our sect is home to *artisans*. You’re only allowed to bring your tools and any lucky charms.” The monk performing the inspection puffed on his pipe, blowing tobacco smoke. “So perhaps you’d like to explain this bow? Rather dangerous, I must say. We don’t like anything that might be used to start a fight.”

“It’s ceremonial,” said Bisco curtly. “It’s for good luck, as you said. The arrows, too. It ain’t dangerous. It’s just like a rabbit’s foot.”

“My, how convincing. What do you think, ladies?” The monk turned to his colleagues, and they all giggled. Their job must have been an uneventful one most of the time, because they seemed to be having great fun amusing themselves with Bisco.

“All right, we’ll let you keep them, as thanks to your mother for making you so cute. Take this tag. Tithes are on the tenth and twentieth of each month, and if you can’t pay, we’ll take your organs instead. That’s about it!”

Bisco and Milo were made to stamp reams of paperwork without even getting to look them over, until at last the monk gathered them all up and dumped them onto Milo. The one in charge spoke some sort of chant into a microphone on the wall, and the elevator doors opened, revealing an ornately decorated interior.

“Remember, if the road to Hell is paved with gold, then surely so is the road to Heaven. Make sure you earn your keep, ’mmkay?”

As the two boys were shoved into the elevator along with the already-waiting Amli, the doors closed on them like a guillotine blade. At last, the pair breathed a sigh of relief as the elevator rocked and began to rise, taking them up to the higher levels of the tower with a metallic clanking of machinery.

“Was that supposed to be an example of virtue?!” asked Milo, incredulous. “I expected them to at least try to hide their corruption!”

“The Metal Tower is a special case. The Gilded Elephants worship money above all things. Your position within the sect is determined simply by how large a tithe you can afford to pay.”

“And here I thought money was s’posed to be the root of all evil… Well, at

least we know what they're about. That's more than we can say for the other sects…"

Bisco's words were punctuated by an enormous *Clunk!* as the elevator came to a stop. The doors slowly opened, bathing the occupants in a dazzling light as bright as the midday sun.

"W-wow! Look at that!" Milo gasped as he squinted into the light. The two boys gazed upon streets literally paved with gold. The room was large enough to fit a small village, and the ceiling was so high above and decorated in such splendor that it was easy to forget there was a roof at all. Even the buildings themselves were painted gold.

Down the main street of the city, a troupe of masked performers donned a red lion-like costume and danced, as others played flutes and pounded drums. Onlookers clapped and chanted and tossed glittering coins into the street.

The shops facing the street were diverse. Some sold ritual items such as cloth and rakes, others were tattoo artists, and others still offered questionable items such as venomous insects for use in poisons. Even the most untrained eye could see the brutality with which they competed for control of the marketplace.

"So, Amli, if we need money to be virtuous, I guess we'd better start makin' some," said Bisco. "And we ain't got long. How can we get our hands on that kinda cash in one day?"

"How?" repeated Amli as she watched the elevator doors close behind her. "Why ever would you ask me? I know nothing of the ways of business."

"Whaaat?! Then why the hell are we here?! I thought you had a plan!"

"My plan was to leave that part to you. Come now, you must be able to think of something. I shall assist you in any way I can, of course."

She smiled. The two boys shared a concerned glance.

"What now, Bisco?" Milo asked. "I'm not exactly an entrepreneur myself…"

"Course you are. You had that clinic in Imihama, didn't you? We'll just start a new branch here. For profit, of course."

"That may have worked there, but here the people are wealthy. They have

access to clean water, sanitation, and they seem to have enough doctors already. You'll be a Rust-Eater man long before we see a single sol of profit."

"Ngh…"

Bisco rubbed his neck as he looked around at the stores, then peered up at the sky. His eyes went wide as though hitting upon something.

"What is it, Bisco? Did you have an idea?"

"…Well, if Jabi were here, he wouldn't like it, but we don't have much of a choice. Amli, go get us some furniture for a clinic. Milo, I need you to make up as many vaccines as you can. A lurkershroom and blue oyster blend should do it."

"O-okay! …But what for?"

"I'm gonna go take a walk. You'll get your patients soon enough."

"Next, please!"

"Hey, can the doc really fix me up? Been itchin' all over; I can't work like this."

"I see you've a case of fungal dermatitis. Fortunately, we still have vaccines in stock. They're two thousand sols each, if you would like one."

"T-two thousand sols?! You're crazy! That's way too expensive!"

"I'm afraid this is due to high demand. We can give it to the next customer if you'd prefer. Okay, next patient!"

"W-w-w-wait! Okay, okay! I'll pay; just get rid of the itch!"

The Six Towers branch of Panda Clinic had recently established itself, working out of an old abandoned hospital, and currently it seemed as if every tradesperson in the Metal Tower was here. They filled the waiting room, scratching themselves all over in agony.

Amli was sitting at reception, dressed in a nurse outfit, complete with cap, her bewitching smile utterly lost on the patients, who simply wished to be rid of their accursed itching as quickly as possible.

"Amli," called Milo from the next room, "we're out of vaccines! We'll have to close up shop while I prepare some more!"

Amli smiled and turned to the patients in the waiting room.

“I’m sorry, but it seems we have exhausted our stock. We will be back in business soon, so please sit tight and scratch yourselves.”

Shouts of “You kiddin’ me?” and “How long you gonna make us wait?!” filled the cramped waiting room, but Amli simply closed the shutter on the reception desk window and pulled down her surgical mask with delight.

“The clinic is a huge success! Truly, the combined might of the legendary Akaboshi and Nekoyanagi is a sight to behold! Once we finish tending to the rest of our patients, we shall easily have enough money for our audience with the high priest!”

“Yeah, looks like my plan worked. Well, Milo, impressed?”

“Of course I’m not impressed! I’m never doing this again, Bisco! I became a doctor to heal people, not make them sick!”

There was a new disease in town, a strange skin infection that turned the skin orange and caused unbearable itchiness, and word on the street was that the newly established Panda Clinic had the only cure.

That, of course, was because it was none other than Bisco himself who’d contaminated the air-conditioning system supporting the tower’s upper levels with tickleshrooms.

“Get that stick outta your ass. At Banryouji Temple, they always say that greed for money’ll make you break out in hives. An’ it’ll all be over in a couple days… Besides, remember it’s my *stomach* on the line here.”

“That’s the only reason I’m going along with this! I know there’s no other way; it’s just… You know I’m going against the foundation of what I believe in, right?! You could stand to look a little sorrier about it!”

Thud!

“…! Whaaa?!”

“…?!”

As Milo fiddled with the medicine mixer, a loud boom reached his ears. He spun around to see his partner with a moderately large Rust-Eater sticking out

of his side.

“Bisco!! Hold on, I’m coming…!”

“Oh, you mustn’t, Mr. Milo, sir. You must concentrate on preparing the vaccine.”

“But Amli! I’ve got to…!”

“Fret not. I shall attend to Mr. Bisco.”

Amli, still in her nurse outfit, tossed Milo a playful smile before turning and trotting over to where Bisco lay.

“I shall now extract the rust, Mr. Bisco, sir. Please turn over onto your back for me…”

“Whaaat?! You’re going to do that again?!” Bisco frowned.

“If I don’t, you shall die. Now, lie still…”

Pinning Bisco to the bed, Amli plucked the mushroom from his side and peered into the hole.

“…Tee-hee. I have been looking forward to this… *Won-amrit-shad-snew*…”

Amli began chanting her mantra, and the rust rose out of Bisco’s gut and into her socket.

“Grrreh! That feels disgusting!”

“…Mgh. Pfah.”

Amli sucked out all the rust and began to quiver, red-faced and panting. After replacing her glass eye, she snuggled up against Bisco.

“You really are a vigorous man. Whenever I suck, it feels like it’s going to burn me up inside…”

“Hey, if you’re finished, then get away from me! Are you listening? Agh! No, not my stomach! Egh!”

Amli twirled her finger around the opening in Bisco’s stomach as she sighed.

“You’re a sinful man for allowing a young lady like me to lose myself in such power… Mr. Bisco, sir? What’s your fiancée like? Is she worthy of you…?”

In a flash, Milo's face grew stern. He bit his lip until it was about to bleed.

That filth. Has he forgotten about Pawoo?!

Suddenly Bisco roared, "Raaargh! Get off me, you weirdo!" he said, flinging Amli aside and panting heavily. He walked over to Milo's desk. "S-she's a strange girl, that one, but my stomach does feel much better now."

"Bisco."

"Hmm?"

"I've been quiet so far, but the next time you cheat on Pawoo, I'm going to tell her."

"…What?! Tell her what? What do you mean, 'cheat'…?"

Milo ignored him. "Amli!" he called. "The vaccines are done! Call in the next patient!"

"Thank you for your patience, everyone," said Amli, addressing the waiting room. "Number twenty-five, please come forward… Eeek! Don't all come at once! Stay in order, please…!"

As Bisco floundered, still reeling at Milo's words, the pretty doctor-and-nurse combo dealt with the remaining patients, selling off the hiked-up mushroom vaccine. Soon enough, their exploitative business practices netted them a veritable mountain of sols.

"Why, if it isn't the rake shop owner. How have things been, economically speaking? Haven't heard from you in a while."

"Yeah… Things have been rough. I thought I'd capitalize on the rash outbreak by selling little backscratchers, but while they were in production, the whole thing calmed down. I don't know what I'm going to do with all this stock…"

The one building that stood out even amid the golden walls of the upper district was the main temple of the Gilded Elephants. Carved into the front of the building was the sect's symbol, the one-eyed elephant god, Gananja. Between his legs was the entrance to the temple, and within were walls and pillars crafted from solid gold, decorated with beautiful gemstones of all shapes and colors. It was such a gaudy sight once more that, to be honest, it was

beginning to grow old.

In a room of the temple, under cover of darkness, sat the higher-ranking merchants, or rather, priests, decked out in sumptuous finery. They spoke in hushed whispers, making merry gossip as the flickering light of the offering candles illuminated the walls. They had gathered, all those who had made enough money to be accepted into the inner circle, to receive the wisdom of Lord Gananja, handed down by the sect's founder himself.

The dozen or so people sitting cross-legged around the table had not changed in quite some time, and when new members appeared, it was usually because one of the existing priests had been replaced.

All of a sudden, the curtain was swept aside, and a pair of piercing eyes peered inside. The high priests all turned toward the intruder, who looked over his shoulder and muttered something to a person standing behind him. Then the two of them…no, three, including the little one at their feet—barged in and entered the room.

"Shut up, all of you. Maybe if you didn't sit on your fat asses countin' money all day, you wouldn't take up so much space."

"I—I'm sorry… May I sit here?"

The rudest priest any of them had ever seen pushed bodies aside to clear a space for himself. His upper half was exposed save a bandage tied around his stomach, and all he wore in addition was a simple pair of hakama. Unlike the others sitting around the table, he didn't look wealthy at all. In fact, he looked like he'd only just crawled in off the streets outside.

"Who let these ruffians in? I'll go call the guards," said one of the priests.

"No, wait," said another. "Those two are the doctor and nurse from Panda Clinic. I heard they made over one million sols from that rash outbreak yesterday…"

In the middle of their conversation, the curtain at the back of the room opened, and a short woman in an ornate robe stepped out onto the lecture platform. Her facial expression was inscrutable beneath her purple veil with gold embroidering, but her long lashes fluttered over her brilliant golden eyes.

“S-Speaker!”

The whispers all stopped as she entered, and all pressed their faces into the carpet in prostration. The so-called Speaker gave a satisfied look over the crowd, stroking the black-and-white island fox curled around her neck, when her eyes fell upon something and went wide, her body frozen in shock.

“Bisco! Get down!” urged Milo as Bisco stood glaring at her with suspicion.

Amli spoke up, too. “Mr. Bisco, sir. She’s not just a pretty lady. This woman is the holy priestess of the Gilded Elephants. We can’t let her find out what we’re up to.”

Bisco sounded unconvinced. “…Hmmm?”

The woman cleared her throat, unperturbed, and sat cross-legged atop the platform, stroking her pet, sounding almost bored as she spoke.

“The founder is communing with Lord Gananja at present. I shall be performing the ceremonies today in his stead.”

“The Speaker will perform the chrysogenic arts…?”

“Lord Gananja’s blood runs in my veins as well. As much as it is beneath me to perform such lowly arts as chrysogenesis, I will do so if it will deepen your faith.”

The woman placed the fox at her feet and began muttering an incantation before the enraptured priests.

“Won-gewn-libtoreo. Won-gewn-toreolib-snew…”

“They can’t take their eyes off her. All right, Milo, now’s our chance…”

“Wait, Bisco…! Look!”

Bisco followed Milo’s wide-eyed gaze, but when he saw what he was looking at, he, too, froze at the miracle unfolding before his eyes.

From the woman’s outstretched palms flowed tiny nuggets of gold, falling to the ground in a golden hailstorm, much to the annoyance of the fox at her feet.

“Chrysogenesis!” “Gold! It’s raining gold!” shouted the priests as the nuggets continued to pour like a waterfall. They pushed one another aside, scrambling

for the coveted metal as it pooled on the ground. After watching them for some time, the priestess sneered.

“Nigie-snew!”

With a booming voice, she swept her arms, and a breeze flowed through the room. The gold nuggets crumbled like sand and were scattered into the wind. Then she clapped her hands with a satisfied “Now, then,” and she took the fox once again in her arms. The priests all stared in shock as she spoke.

“When you are as faithful as I am, you can bestow and bereave gold as you please. No longer will you be held hostage by the whims of the business world. However, you are not at that stage yet. Lord Gananja wishes for you to focus, work hard at your businesses, and prove your effort with tithes.”

As the monks kneeled in awe, Milo bit his thumb, unconvinced by what he had just seen.

“What was that, Amli? Some kind of magic trick?”

“No. Perhaps the gold was fake, but the mantra itself was real. That means one of the Scriptures is nearby.”

“Right. So why don’t we ask her?” said Bisco.

“Ask her…?”

Then Bisco produced a tiny needle from out of his spiky red hair and gave Milo a grin.

“Now I will move on to bestowing Lord Gananja’s wisdom. Highest in the rankings is you, Mirror Seller…”

The woman reseated herself arrogantly on her chair and began summoning the priests. Meanwhile, Bisco placed the needle in his mouth and blew, sending it flying directly into the backside of the fox innocently dozing on her lap. The fox yelped and clamped its jaws down on her hand.

“Gnyaaaaagh!”

The lady jumped out of her seat and screamed, causing the other priests to gasp. She blew repeatedly on her bitten hand, but when she spotted the tiny mushrooms growing all over her pet’s rear, her hair stood on end, and she had

to struggle not to scream.

“Is something the matter, Speaker?”

“N-no, it’s nothing. The revelation just…surprised me, that’s all.”

“B-but you seem hurt…”

The woman’s mind reeled as sweat dripped down her brow. If word got out that she had brought mushrooms into this holy place, it would be her head on the line. She hid the fox behind her back and, in as calm a voice as she could muster, said, “I-it appears Lord Gananja is presently bathing. It would be incredibly rude of me to consult him at this time, so that will be all for today’s oracle.”

“What?! But I haven’t received my fortune!”

“Th-this is outrageous! We broke our backs to deliver those tithes…!”

“Shut up! You want me to stand and watch while our Lord performs his ablutions? Get out! All of you, get out!”

The woman’s menacing attitude sent the priests scurrying out of the room, and soon the only ones remaining were her, the fox, Bisco, Milo, and Amli.

“Oh, Mr. Bisco, sir. What have you done…?”

“Bisco! Come on, we have to get out of here…”

“Heh. Heh-heh-heh-heh. Milo, haven’t you noticed yet?”

Bisco crept up beside the woman as she folded her arms in a sulk and pulled back her hood and veil.

“Ah…Aaaahhh!”

She looked a little different owing to the exotic makeup and jewelry she was wearing, but those pink braids of hers were unmistakable. It was the jellyfish girl.

“T-Tirol!”

“Just when I was finally startin’ to make some money off my own honest work…” she growled as she ground her teeth. The vein on her head looked ready to pop. “Why do I have to run into you two idiots here, of all places?! And

why'd ya have to hurt this foxie here? He's the founder's favorite, y'know! If something happens to him…"

As the island fox looked up at her in fear, Tirol snatched it up off the ground and cuddled it like a baby.

"H-how are you two acquainted with the Gilded Elephants' Speaker?!" cried Amli.

"Ha. I can't escape them," spat Tirol. "Ohhh, don't cry, Berry, everything's okay now… Oi, meathead, do something about these mushrooms! If somebody sees them, heads'll roll!"

"All right, all right, don't get your undies in a twist. Anyway, *we're* the ones surprised to see *you* here." While Milo injected the counteragent into Berry, Bisco went on. "I got all sorts of questions, like how you made that gold appear…"

"Tirol, we're looking for something called the Scripture," said Milo, "owned by the Gilded Elephants. If we don't get it, Bisco will turn into a mushroom!!"

"…He'll what?!"

"This random old dude stuck his hand into my belly and pulled out my stomach. I'm freakin' starving all the time now. We need anything that can lead us to him as soon as possible."

Tirol was a little taken aback by the enthusiasm with which the boys made their disjointed and seemingly irrelevant remarks, but she scratched her chin and sighed.

"Well, I always knew y'all were suckers from the moment I met ya. What kinda BS are they feeding you guys this time? This is why I can't stand meatheads…!"

"You little shit! Listen here, we've been—"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Let me have a li'l look-see at yer missin' stomach or whatever. God, you boys are pathetic. Bet ya think yer mommy's gone when she plays peek-a-boo, too. You guys never seen an illusion before…?"

Tirol tore off Bisco's bandages to see through the sheet of fungus covering the

hole in his abdomen, a pulsating mass of rust in place of his stomach.

"…"

"T-Tirol, do you know something?"

"If it was just a trick, we'd have figured that out already…"

"Nwaaaagh?!" After a short delay as the gears turned, Tirol screamed as though she had just seen a monster and leaped back from Bisco in fright. "What the hell happened to you?! There's rust everywhere! How are you even still alive?!"

"'Cause the Rust-Eater keeps eatin' up all the rust, apparently. But that means…"

Thud!

With timing that couldn't possibly have been more perfect, a medium-sized Rust-Eater popped out of the side of Bisco's head. As Bisco pulled it out, blood dripped down the side of his face.

"Damn, that was nearly in my eye. It's speedin' up, too!"

"We don't know when and where the reaction is going to take place," said Milo. "If it gets to his brain or heart, that'll be it! Please, Tirol, you have to help us save Bisco!"

Looking at his tearstained face, Tirol bit her lip…

"Nnniiiiiiii!!" With a screech that wasn't a word, she scratched at her hair. Then, putting her fingers in her mouth, she whistled. *Pweee!* The curtain behind her opened, and out stepped two guards.

"Heathens!" said one. "Please step back, Agent, we'll deal with this."

"Don't touch her, lowlifes," said the other. "Scum like you should know your place."

Decked out in their magnificent robes, the two guards stepped in front of Tirol and brandished their sabers. Bisco sized up the two tough-looking men before him and cracked his neck, glaring right through them with his piercing eyes.

“…Suits me just fine. You wanna go? Then let’s—!”

Before Bisco could finish his line, there were two loud clangs, and the guards’ eyes rolled back in their skulls before both of them crumpled powerlessly into the carpet below.

“Wear these fellas’ robes and earrings and y’all will have a much easier time walkin’ around.”

Tirol stood above the two warrior monks, tapping a hefty iron crowbar on her shoulder. Then, as one of the guards let out a feeble cry, she gave him another whack just to be sure and put it away.

“M-my goodness…!” cried Amli, her hand to her mouth in shock. The frighteningly powerful girl wasn’t that much taller than herself. “Mr. Bisco, sir, you sure are acquainted with some rather…extreme characters.”

“You should stay here,” said Tirol to Amli. “The founder can smell little girls a mile off. You two, get changed and come through to my room.”

“Wait!”

“I’m never doin’ this again, ya know! You guys saved my life twice, an’ the first time I paid ya back already for Tetsujin. This is for the second time, so now we’re even, got it?”

“Tiroool? Where are you? Come back to me… Where are yooou? Tirol?”

“I’m right here, Lord Corpulo… Ahh, you mustn’t eat so much. Be sure to take your medicine afterward.”

“No! I don’t like the taste.” The legs of the golden-canopied bed seemed ready to snap in two as the ridiculously obese man thrashed atop it like a spoiled child. “Serve it to me, Tirol, like you usually do. Come, come…”

“Well, I never could resist those puppy-dog eyes…”

Tirol looked away as her smile began to crack, and with a face that looked as though she hated the world and everyone in it, she took a bottle of water in her hand and placed the pills in her mouth. Then she glared with her golden eyes at the two guards.

The blue-haired one quickly spun around while the red-haired one cracked a

smile. Then his partner elbowed him in the ribs and he, too, turned to look away.

"…Mmk. Okay, there we go. You can do the next one yourself, right?"

"Ohhh, Tirol. Even the most bitter medicine tastes of honey when delivered by your lips."

"Oh-ho-ho-ho…"

Tirol chuckled and stroked the founder's chin (though it was impossible to say where his chin was, exactly), before turning and retreating into a back room with the two guards.

"…Guh. So gross. I'd rather kiss a snail."

"Th-thank you, Tirol…! Now that he's taken the sleepshroom medicine, he should be out for a while. Ingesting it is so much more effective than using a mushroom arrow."

"Was two enough?" asked Bisco, unconvinced. "Looks like he's not dozin' off yet."

"It'll take some time to spread through his body, that's all. I agree there's a lot of it, but three pills and he'd never wake up again."

Bisco seemed to trust Milo's words and went and threw himself on Tirol's bed as she was washing her mouth out in the mirror.

"When did you get so interested in spells anyway?" he asked. "Even Amli was shocked that you could make gold outta nothin'."

"There's a trick to that one. I can teach ya right now if ya want… You guys don't have any money left anyway after yer tithes," said Tirol. Then she got a mischievous twinkle in her eye and closed in on Milo, stroking his chest with her finger. "Gimme twenty-four hours alone with Panda Boy, and I'll show you whatever you want."

"Tirol," cried Milo, "be serious! Cut the jokes, we're trying to—"

"Sounds good to me," said Bisco. "It's just one night; you're used to it by now, aren't you?"

“Shut up, you…mushroom man!”

Tirol laughed. “Ah-ha-ha-ha! Whatever, I’ll tell ya. Y’all really seem to be in a pinch anyhow.” She slipped away from Milo and sat herself cross-legged on the carpet. “Watch closely.”

She closed her eyes and began to recite the mantra that had gotten the priests from earlier so excited.

“Ongewn-libtoreo. Ongewn-toreolib-snew.”

As she did, she raised her right hand, and tiny nuggets of gold appeared once more in her palm, spilling to the floor like a waterfall. Bisco and Milo watched, unable to take their eyes off the miracle.

“This is real, genuine gold…! The hell? No wonder you got cultists flockin’ to you!”

“Try crushing it.”

“Huh?”

“You’re strong enough. It should be easy. Just crush it between your fingers, like this.”

Bisco looked puzzled but picked up one of the fallen nuggets of gold and squeezed it as Tirol instructed. And immediately, the gleaming nugget lost its sheen and became a tarnished brown metal that fell apart onto the carpet.

“Wh-what the hell…?”

“It’s rust!” cried Milo, trying not to be too loud. “Just particles of rust! Then… all of this gold…”

“Just polished rust. All of it,” said Tirol. She muttered another few magic words, and a soft breeze cleared away the rust dust until there was nothing left. “The Gilded Elephants have been usin’ this technique to swindle people for years. They tell ya, if yer holy enough, you can make gold from nothin’, but it’s all bullshit. As long as ya know the magic words, anyone can do it, even a scumbag like me.”

“You don’t have to be holy to recite the mantra?”

“Nah, but there are other conditions. You gotta know the words, like I said. I learned ’em from that lardass in the other room. The second thing is, you gotta be near that Scripture thing you guys’re lookin’ for. I dunno why, but the magic won’t work without it.”

“I see… That means the Scripture must be nearby, as we thought!”

“The founder’s a paranoid guy, so I’m the only one who knows this, but there’s s’posed to be a secret room underneath his bed…”

“He’s asleep,” said Bisco, heading toward the door all of a sudden. As Tirol blinked in surprise, Milo crept over to the doorway and peeped through. Then he looked at the others and nodded. As Bisco slipped out into the founder’s chamber like a snake, Tirol turned to Milo, a dumbfounded look on her face.

“…How the hell did he know that? He’s like a dog.”

“Ah-ha-ha! His hearing’s pretty good, you know. I bet he was listening to the founder’s breaths.”

“Geh. He’s the miracle worker, then, not me!”

With no small amount of effort, the three of them heaved aside the solid gold bed atop which lay the founder’s corpulent body. Dirty fingerprints were visible

on the golden floor.

“There’s a cave below,” said Bisco, pressing his ear to the ground.

“Just like Tirol said. This is the only place it could be.”

“It’s probably locked. We’ll have to find the key…,” Tirol began, but before she could finish, Bisco leaped into a somersault, twirling his sword like a whirlwind, and struck the ground. The solid gold trapdoor crumpled with the force of the blow, letting out a metallic clang as the hinges and nails popped right off. Bisco tore it off the floor and peered down into the hole beneath.

“…It’s sloped,” said Milo. “You see anything with your thermal goggles?”

“Nope,” said Bisco. “Doesn’t seem to be trapped. Who’s first? Oh, let’s do rock-paper-scissors for it. One, two…”

Milo ignored him and plunged into the hole. Bisco frowned, displeased, and beckoned Tirol over. She shuddered and, after carefully replacing the founder’s blanket, hurried over to Bisco and followed behind him.

“…I was expecting to find treasure down here, since this is the founder’s vault,” muttered Milo, using his light-up wristwatch to illuminate the room at the foot of the slope. The room was simple, carved from stone, like a tomb. Dark and dingy, it was nothing like the other parts of the Metal Tower.

“What’s this, a scroll? They’re all over the place. Perhaps he’s more devout than we thought…”

“You only need to spend twenty seconds with him to know that’s not true,” replied Tirol as Bisco peered around the eerie room. “Look, let’s just find the Scripture and get outta here!”

Bisco and Tirol started turning the room upside down, but Milo couldn’t stop thinking about the scrolls. He picked one out that looked promising and examined it. It appeared to be a mantra of some sort, but Milo struggled to read the minuscule, dense lettering, and it was hard to tell at a glance what exactly it did.

Tirol said anyone can use these as long as they can read them. Could that be true…?

Milo unrolled the scroll, squinted at it, and took a couple steps back…only to bump into someone standing behind him.

“Oh, sorry, Bisco. I’ll go look over…”

Milo turned around to see a pair of murky, bloodshot eyes. Atop the many-layered chin was a thin smile, dripping thick drool that was reminiscent of sludge.

…Gch!

A thick arm swiped for him, but Milo leaped back, putting some distance between himself and the peculiar man. There could be no mistake: The man now bearing down on him was none other than the founder, who had been so soundly sleeping only a few moments ago. However, something was wrong. Besides the fact there was no way this blob of fat could ever creep up on a pair of Mushroom Keepers unnoticed, something else about the man seemed off.

I have to strike first. But my bow…

It was the Mushroom Keepers’ creed to strike before your opponent made a move. According to Bisco, you couldn’t even allow them to speak. However, for that, the Mushroom Keepers required their signature mushroom bow, and both of theirs had been handed to the guards for safekeeping back at the entrance to the temple.

“Won-shad-sliv. Won-shad…”

The founder’s mouth began to move and, in a voice as thick as glue, began to chant. With each syllable, his saliva dribbled from his mouth and dripped onto the flagstones.

“…My fifth disciple… Corpulo the Avaricious… A mere swine, lacking both strength and piety. Nonetheless…his vapid, witless existence was very useful to me… Now…this faithless cur has revealed to the faithless monetarists the path of worship. That…is his greatest act of virtue—”

As the founder spoke, Milo instinctively seized the opportunity, drawing the blade concealed at his belt.

These numbshrooms will put you back to sleep!!

With a flash of steel, the poisoned blade carved a half-moon through the air and landed on the founder's collarbone. A streak of blood stained Milo's face.

…?! The poison!

However, Milo's blade had only scratched the surface of the founder's skin, and the numbshrooms showed no sign of taking root. Looking closer, he saw that the peerless edge of the lizard-claw blade was marred with rust, blunting it completely.

Dammit! It must have been that mantra…!

The blade was still lodged in its target's flesh. Milo tried to abandon it and step back to form a new plan, but the founder's flabby arm reached out and grabbed him. With unbelievable force, his fingers closed around Milo's neck.

"Where is…the Scripture? …Ha…ha… I suppose you cannot answer."

"Gh…ah!"

Blood began dribbling down the edge of Milo's mouth. Just then, a red blur flew in from the shadows and unleashed a roundhouse kick sharper than a slash from a master swordsman. The blow struck Milo's sword with such force that it pushed the rusty blade clean through the founder's meaty shoulders, launching his head against the stone wall with a wet *thunk*.

"Don't be a hero! Call for me!" said Bisco, irritated.

"*Herk, pfeh!* B-Bisco! Behind you!"

The enormous headless body of the founder raised its arms and swung them down on Bisco from behind. He whirled around and caught the blow on the back of his saber, causing a tremendous clatter and cracking the flagstones beneath his feet.

"…You piece of—!"

"Bisco!"

Milo watched as blood leaked between Bisco's gritted teeth. The battle within his body had left him weak, able to summon only about a fifth of his full power.

"Krh!"

Still, Bisco flared up his strength and called upon whatever his stomachless body could muster. Delivering a spinning slash like a tornado, Bisco's saber tore a straight line right through the founder's torso.

A wave of blood painted the two boys red. Yet even now, with his head removed and bowels torn open, the founder's body lumbered on. It reached inside itself and with a *Splat!* pulled out its own intestines and lashed them like a whip. The disgusting weapon knocked Bisco clean off his feet and wrapped around Milo's legs as he moved in to protect his partner. The two boys found themselves being thrown around the room, slamming against the walls, scattering scrolls everywhere.

Bisco let out a yell, unsheathing his own sword and lopping off the hand in which Corpulo held his weapon. Then he ran up the slope and grappled with the body, but he was unable to summon up his full strength, and he eventually lost out to his opponent's seemingly limitless stamina. Thrown to the ground, he could only watch as the chunky pair of legs sat on his chest.

"Grr…rrrgh!"

"Ha…ha…ha…ha…ha…ha…ha…"

As the founder pinned Bisco down by the throat, a cloud of rust rose up out of Corpulo's neck and began to take form. Eventually, it took the familiar shape of an old man's face, which laughed in a voice like sandpaper.

"The old dude… I knew you were behind this…!"

"You have fought well with the Rust ingrained so deep. Truly terrifying, Akaboshi… Or perhaps it is the Rust-Eater I should fear… I have erred. It is because of that vixen that I allowed you to live, but in the Rust-Eater's power I can see the face of God. I will not allow my path to be altered any further."

"Pfft! You want my organs? Then come and get 'em! I'll eat you up from the inside out!"

"…It seems you must die after all. There can be only one God."

"Kelshinha!"

Just before the founder snapped Bisco's neck, a saber glided through the air

and lodged itself in his side, causing him to crumple.

"*Hmm. So you yet live*," said the voice as the founder's body turned to face the assailant. Milo pounced at him, his face bloodred and sapphire eyes blazing. Evading the slicing action of the intestine whip by a hair's breadth, he got up close and plunged the golden needle in his hand into the founder's chest. The Rust-Eater vaccine.

"Your poisons are futile against my puppet. Give it up."

"Get back, Milo! Get away from him!"

The founder closed his eagle-like grip around Milo's face, not paying the slightest attention to the injection. His thick thumb pressed against Milo's left eye.

"Ugh… Grh…!"

"I have found myself desiring that knowledge of fungi you possess more frequently of late."

A twisting stream of rust issued forth from the founder's thumb and wormed its way past Milo's eyeball, into the socket. Milo didn't even flinch. With a battle cry, he squeezed out every last drop of the syringe into the founder's veins.

"Ha…ha… With Akaboshi's stomach, and your brain, I shall be— Urgh?! Groargh?!"

Gaboom! Gaboom! Gaboom!

A throng of golden Rust-Eaters burst forth from the founder's back as he was speaking.

"You craven, what have you done to me…?!"

"I see. I get it now. I know how to control the Rust, just like Tirol!" Milo, seeing his attack strike true, steadied his breathing and proclaimed, "It doesn't matter what trickery you resort to. As long as your power comes from the Rust, we won't be afraid! For we are Rust-Eaters, and we fear the Rust no more than an anteater fears an ant!"

"Cease your prattling…!"

The face of rust became warped with anger. Kelshinha forced the enormous body of the founder to its feet, then picked up the fallen saber and swung it at Milo…

Gaboom! Gaboom! Gaboom!

The body exploded into a parade of brilliant golden Rust-Eaters. For a silent moment, the founder wobbled on his feet, before crashing front-first into the ground. Instead of blood, countless grains of rust poured out onto the flagstones, whereupon new Rust-Eater mushrooms grew out of them like soil.

Milo simply watched for a moment and turned to check Bisco's wounds… But suddenly, he felt faint and collapsed into his partner's arms.

"Milo!! Stay with me…! Did he get your eye?!"

"Don't worry. I can still see… I think."

Blood spilled down his panda-eye birthmark, but Milo relaxed as Bisco administered the Rust-Eater injection. There was still a dull ache somewhere in the back of his skull, and he groaned as he wound a bandage around his eye and rose to his feet.

"It was Kelshinha controlling that man's body. I never knew mantras were capable of anything like that… That elderly gentleman is a more formidable opponent than we'd ever imagined, Bisco!"

"Don't talk, you idiot! How are you? Do you need me to carry you?"

"Don't be silly. I said I wasn't going to be a bother, didn't I?"

Milo accepted Bisco's hand and rose to his feet. He looked over at Tirol, who was slowly making her way back up the ramp. She carried a large cylindrical box in her arms, covered in a cloth inscribed with esoteric writing. When she saw the scene before her, her face froze in shock.

"Wha—! What the heck have ya been doin' in here?! What's with all the mushrooms?!"

"The old dude interrupted us with some weird magic. That the Scripture you got there? I guess that means we win."

"I guess so, but how're we gonna get outta this next one?!"

Tirol heard the sounds of footsteps coming from outside the room. Guards had heard the noise and were coming to investigate.

“Lord Corpulo! Is something the matter?!”

Tirol shushed the boys and crept over to the door, wiping the sweat from her brow. She opened it, and in as dignified a voice as she could muster…

“Whatever is all the commotion? Lord Corpulo is presently meditating.”

“Lady Ochagama! Excuse us… We were downstairs and heard noises.”

“Noises, you say?” Finally back in her zone, Tirol’s quick wits and fast-talking action came to the fore. “You heard noises downstairs from our bedroom? Whatever are you trying to imply? I could have you executed for such impudence, you realize.”

“N-no! Th-that was not my intention…!!”

Bisco’s eye twitched. “*I feel sorry for the poor guy*,” he whispered, “*for havin’ that toxic jellyfish as a boss. I wouldn’t have lasted fifteen minutes before snapping.*”

“*I’m just glad she’s here*,” replied Milo. “*Some problems require a gentler touch. You’re the only one who can afford to use brute force on everything.*”

“And your sister, too, don’t forget.”

Just as Milo was about to object, the tiny particles of rust on the ground caught his eye. Although there was no wind, they slipped between Tirol’s legs and out the door as though they had a mind of their own.

“I will overlook your impertinence this time,” said Tirol. “Hurry up and leave us.”

“Y-y-yes, my l-lady. P-p-pardon m-m-m…”

“…? What are you dawdling for? Return to your…”

Tirol looked up and froze. The guard’s face was scarred brown, and a stream of rust flowed into his nostrils like a swarm of tiny locusts.

“…M-m-me… Blgagh.”

Right before her eyes, the guard’s head swelled up like a balloon and burst in

a shower of blood. As she stared in shock, the other guards all met the same fate, with a *Bang! Bang!* as their heads exploded one after the other.

"…Give me…"

"…the Scripture."

The corpses spoke with one voice, their heads reduced to lower jaws and flapping tongues, and reached out for Tirol like a pack of zombies. As she shrieked and fell backward into the room, Bisco scooped her up along with the Scripture and launched a kick like a spear into the horde of walking dead.

"This is that old man's power again!" he said.

"It must be!" said Milo. "Bisco, can you make it to your bow?!"

"Better than you can!"

Bisco took Tirol, and Milo the Scripture, as the pair kicked their way through the zombie swarm and ran deeper into the temple. Suddenly, the doors on either side of the long corridor flew open, and out poured an immeasurable number of the walking dead.

"How many of them are there?!" cried Bisco.

"It's a bluff. They're moving too slow. They're nothing compared to the leader we just fought!"

It was like a sea of the creatures, but the two boys leaped up and ran across, using their heads like stepping-stones. When they finally left the temple, they turned and closed the doors behind them with all their might. The doors took off several arms that were reaching through the doorway with an unpleasant squishing sound, but as soon as they hit the ground, they turned into powdered rust and were swept away by the breeze.

At the entrance to the shrine, Bisco yelled to the guard tasked with safekeeping luggage, "Hey, you there! Gimme back my bow…and get outta here! There's a buncha zombies on the other side!"

The guard's head swiveled to face Bisco, and he responded in a voice like mud.

"You wish…to reclaim…your baggage…?"

“You… Your neck…?!”

“Here you are… Thank you for waiting…”

The large guard took a massive ax and swung it around. His unfocused eyes and the rust falling from the corners of his mouth showed he was already Kelshinha’s thrall.

“Dammit, him too!”

Bisco launched a flying kick, snapping the ax at the handle. The heavy ax head spun in the air and landed with a *thud* in the guard’s skull.

“Mr. Bisco, Mr. Milo, sirs! Your bows are here!”

“Amli!”

As the guard’s body flopped onto the counter, Amli popped out from beneath it, holding their bows and quivers in her arms. She tossed them back, and as the two Mushroom Keepers regained their weapons, they turned to see the doors behind them creak and leaped back at the last moment. In a splintering of wood, the doors flew open and an avalanche of corpses spilled out. Even Bisco couldn’t help but balk at the sight. It was like something out of a vision of Hell.

“Forget faith, these guys have no gods at all!”

“Kelshinha must have had this place completely under his control for a while…! Bisco, behind you!”

Looking back, Bisco saw the zombies pouring forth from all the shop windows and doors. Kelshinha’s mantra was powerful enough to take over not just the temple but the entire upper level of the tower.

“We’re gonna have to fight our way through!” cried Milo.

“That’s fine by me.”

The gleam in Bisco’s emerald eyes pushed aside his ravenous hunger. As he pulled the bowstring, the fang in his grin twinkled.

“I hate bein’ on the defensive. Just once, I wanna make that grandpa piss his pants!”

“Don’t get too excited, Bisco, or the Rust-Eater will come back!”

“So I gotta moderate myself, huh? You sure are askin’ the impossible…”

The two stood back-to-back and leveled their bows at the oncoming creatures…

“Hmph.”

Fwsh!

Entirely in sync, the pair unleashed their mushroom arrows into the crowds, which exploded into being with a *Gaboom! Gaboom!* and launched the zombies into the air.

“There’ll be more, Bisco! Let’s move!”

“Yeah! Come on, Amli, this way!”

The pair grabbed Amli’s hands and pulled her down the gold-paved road before the dead returned, still carrying Tirol and the Scripture under their arms.

“Oh, my poor shoulders,” said one of the effeminate priests in charge of initiations. “That’s all for today. Come on, we’re closed. Come back tomorrow.”

As the priest cracked his neck, the warrior monk guards stepped before the reception desk and crossed their blades. The hopeful initiates grumbled but slowly filed out of the hall.

“My oh my. Looking at their dreary faces day in and day out is doing me in.”

“Oh, I *know*. They’re like shriveled-up mummies. There’s no point even branding them. I wish that young redheaded boy would come back.”

“I should have asked him, you know. To be my little sugar baby.”

“Your sugar baby? Huh! If you’re into pets, then why not get a pig?”

“Thanks for volunteering, sweetcheeks.”

“Oh, you did *not* just say that!”

As the priests engaged in their daily banter, the elevator suddenly arrived from above with a thud. The two looked at each other and agreed to a temporary truce.

“Just when things were getting good. I wonder who dropped out today.”

Suddenly, there was a *Clang! Clang!*, and two large bulges appeared in the metal elevator doors. On the third strike, they were torn clean off and scraped across the reception hall tossing out sparks. A dozen or so corpses spilled out from inside like wastepaper out of a fallen bin and crumbled into rust as they hit the floor.

“Eek! What in the world…?!”

One of the corpses that was still ambulatory lunged for the monk and was about to clamp its jaws down upon him when Bisco came out of nowhere with a solid kick that detached the monster’s head from its shoulders like a soccer ball.

“Mr. Bisco, sir, there’s no end to them!” yelled Amli.

“We need to block them off!” he shouted back. “You there, get outta the way unless you wanna die!”

The two Mushroom Keepers mowed their way to the center of the hall, turning and pointing their bows at the elevator. From a hole in its roof poured more and more of the foul creatures, causing the priests and guards to flee in panic.

“Milo, King Trumpet, on my count!”

“Got it!”

“Two, one…!”

Swf!

A pair of streaks shot from the two bows, pinning the zombies to the back of the elevator. The arrowhead glowed orange, and then…

Gaboom! Gaboom!

The explosive King Trumpet mushrooms filled the elevator car, burst through the roof, and kept going, filling up the entire shaft and blocking it off completely.

Amli looked back at the magnificent stem. “W-wow. So this is the power of mushrooms…”

“I wish we could have done something else for them…,” muttered Milo.

“Either way, it’s a lot more merciful than what that old dude would do to them,” replied Bisco. “C’mon, let’s go.”

The pair turned and left with the fainted Tirol and the Scripture in their arms, and Amli following behind. Like a gale, they ran down the stairway to the lower levels.

The two priests watched them go with rapt fascination.

“…Now that’s a man of danger.”

“Perhaps I’ll quit the Gilded Elephants. He’s the only god for me now.”

Then just as the last surviving zombie was about to attack them from behind, the two of them spun round in sync and punched it in the face.

6

“So Corpulo is dead. He was a greedy man but incredibly easy to manipulate. This just goes to show that Kelshinha wants his six disciples dead, by hook or by crook.”

Raskeni seemed unshaken by the death of her former partner, placing the captured cylindrical jar containing the Scripture in front of her guests.

“Ooohhh, so this is the Scripture! I can’t believe it’s literally an organ…!”

“Even you, Ms. Tirol, as speaker of the Gilded Elephants, were unaware of its true nature?”

“Well, yeah, the Speaker’s basically just the high priest’s bi— Ew, gross, it’s moving!”

The cylindrical jar was filled with a cold fluorescent liquid. Through the curved glass, Tirol could see something suspended, dark and red, and pulsating. She let out a sound of both disgust and curiosity.

“Can you see the sutras tattooed all along the side of this spleen?” Raskeni asked her, squinting at the noxious-looking green liquid. “These are the secret to Kelshinha’s power. They form a mantra that absorbs the power of his followers.”

“H-he tattooed his own organs?! Ewww…what a freak.”

“He was obsessed with becoming a god. He did what no one else dared.”

Raskeni examined the Scripture closely, letting her face bathe in the bright green glow, before emitting a long, fascinated sigh.

“…”

Tirol felt a little put off by Raskeni’s sudden transformation from her usual imposing self, but she continued looking at the Scripture, pretending not to notice.

A little later, after Raskeni had calmed down, she looked over at Bisco, who was standing, arms folded, in front of Milo's hospital curtain. Each time his partner's twisted cries rose from the other side, Bisco clenched his teeth in pain.

"Bisco, Amli's taking care of your friend, so don't worry. You should go rest. Your wounds are pretty deep, too…"

"Raskeni! What the hell is going on in there?! He's only just gotten back! Is it the rust in his eyes? Then, use my blood to—"

"Calm down, Bisco. We think Kelshinha might have tried to enter Milo's mind. Fortunately, he didn't get too deep." Raskeni took a short breath and continued, "It's a minor issue; he's not going to die, like you are. It's just…" She paused.

"Just what?!"

"Kelshinha is in his brain. Probably because he was after Milo's knowledge of mushroom techniques. Just a little, but he's there, and I'm not sure we can fully dislodge him."

"How the hell is that 'minor'?!"

Even Raskeni flinched a little at Bisco's beastly rage. Until now, she had been a little disappointed meeting the Man-Eating Redcap in person. Looks aside, his personality didn't seem to match his reputation. It was only when his partner's life was on the line that Raskeni could see he indeed lived up to his name.

Suddenly, as Raskeni tried to calm him, there was another scream from Milo behind the curtain.

"Uuurgh! Aaagh! Shut up! Go away!"

"Mr. Milo, sir! Please stay still, or the rust will spread!"

"Get off me! Don't touch me!!"

"Eeek!!"

All of a sudden, Amli came flying through the curtain and landed on her butt. She sat there in shock at Milo's unprecedented foul mood.

“Mr. Bisco, sir…,” she pleaded, looking up at him from the floor.

But Bisco was already striding into the hospital room. He tore aside the curtain and looked down at Milo, tied to the bed. His signature panda-eye birthmark was coated in rust, and as he squirmed in discomfort, thick blood dripped from his eye.

“Wraargh! Stay back! Stay back!”

Milo swung wildly, scratching Bisco’s face with his nails, drawing blood. Bisco paid it no heed and simply placed his hand on Milo’s rusted-up skin. Eventually, Milo’s rage began to die down until he lay still, panting.

“…”

“…”

“…Bis…co…?”

“You recognize me now?”

“…I’m sorry… I…”

“Go to sleep, idiot… Does it hurt anywhere?”

“…Ye…ah… No… I’m fine…”

“Are you fine or not? What made you lash out like that?”

“…Something…inside me. I can hear it chanting…like a mantra… It’s trying to get into my head… I have to stop it…”

“It’s trying to take over your mind,” said Bisco. He looked back at Amli, who was peeping through the curtain. She nodded and turned back to Raskeni for something. “Amli says it’s still treatable. She’ll help us. You’ll be cured in no time.”

“Bisco!”

As Bisco stood to leave, Milo grabbed on to his sleeve. Bisco stopped for a moment before sitting back down by Milo’s side and placing his hand on his rusted mark. Milo seemed embarrassed by what he had just done and began to sob gently, shaking in his bed.

“I’m sorry, Bisco. I’m…I’m…I’m supposed to be protecting you.”

“No, you’re not. We’re equals, remember?”

“…”

“Everything’s going to be fine. You’re smart. You’ll figure this out. Soon you’ll have one of your usual flashes of inspiration and unravel the whole thing. Then we’ll make Kelshinha pay for trying to get inside your head.”

“…”

“…The first thing is to look closely, and the second…”

“…is to believe.”

“Can you?”

“Yeah. I’m looking. And I believe… In you…and in me.”

Milo sniffled and shook away his tears before taking a deep breath to dispel his fear. Then he took a sleepshroom concoction from the vial pouch at his hip and injected it into his own neck.

“I’m sorry for holding you back. I’m fine now. You can go…”

Bisco nodded and rose to his feet. He parted the curtain…and paused, started to take one last look back at Milo, but thought better of it. As Milo watched him leave, the sedative quickly worked its way through his veins, dragging him down into a deep slumber.

“I believe Mr. Milo hates me now,” muttered Amli, looking down at her feet as she walked. The commercial district in the lower reaches of the tower was bathed in neon. Her usual bright smile was nowhere to be found, and she seemed distracted, as though she wasn’t all there.

“I’ve acted shamefully,” she continued. “Even if it was for medical purposes, I’ve been too friendly with you, Mr. Bisco, sir, and that has angered Mr. Milo.”

“Listen. He was just having his mind hijacked by that old freak; it’s got nothin’ to do with you.”

“But Mr. Bisco, sir, when you touched him, it was like the demon left him. He calmed down so fast… How did you do it?”

“Well…,” Bisco said, half paying attention as he looked around at the weird

and wonderful market stalls, “I guess it’s just ’cause we’re partners, right?”

“Partners…?”

“You want me to explain? I guess…would you understand if I said it’s like family? Imagine how you’d feel if you had to take care of your mom or dad. It’s kinda like that.”

Amli looked back down at the ground. “…That doesn’t help me understand…”

“…? Amli, you mean…?”

“I’ve forgotten them. My family…”

Amli stopped short, and Bisco wasn’t sure if he should say anything, when…

“Come, one and all! Everybody wants someone dead, right? My beautiful bugs’ll do the trick! Watch ’em squirm!”

The merchant’s questionable sales pitch seemed to break Amli out of her stupor, and she grabbed Bisco’s hand and waddled over in that direction.

“Oh, dear, I mustn’t dawdle,” she said. “We have to get the ingredients for Milo’s medicine and hurry back.”

Amli reached the stall and began scrutinizing the merchandise. Bisco peeked over her shoulder and turned his nose up at the unsettling goods on offer.

“What the hell are these? They’re alive! Centipedes, snakes… These things are dangerous!”

“Of course they are. Otherwise they wouldn’t be effective.”

“What kinda shop is this anyway?”

“A poison shop,” Amli replied simply.

Bisco was left speechless, watching the venomous bugs squirming in their glass tanks. Although he was used to seeing such creatures as a Mushroom Keeper, never had he seen them for sale at a market like this.

“You buyin’, my friend?” said the shopkeeper. “You look like you could kill someone easy enough without my help.”

“Can it. We’re here to cure someone, not kill ’em. We need…uhh…”

“We require a selection of white poisons,” Amli interjected. “Quickly.”

“Sure thing. Grade?”

“The highest. Here’s the money.”

“Well, now, ain’t that something? I dunno who pissed you two off… but I hope they get what’s comin’ to ’em. All right…how about this fella here? I’ll give you a discount if you carry him home yourself.”

“You tryin’ to get me killed, asshole?”

“Wah-ha-ha-ha! You got guts, kid! I like you. All right, elbow beetle…great dung beetle…ball centipede… I’m cuttin’ you a special deal here.”

The shopkeeper let out a laugh and began sorting out the good bugs with practiced ease, placing them in a partitioned glass cage so they couldn’t fight among themselves. His fingers were all metal prosthetics, the originals presumably lost to the hazards of the job.

“We have more to buy. Carry the insects for me,” said Amli.

“What?! Didn’t ya say we could get all we needed in one place?!”

“If all we want to do is keep him alive, then yes. That is what Master asked me to do, but I disagree. I shall not compromise.” Amli puffed out her meager chest. “I will cure Milo completely and join you as his partner.”

“?? I don’t think you quite get it… Ah! Hey, wait!”

Amli hopped down the street like a bunny, scaring off the goldfish lanterns as she went. Bisco took after her as best he could despite the hole in his stomach.

“*Now* we have all we need!”

Amli seemed way more excitable than usual without her master’s oversight to rein her in. She skipped happily through the streets, gathering all the odds and ends she needed for Milo’s treatment. Meanwhile, Bisco was unamused, carrying an enormous pot and incense burner on his back and the cage of wriggling insects hung around his neck.

“Hey! Is all of this really gonna help Milo?”

“It doesn’t hurt to be too careful. Even if it doesn’t cure him completely, this

should at least make him sane."

The number of mortal pleasures on display in the city put even Imihama to shame. Besides the shady sorts of shops already mentioned, the rich scent of hippo meat slowly roasting on an open fire gently wafted through the streets. With great pains, Bisco suppressed his hunger. He couldn't digest anything more complex than baby food right now anyway.

"I was going to suggest we get lunch together…but I suppose there's not much you can eat in that state. I was so looking forward to it, too."

"You think I can just leave Milo alone and eat at a time like this?"

"I understand how you feel, but we must wait for the insects to be ready anyway," said Amli, pointing at the labyrinth-like cage swinging from Bisco's neck. Inside, the centipedes and beetles were literally tearing each other to pieces despite the partitions.

"…Also…I am envious. Mr. Bisco and Mr. Milo always have such pleasant chats… I wanted to be a part of it, too…," she muttered, her pale cheeks turning ever so slightly pink. She furtively glanced at Bisco…who was enthralled watching the fighting match in the glass tank below.

"Mr. Bisco, sir!" she shouted, her eye twitching. "Are you listening?!"

"Huh? Oh, yeah."

"I do not believe you. Do you know how much courage it took me to say that?"

"What's gotten into you? You angry?"

"No. Not even a little bit."

"Dunno what I did, but sorry. I don't think you gotta do anything special, though. You've helped us a lot already. I'd say we're already friends."

"…Friends…?"

Amli stared back in wonder before hiding her joy and looking away from Bisco once more.

"Friends is not good enough. You'll be gone before I know it."

“Well, whaddaya want, then?”

“…Can you make me your partner?”

“Huuuh?!”

“I wish to be your partner, like Mr. Milo! That way I’ll become Mr. Milo’s partner, too, and the three of us will be together forever!”

Amli smiled as bright as a flower and turned to Bisco with glittering eyes, but her face suddenly fell when she saw his serious expression, tinged with pity.

“…I have said too much,” she said. “Let us go.”

“Amli, Mushroom Keepers have only one partner. It’s nothin’ like what you’re imagining.”

“We must make haste before your mushroom strikes again. There is no time for chatter…,” Amli began when Bisco picked her up by the waist and lifted her off the ground. He carried her over to a bench by the side of the road and sat her down.

“M-Mr. Bisco, sir…?”

Bisco kneeled and looked her straight in the eye. He didn’t say a single word, but Amli felt as though he were looking right through her with his jade-green eyes.

“…I’m sorry,” she said, averting her gaze. “I got carried away. I was just so happy when you two showed up, because it was like I’d gotten two new big brothers. My family is not with me, you know…”

“Isn’t Raskeni your family?”

“…It is not me she loves. It is my talent for mantra. She shut me away in that place for years so that I could train. I was so…”

Lonely? Whatever she was about to say, she swallowed it and looked up at Bisco with a nervous smile. Then, as if to dispel the dark mood she had created, she tried to put on a brave face.

“But I wasn’t completely alone. And soon my father will come to pick me up.”

“Your father?”

“I do not remember his face. But I hear he is a very respected priest. When I grow strong, stronger than anyone else in Six Towers, then I know he will come for me. My mother, too. Master told me so…”

“…”

“I do not care if he is respected or not. He could just as well be an ordinary man. I just… I just want to have a family again… I know such a wish is rather selfish these days.”

Bisco watched as she clutched her chest. He searched his limited vocabulary for anything that might cheer her up even a little, and…

“If there is a god…”

“…”

“…then I’m sure he’s got something good in store for people who have faith and patience like you. Your family’ll be back before you know it.”

“…Do you really think so?”

“Milo says he can tell when I lie, because I stutter three times.”

Amli wiped away a tear from her eye and gave Bisco a warm smile.

“Thank you. You are very kind, Mr. Bisco, sir. I wouldn’t know it from looking at you.”

“Ha! I really ain’t. You’ve been puttin’ your life on the line for us; it’s the least I can do. If there’s anything we can do to help you, you just let us know, okay?”

Amli just stared in silence and blinked. Then, realizing the meaning of Bisco’s words, she came so close to him their noses touched, a devilish grin spread across her face.

“If there’s anything you can do, you’ll do it?”

“Yeah… Hmm?! Hold up, I can’t make you my partner. I already said, I can only have one…”

“In that case, Mr. Bisco, sir, make me your family!” she declared, wrapping her thin arms around Bisco’s neck, squeezing him with such strength, it was hard to imagine where in her small body it was coming from.

“My big brother! I’m so glad…this is the nicest thing anyone’s ever done for me! You are the best brother ever! Strong, like a hawk, but kind…”

“You idiot, do you even hear what you’re saying—? Gwaaaagh! Ow! G-get off me!! Okay, okay, I get it!!”

“Let’s go home, big brother. I want to make Milo my brother, too. I’ll have a strong one and a nice one. How wonderful! Two brothers in one day!!”

A glittering sunshine of smiles, Amli dragged the helpless Bisco through the streets with uncanny strength. Bisco almost felt he could see the stars circling his head as he followed behind her.

“…Ugh… Grr…!”

“Milo!” cried Bisco.

“Do not try to move him,” said Amli. “Mr. Milo, sir, can you hear me?”

Milo’s mind was a blur. A paper amulet of some kind covered his left eye and sealed it shut, while a dull pain ached in the back of his head.

“Bis…co…? Where are you…?”

“I’m right here, Milo. Amli, are you sure this’ll cure him?!”

“Probably not, but it should keep it from getting any worse. Can you stand, Mr. Milo, sir?”

Milo did as instructed and climbed out of bed. Though his head seemed heavy, his movements were otherwise natural.

“Can you walk?” Bisco asked. “Nah, on second thought, don’t force yourself. Go back to bed.”

“It’s okay, I can move…but I can hear someone in my head…!”

“It seems we must beat Kelshinha after all if we are to cure him… Well, that does not change what we must do. First we must retrieve your stomach.”

“Bisco’s…stomach.”

Milo teetered over to Bisco and clung to his chest. His face was pale from the constant headaches, and he looked very sick indeed.

“Bisco…you don’t have your stomach back yet? What are you still doing here…?!”

“Calm down! How am I supposed to go off and leave you like this?!”

“Who cares about me?! Bisco, you need to get your stomach back…!”

“My brother has been very active for your sake,” said Amli, putting on her best smile even though Milo’s sudden change in personality scared her a little. “He helped me with the shopping. Look at the large incense burner he helped carry…”

“Your brother…?” Milo’s sapphire eyes burned with darkness as he rushed over to Amli and pulled her up by the throat.

“*Gh…gack?!* Mr.…Milo…sir!”

“You leave Bisco alone…! What are you after…? Is it Bisco’s Rust-Eater powers? Is that what you’ve been after…this whole time?!”

“What are you doing, asshole?!”

Bisco slapped Milo across the face, sending him reeling back into bed, and Amli fell to the floor, coughing.

“…No… I’m not… That’s not… I just…,” she cried, huddled up on the floor. Raskeni ran up to her, turned to Bisco, and nodded.

“Milo’s body may have fully escaped Kelshinha’s grasp,” she said, “but his mind has not. He is still prone to bouts of extreme paranoia.”

“All right. Let me talk to him.”

“Please do. I expect you’re the only one he’ll listen to right now.”

Bisco nodded and waited until the other two had left the room, leaving him alone with Milo.

“…”

“…”

“…Milo.”

“…I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be acting up at a time like this…”

“It’s not *you*. You’d never hit a child. It’s that damn geezer taking control of you. I’m gonna beat him to a bloody pulp while I get my stomach back, so you just sit tight.”

“No, Bisco, I want to go with you…!”

“Milo!”

“I’m not crazy! The noises, the headaches… They’re rough, but I still don’t trust Amli! She’s trying to take advantage of you, and you’re just too kind…”

“Amli’s just a kid. And she’s been trying to help you get better. Why do you think that?”

“I can’t explain,” said Milo, staring off into space. “It’s like her wavelength… Her aura, if I can call it that… It feels just like what’s coming from Kelshinha.” Milo clenched his teeth. “He’s pure evil. It’s not hard to think that he might take advantage of someone’s kindness…”

Milo seemed to be struggling to put his thoughts in order. Bisco had always made his decisions without hesitation, but now, for the first time, he crossed his arms and snarled.

Bisco himself had borne witness to Amli’s true nature just moments ago, and he knew she was nothing but an innocent child. However, if there was one thing he could trust more than his own judgment, it was that of his partner. But could he? Milo’s mind had been taken over by Kelshinha. What if some part of the old man still exerted control, and this was all his ploy?

“Now, that’s the face of a man in a pickle if ever I’ve seen one.”

Rudely pulling open the hospital curtain was the jellyfish girl, Tirol.

“Of course I am. My partner’s losing his mind.”

“No I’m not!!!”

“Okay, okay. Look, Milo needs his head back, and Bisco needs his stomach.” Tirol played with one of her trademark braids and continued, “And we need to come up with a plan soon, ’cuz Kelshinha’s only gettin’ stronger by the minute. You Mushroom Keepers are all about speed, right? So what’re y’all sittin’ around here on yer butts for?”

Tirol's scathing words were nonetheless insightful, and even Milo seemed to calm slightly as he slowly rose from his bed and made his way unsteadily over to the table, where Raskeni and Amli were sitting. With a glare, sharp like an arrow, he sat down with them.

"My partner's gone rogue. Tirol, what do I do?"

"Yer a trusting soul, Bisco. Too trusting. I don't think Milo's lost it at all."

"Not you, too. You think Amli's gonna betray us?"

She lowered her voice to a whisper so only Bisco could hear. "Not so much her as that woman, Raskeni, or whatever her name is. Well, just leave the thinking to us, muscle man. It never was your forte."

"Hmph!"

Bisco didn't like what she was saying, but he had to admit she was right. Grumbling curses under his breath, he and Tirol sat down where the others were waiting for them.

Though the air around the table was tense, all gathered to discuss their next steps. Raskeni, with her map of the Six Towers; Milo, exuding a prickly air like a porcupine; and Amli, still cowering slightly in her seat.

"I'm sorry to send you out again so soon, but we can't do anything without you guys in the field. We need to come up with our next plan."

Raskeni looked up from the map and surveyed the faces around the table, scratching her chin thoughtfully.

"To be honest, I didn't expect Kelshinha to regain so much of his power so soon. He's taken out half my men already."

"What were those zombie guys in the Metal Tower? Did the old guy make 'em with his magic?" asked Tirol.

"Kelshinha has always been very skilled at the necromantic arts, but I've never seen him summon such a huge number before. It's like he's stronger than ever before, and we still don't know how strong he'll get."

"I ain't here to listen to you whine," said Bisco. "You got a way to beat him or what?!"

“I do,” said Raskeni, who looked at Bisco and smiled. “It’s not just Kelshinha who’s defied expectations, but the Mushroom Keepers, too. I have to admit, I didn’t think your arts would be strong enough to drive him off.”

She turned to Amli, who pulled out several tiny statues, like chess pieces, from her pocket placed them on the map. Raskeni took two, a monkey god wreathed in flame and a blue mermaid, and placed them on the Earth Tower.

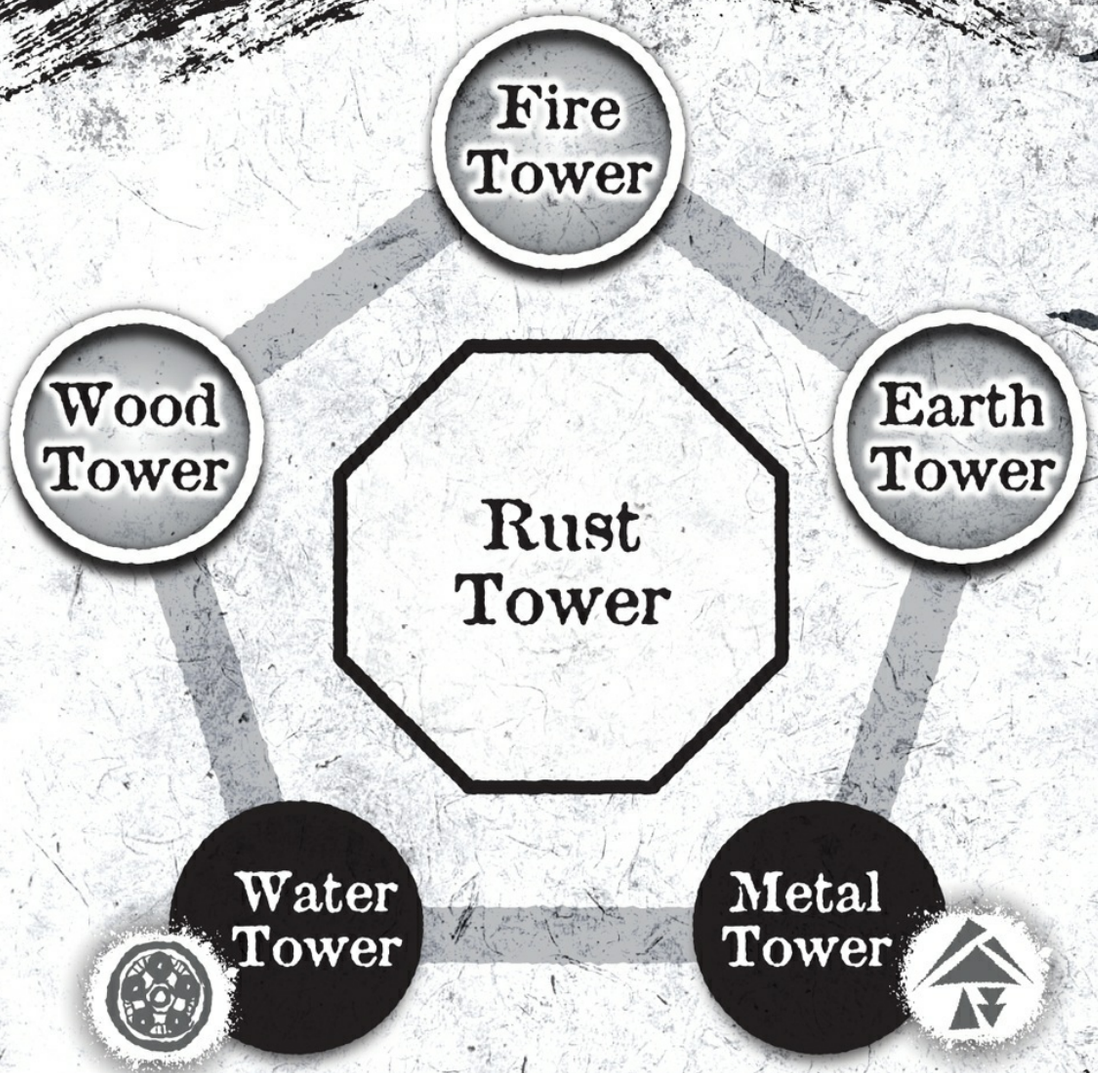
“First, the two Mushroom Keepers will…”

“No, Raskeni. I’ll go alone. Milo has to stay here.”

“Bisco!”

Finally blowing his lid, Milo stood up from his chair and wrapped his fingers around Bisco’s throat.

Six Towers of Izumo



- Rust Tower = Former Head Temple of the Rust Speakers
- Wood Tower = The High Hall (Leader: Kugunotsu)
- Fire Tower = The Flamebound (Leader: Kyurumon)
- Earth Tower = The Wizened (Leader: Kandori)
- Metal Tower = The Gilded Elephants (Leader: Corpulo)
- Water Tower = The Mercurials (Leader: Hylmaleo)

“Why…! Why do you keep saying that?! Haven’t I always watched your back?!”

“I told you, didn’t I?! If one partner dies, the other dies with them. Your head’s not right; I can’t trust you to stay safe out there. It’s better if you stay here.”

“So you’re saying…” Milo’s teeth clenched. The dark flames of jealousy and humiliation swirled within his sapphire eyes. “You’re saying you trust those two strange women? More than your own *partner*…?!”

“You asshole, you know that’s—!”

“Drop it, you two!”

Just as they were about to come to blows, Raskeni stepped in between them. Milo swatted her away in anger and sat himself back down in his chair.

“…Bisco, I’m sorry, but we can’t afford to send any less than our full power. You two Mushroom Keepers are the best we have. You’re going to split up. There are three Scriptures left, and we have to take two of them this turn, or we lose.”

“I’ll go alone,” said Milo in a shaky voice. “I don’t trust any of you… But I’ll cooperate if it’s the only way to help Bisco recover. I’ll go anywhere; just point me in the right direction.”

As Bisco opened his mouth to object, Tirol whispered in his ear.

“Let him go; he’s all right physically, ain’t he? If nobody goes with him, it don’t matter how paranoid he is.”

“…”

“…Then first, the Earth Tower.”

Raskeni cleared her throat, picked up two statuettes of the red monkey god and a jellyfish god, and placed them on the Earth Tower.

“What is that? A monkey…?”

“It’s the monkey god, Agnan. I’m using it to represent you; is that a problem? And over here we have…”

“The jellyfish god, Upa. S’posed to be me, I guess.”

“What?!” Bisco bellowed in outrage. “I have to go with *you*?!”

“What’s wrong with me?! Well, you can just starve to death if that’s what you want!”

“The Wizened of the Earth Tower value knowledge above all. And let’s be honest, Akaboshi’s not the brightest apple of the bunch…” Seeing Bisco’s rotten glare, she smiled. “Apologies. But we need someone smart on the team…,” she said before leaning in and whispering, “*And I don’t think Milo is going to let us accompany you.* By combining brains and brawn, we should be able to take that tower down.”

“Brains, huh? The only thing she knows is how to swindle people. That still count?”

“Still better than a monkey who can only shoot a bow,” retorted Tirol with polished wit. Then she asked Raskeni a question. “Okay, so we’re going to the Earth Tower. What about the other two?”

“I think we’re going to have to give up on one of them. We have to stay here and protect the Scripture we’ve already obtained from Kelshinha. The question, then, is which of the Wood and Fire Towers will we send Milo into…”

“…My, Master. I would think the answer to that is obvious,” said Amli, taking the panda statuette and placing it on the Fire Tower. She turned and shot Milo a smile but faltered upon meeting his piercing gaze. “At the High Hall, seniority is determined by length of service. It will, therefore, be difficult for us to infiltrate the ranks. The Flamebound, by contrast, value beauty and power. It is perfect for Mr. Milo, wouldn’t you say?”

“Ha-ha, I see…,” said Tirol.

But Raskeni was still unconvinced. “You misunderstand. While Amli is correct, the Flamebound are…how do I say this…”

“They’re led by the notorious womanizer, the head priestess Kyurumon, right?” Tirol cleanly finished what Raskeni was hesitant to say. “And that means only female priests get anywhere in that cult. I’ve been workin’ as Corpulo’s mistress, so I picked up that much.”

“Does that mean you have ideas about how we can smuggle Milo in?” Raskeni asked.

“Ideas?” Tirol grinned at Milo’s straight-faced glare and whispered to Raskeni, “You look at that pretty little face and tell me you don’t have any *ideas*.”

Milo looked into her impish grin and gleaming amber eyes and, more or less understanding what she was getting at, stood up and left the table.

“Wait, Milo!” Bisco shouted after him.

At his voice, Milo stopped, dead-eyed. He didn’t even turn around. His silky blue hair caressed his paling lips. His eyes were sunken and hollow from the ceaseless headaches, and there was no trace of his usual innocent, happy smile.

“You really gonna go by yourself, with your head in that state?”

“Better than your stomach. Right now I’m more competent than you are.”

His words were cold and distant. Words Bisco never would have expected to hear him say.

“Stay with Tirol. I don’t know what those two are going to try, but it would be easy for them to trick you. Because you never think about anything…”

Each of Milo’s words dripped with poison, and his eyes grew darker and darker.

“No… I can’t give them the chance… I have to do it right now…!”

Milo turned, and Bisco saw the murder in his eyes.

“Have you lost your mind?!” he shouted, grabbing Milo and restraining him.

“Let go of me!” yelled Milo, shaking free of his grip. He stood there, panting, sweat dripping down his face, as though even he realized he’d gone too far. Then he turned. “…Sorry. I’m leaving. Don’t try to stop me.”

“Milo, if you run into Kelshinha, don’t fight him alone! He’s too dangerous!”

“Don’t tell me what to do. If you’re always going to do as you please, then so will I.”

Milo leaped off the balcony without leaving Bisco time to argue. Bisco watched him go, biting his lip so hard it bled.

Tirol appeared at his side. “Ya trust Milo, don’t ya?”

“…Yeah, but…”

“He trusts ya, even now. And I’m sure he’s feeling the same way you are. Think ya understand his feelings a bit more?”

“…”

“Think he’ll screw up?”

“No, he won’t. Never…”

“Then what’s the problem? Seriously, you two are like a couple of kids.”

Tirol patted Bisco gently on the back as she looked up at the night sky. Then, turning back and seeing the worry on Amli’s face, she gave a bright, reassuring smile.

In the corners of the octagonal room stood eight braziers, flames aflicker, illuminating the dark recesses of the hall. From time to time, a fly or a moth would drift too close and be engulfed in the flames, falling to the wooden floor in a twitching cinder.

The main thing people knew about the upper reaches of the Fire Tower was that it consisted entirely of female staff, but another trait of the Flamebound was that they sought to avoid technological advancement, even in an age where it was common to incorporate such developments into religion. This was one reason the large hall sported not even a single fluorescent light and was instead lit only by fire. However, while this practice seemed regressive at first glance, it did indeed heighten the mystique and lead to even deeper levels of enlightenment.

The hall was filled with priestesses wearing thin robes modeled after blazing flames, all chanting softly. There were only a mere hundred people packed into their room, but their dazzling good looks made it clear that these were the cream of the crop.

…They're burning narcotics…

Milo detected traces of mind-altering compounds in the floral scent wafting through the air. He had already vaccinated himself against them a long time ago, but he could see their effects in the sweaty faces and trembling lips of the beautiful priestesses around him.

Suddenly, the priestess standing next to him collapsed to the floor. Milo stooped to help her, only to find her with her eyes rolled back in her head, unconscious.

"They would go this far…?"

Presently, the high priestess walked out onto a platform, clad in a gorgeous

robe and flanked by two guards (also women). Milo followed suit with the other priestesses and lowered his head in her presence, stealing a look at her when he had the chance. He saw the face of Kyurumon, the leader of the Flamebound. She had close-cropped hair and a pair of hoop earrings in both of her ears, and within her enchanting beauty lurked a powerful and chilling gaze.

But what most grabbed Milo's attention were the three masks floating around her head. There was one representing joy, one for anger, and one for sorrow, and they hovered in the air as if under the effects of some kind of spell, at certain times floating in front of the priestess's face.

"*This concludes the Death Breath techniques*," uttered the angry-looking mask in a deep male voice. "*Fill the mouths of the dead with centipedes. The lower priests will transport them to Tokyo.*"

The warrior monk guards stepped off the platform and began gathering up the expired priestesses. As one of them bent down to pick up the body by Milo, he stepped in.

"Excuse me. This woman is still alive. I can resuscitate her."

"Being laid unconscious by the Death Breath arts is the same as death. It is a matter of honor. Do not intervene."

"If she's alive, she can still deepen her faith. Doesn't that make it more blasphemous to kill her now?"

"You dare speak to me of blasphemy, child?"

Just as it seemed things were about to take a nasty turn, there was a *crash* as the wall of the chamber collapsed. Screams filled the hall as countless figures, covered in rust from head to toe, rushed inside through the hole. They looked as though they were once the Flamebound's warrior monks, but their supple bodies were cruelly torn open, and jets of rust blasted like steam from the cavities.

…Necromancy!

As if answering Milo's thoughts, Kyurumon herself muttered underneath her breath, "…Playing the assassin at their own game. Curse that old man. Where does he get all this power?" The zombies made a beeline for their former

master and, with horrifying strength, tore apart anyone who stood in their way. Having fought them before, it was clear to Milo that Kelshinha was commanding them with intent. Just as one of them was about to reach Kyurumon's throat, her lips, daubed in blue lipstick, began to move.

"Won-shad-lib-varuler-nyu…"

As she chanted, the blood of the mangled priestesses flew from their bodies in a dozen spear-like threads and pierced the zombie in midair.

The sad-looking mask spoke in a voice devoid of compassion. *"But still, that rust-eaten old fool shall not lay so much as a scratch on me."* Kyurumon, her expression unchanging, made a series of signs with one hand, and one of the masks twirled and shot out in a semicircular orbit, slicing the head of the creature clean off.

The priestesses gaped with awe at Kyurumon's power, but still more zombies came. They struck down the guards protecting her one by one, whittling them down.

"*You cur…*," growled the anger mask, and for the first time, Kyurumon's impenetrable gaze became tinged with the slightest hint of wrath. At that moment, one of the zombies broke through her guard and struck her clean in the gut, interrupting her chanting, then took her head in both its hands.

"Gr…! Rrgh…!"

Its veins bulged, and just as Kyurumon's head was about to split in two, a blue-haired priestess appeared in a flash of steel, and with her unbelievably sharp blade, she lopped off the zombie's arm.

"Finish him off, Your Eminence!" she cried.

"Won-shad-varuler-nyu!"

In a hoarse voice, Kyurumon resumed her mantra, and hundreds of spears of blood shot out of the bodies of the fallen priestesses and guards, impaling the remaining zombies.

"*…How dare you make me use so much strength*," muttered the joy mask, and Kyurumon looked slightly irritated as she flashed her hand signs, causing the

three masks to fly around in a circle, almost as if they had wills of their own, chopping off the heads of all the remaining zombies.

After all was silent in the hall once more, Kyurumon's guards and several of the priestesses ran to her side.

"Your Eminence! Are you hurt!"

"I am not. How many are dead?"

"A dozen or so… But this room was supposed to be filled with the greatest assassins the sect had to offer. How could that doddering old fool Kelshinha command such power…?"

"…Somebody must be assisting him." Kyurumon glared into space, drawing her thumb across her blue lips. "Or else, that vixen…"

"Your Eminence?"

"It is nothing. You are not paid to think. Prepare for an attack at any time…"

"Wait, you there."

Kyurumon stopped speaking through the mask and called out in her own captivating voice to the priestess who had just saved her, who now seemed to be trying to remove herself from the room as quickly and quietly as possible.

"You don't seem to have understood the precepts, bringing a blade into this place of worship."

"I apologize, Your Eminence."

She answered in a clear voice, a bit deep for a woman. Kyurumon tore back her cloth hood and held the priestess's chin in her long, slender fingers. The girl was pretty, with dazzlingly pale skin and sky-blue hair. She looked young, and her face held vestiges of boyish charm and gallantry. For Kyurumon, accustomed as she was to being surrounded by perfect faces, there was a strange charm to the mark around her eye and the traces of rust that even the makeup couldn't hide.

"I will punish her for her transgressions," said a guard.

"No need. This one saved my life. Her sins shall be pardoned."

“Yes, ma’am.”

“…In fact, you shall be rewarded.” The corners of her icy lips turned up into a smile. “You seem to know how to fight. I will have you guard my bedroom tonight.”

“Your Eminence! I must object! This upstart should not be allowed near you —!”

Suddenly, a surviving zombie dropped from above and tore out the guard’s throat without even giving her a chance to scream. Kyurumon wheeled around, a pale light appearing in her fingertips.

“Won-shad-vawa-snew…”

As she completed her mantra, a powerful force blew away the zombie, sending it crashing through the wall and far off outside toward the Earth Tower. Then she relaxed and blew on her finger as if it were a pistol.

“Excellent timing. It appears a position has just opened up,” she said, looking down at the guard’s mangled corpse with a heartless smile. “Come visit me in my bedroom when you have finished disposing of the bodies. We will continue the orientation ceremony there.”

“…As you command…”

Milo kneeled with his head to the ground. His eye glinted at the opportunity that had just presented itself, as Kelshinha’s sutras echoed endlessly within his mind.

“Okay, let us begin…”

On the first floor of the upper reaches of the Earth Tower lay a vast circular hall where the initiation process of the Wizened took place. An enormous number of seats surrounded the hall like an arena, and today those seats were filled with paying merchants and other non-priests enthralled by the proceedings. And what exactly were they watching, you ask…?

“He strikes…”

“Wrah!”

As the speaker said those two words, one red-haired priest suddenly

launched himself nearly three meters and swiped a card off the ground. He then grinned at his dumbstruck opponent opposite him and showed the speaker the card in his hand.

"'*He strikes down the Yaksha in their land of shadows.'* Here, it's *Enbiten*'s card."

"Very good. Please return to your seat."

It was *karuta*. A simple game, in which the player must locate the deity related to the words on the speaker's card. For the Wizened, this game served a dual purpose, testing both the reflexes and the spiritual knowledge of its applicants.

However, there was something today that made this event far more exciting than ever before. The red-haired young monk was absolutely stealing the show with his insane reflexes and acrobatic skills. Every time he swiped up another card, his opponents groaned, but the crowd went wild with applause and cheers.

"Huh. I didn't expect ya to be any good at this. Yer smarter than I gave ya credit for!"

Tirol's voice came through the hidden earpiece in Bisco's ear. She was sitting among the audience, watching the whole thing through Bisco's cat-eye goggles, ready to give Bisco support if the situation called for it.

"Heh, I know. We used to play this all the time as kids. Wasn't much else for young Mushroom Keepers to do. But I'm surprised the others are goin' so easy on me. They're all just sittin' still. There hasn't been any punchin' or kickin' at all."

"You think karuta *is a contact sport?"*

"It's not?"

"…"

"Very well. Next question… He splits…"

As the speaker began the next round, there was a tremendous rumble that reverberated throughout the bleachers. A humanoid figure broke through the

walls, scattering rubble, and headed straight for the center of the playing field. Bisco leaped up with split-second reflexes and delivered a spinning kick, launching the intruder into the crowd of spectators like a stray baseball. The crowd was just able to get out of the way before it crashed into the seating.

"Wh-whoa, what the hell was that?!"

"*Same things we saw at the Metal Tower. One of them walking dead guys*," Bisco whispered to the frightened voice on the other side. "*Has the old dude figured out where I am…? That thing was already dead before I kicked it.*"

"Sir, what was that?" one priest whispered to the speaker. "It appeared to be one of the Flamebound's assassins. You don't suppose he was…?"

"Yes. That was necromancy. Kelshinha's specialty. He has finally begun to make his move. We must protect His Eminence."

The elderly examiner stroked his beard as the other priests around him seemed to panic. Then he addressed the room in a loud voice.

"Stay calm! The Wizened will not allow the sacred examination to be halted by such an insignificant interruption. Now then, prepare to continue where we left off…"

"No need, it was '*He splits the stars and unleashes a torrent of sand*.'"

"What…?"

"I already got it," said Bisco, removing from between his toes the *Jakokuten* card that he had picked up during the earlier fight. "Let's keep going. There seems to be some kinda crisis going on, so let's get this over with."

The examiner shared a look with the other priests, who nodded and set about collecting all the remaining cards.

"Hey, hey, what's this about? Was it somethin' I said?"

"Not at all," answered the examiner, scratching his bald head, "but there is little sense in continuing. Err… Bisco Akaboshi. Congratulations on your induction. Everyone else has failed."

"Seriously, Gramps?!"

“Take this card and advance to the upper floor. They will allow you to take the next examination immediately if you wish.”

The elderly examiner handed Bisco a block of wood before turning back and signaling the other two priests. They nodded before climbing the bleachers with surprising agility, throwing open the windows and leaping out of the tower.

“Somethin’ the matter, Gramps?”

“Nothing at all. Simply focus on your studies. A man who aspires to wisdom should not allow his mind to wander. ”

The elderly priest then jumped out of the tower himself with a speed entirely unfitting for his age.

“Hmm. I guess these guys ain’t so bad after all.”

“If that’s all it takes to change yer mind, then you really are a kid, Bisco. C’mon, let’s get going!”

Bisco scaled the chairs amid the cheering crowd, scooped up Tirol and hid her in his cloak, and then dashed up the stairs to the next floor.

Guarding the bedroom… That means…

The decoration of Kyurumon’s private quarters was simple yet refined, mostly black with subdued colorings—a far cry from Corpulo’s bedroom. Kyurumon was sitting atop the jet-black bed puffing on a thin pipe. Her bed gown was so thin as to be more or less transparent, and the three masks that usually hovered around her head were now hanging above the fireplace, silent.

I’m on night duty, so to speak…!

Milo had already heard from Tirol that Kyurumon, leader of the Flamebound, had a taste for beautiful women, and Raskeni had also passed along the rumors that she had the prettiest among them wait upon her, even taking them to bed personally if it struck her fancy.

…If I can make it through this, I have a chance. But how?

“Relax.”

Seeing Milo sweating, frozen in the doorway, Kyurumon stood up and walked

over to him, so close that the indescribable scent of her perfume filled Milo's nostrils.

Uh-oh…!

Tirol had assured him that his disguise would fool any woman, but Milo was not so confident it would pass scrutiny. Kyurumon traced her fingers along his neck, down his arm, and wrapped them around his hand.

"…Your Eminence… I am not worthy… You sully your hands…"

"Hee-hee-hee… Are you afraid?"

Kyurumon smoothly stepped back and began playing with her earring. Through her paper-thin gown, the flames of the fireplace illuminated the perfect contours of her body.

"Hee-hee. Be calm. Those fears will soon melt away…"

Her whispers tickled Milo's ear and brought beads of sweat to his face.

Suddenly, a distant rumble shook the whole tower. Kyurumon quickly pulled on her flame-themed robe and looked out the window. Milo ran up beside her, and what he saw struck him speechless.

"What the…!"

The Wood Tower was burning.

Originally fashioned from a hollowed-out old tree, the Wood Tower was characteristic of the High Hall's penchant for preserving and making use of nature's bounty. Now scarlet flames coiled around it, wreathing trunk and boughs alike in fire. From the upper floors, Milo could even see priests leaping from the tower to escape the conflagration, only to be swallowed up by the dark tangle of platforms and stairways below.

"The Wood Tower has fallen. Damn Kugunotsu… Has Kelshinha already surpassed you…?"

Kyurumon made a brief show of disappointment before uttering a short mantra, and the masks hanging above the fireplace flew off the wall and into their gentle rotation about her face.

“…Your Eminence!”

Milo moved to protect her as a corpse came crashing in through the window. He recognized the state of the body, riddled with holes. It was one of Kelshinha’s puppets. A pair of monks entered the same way, in pursuit. One of them was young, about the same age as the corpse, the other an elderly priest.

“Lady Kyurumon. Pray forgive our rudeness. We appear to have a bit of a crisis on our hands. The Metal, Water, and Wood Towers have fallen.”

“*I can see that*,” said the anger mask. “*That does not give you permission to taint this sacred space with your feet.*”

“Lady Kyurumon. While the towers have fallen, Kugunotsu yet lives. We must put aside our differences and stand united against this threat.”

“…”

Kyurumon scratched her lip, irritated, but quickly reverted to her aloof posture as she schemed up a way to turn the situation to her advantage.

“And what of Kandori? Still engrossed in his cards, I expect.”

“I assure you not. He will be along shortly.”

“You have nerve to suggest we work together. Know that without the Flamebound, you lack the strength to kill even one senile old man. You had better not hold me back.”

As the joy mask finished speaking, Kyurumon snapped her fingers, and several of her personal guards stepped out of the shadows and kneeled beside her. Then she turned to Milo and, in a seductive voice, whispered into his ear.

“…I have not forgotten your admirable conduct. You saved me the bother of marring my flawless skin. Watch over this room in my absence. We shall continue upon my return. Ah, I have neglected to ask. What is your name?”

“…I am Milo Nekoyanagi, Your Eminence…”

“…Heh-heh. Milo. I entrust this place to you. Do not disappoint me…”

Then, without warning, she sprang out of the window and took off toward the blazing Wood Tower, leaping across the power lines that ran between the

buildings. Her guards and the two priests from the Earth Tower followed her.

Is she going to fight Kelshinha? What should I do? Follow her?

At that moment, Milo hesitated.

…I can't get so wrapped up in the Six Towers' customs and forget what I came here for. I'm after Bisco's stomach, not the Scripture.

And so Milo decided to abandon the perfect chance he had been presented with and took off like a shadow toward the towering inferno.

Boom!

The sudden rumble shook the tower, scattering the shogi pieces atop the board. Kandori's eyes shot open, and with a yell of "Kah!" the pieces all froze in position. The room was bathed in silence, illuminated only by the orange light filtering in through the open window.

"…Dude, this is not a 'Kah' moment!" said Bisco, sitting opposite the boulder-like giant of a man. "Do you not see that pillar of flame out there? Look, that tree's on fire!"

"Ignore it!! Your focus should be on this match. This very move!! Devote your mind and play your finest game!!!" yelled the Wizened's high priest in a deep, booming voice that gave even Bisco a start. The vessels on the man's oblong face looked ready to burst.

"Excuse us, Your Eminence!"

A group of priests burst into the room from the lower floor. When they spotted Kandori glowering at the shogi board, however, their faces turned pale. Eventually, one of the priests gulped and addressed their leader.

"Lord Kandori! The Wood Tower is burning down! Kelshinha was behind the attack on the Metal Tower after all!"

"…"

"C-currently, Lord Kugunotsu of the High Hall and Lady Kyurumon of the Flamebound are joining forces to defeat him! W-we implore you to lend us your strength, Lord Kandori!"

“I know. As soon as this match is over, I will join them.”

“B-but…”

“I am in the midst of a battle of wits!!”

Kandori picked up his pawn and, with fearsome might, smashed it into the high-grade Shimobuki-wood shogi board in front of Bisco’s bishop, tearing a spiderweb of cracks into the surface.

“I will not permit your transgression into this holy sphere of clashing minds! Begone!”

“Y-yes, Your Eminence!!”

The monk fell to his knees and scurried out of the room. Bisco watched them go and turned back to Kandori, his eye twitching.

W-what’s this guy’s deal?!

At first, Bisco had thought him a pleasant man, a rare find in this city of towers, physically fit and with a kindly expression on his face. He had even been so generous as to accept Bisco’s challenge, despite the objections from those around him that Bisco had only just joined.

However, ever since Bisco’s extraordinary skill at the game became clear, the priest’s personality completely changed. His skin became flushed with rage, his muscles bulged, and steam almost seemed to be blasting from his nostrils.

“Pardon those fools’ intrusion. It’s your move.”

“I—I know…”

A little taken aback by Kandori’s overwhelming pressure, Bisco adjusted his cat-eye goggles and reexamined the board.

“…Hey, Tirol, can I even win? I don’t have that many pieces left…”

Of course, it was not Bisco who was so incredibly skilled at shogi. Through his goggles, he was relaying the state of the board to Tirol, who was feeding him his next moves through the tiny communicator in his ear.

“…’Kay, forget the bishop. Take the silver with your pawn on c4 and promote.”

“Okay. W-which one’s the pawn again?”

“For crying out loud, learn the pieces already! Their names are written on the front!”

Even though Tirol had given him the complete rundown before the game, sweat poured off Bisco’s face like a waterfall as he struggled to identify the pieces by the intricate handwritten characters scattered across their faces. Still, whether through perseverance or sheer luck, he somehow continued to execute the moves as Tirol commanded.

A clear snap, like a struck gong, echoed as he slapped his piece on the board.

“WROOOAAARGH!!”

The very air around him seemed to shake as Kandori flared up with emotion. Bisco was so surprised that a pair of Rust-Eater mushrooms sprang from his body. Hurriedly picking them off before Kandori noticed, he turned to see the old man still glaring fixedly at the board.

“What was that move…? Pure genius…”

“Tirol, this guy’s a psycho! Even the Rust-Eaters are scared of him! I’m startin’ to think it’s possible to kill someone just through shogi! Let’s switch places!”

“Sorry, that won’t work, ’cuz I’m cheating.”

As the battle of the century took place on the floor above her, Tirol fiddled with a small pocket computer in her hand. As Bisco relayed the state of the board to her, she fed it into the machine, which spat out the optimal move.

“It’s a shogi computer I dug up somewhere called Bonanza. I was gonna try sellin’ it to a collector or somethin’, ’cause I didn’t think it would ever come in so handy. Lucky us, eh?”

“Just end the game before this guy’s face turns from red and into purple!”

“Yeah, yeah. The next move’s mate. Ya just gotta move your rook to the right of his king!”

“R-rook…”

“The biggest piece on the board!”

“R-right of the king…? Right…”

“Your right! Man, I thought havin’ this thing would make it child’s play, but this is more stressful than ever!”

Fingers drenched in sweat, Bisco gripped the rook so tightly it might have crumbled in his hand and slapped it down with a clear knock that reverberated throughout the hall.

The silence lasted five seconds…ten…

“H-hey, what’s wrong? Did I make a mistake?”

“Huh? No, th-that’s mate, I’m pretty sure…”

Suddenly…

Crackk!!

The giant man Kandori swung his head down with such force that it shattered the shogi board in two. One of the pieces struck Bisco in the nose, and he leaped backward, hand to the sword at his belt.

“What’s goin’ on? You wanna fight after all?”

“Your Eminence…”

“W-what…?”

“I have waited my entire life for this day…”

When Kandori raised his head at last, all the anger was gone from his face, replaced with a look of sheer rapture, his tears flowing like twin waterfalls. Bisco could only look on in blank-faced amazement, his mouth hanging open in shock at the man’s sudden transformation once again.

“I have been awaiting one of true wisdom, to whom I should bequeath my title…and the Scripture. This match today was surely the will of the heavens…of the god of wisdom himself!”

As he said this, Kandori looked at the broken shogi board…and hidden within was a cylindrical container wrapped in cloth embroidered in holy texts, identical to the Scripture from the Metal Tower.

Kandori extended his rugged, boulder-like hands and offered the Scripture to the dumbfounded Bisco. “From this moment on, you shall be the one to lead

us…Lord Akaboshi.”

In other parts of the city, people looked on in fear, chanting as they lamented the sequence of disasters that began with the collapse of the Water Tower. And gazing out over the now-blazing Wood Tower was one restaurant and its staff.

“Ohh! The Wood Tower… The Wood Tower is burning!”

“It is an omen of doom… *Won-culvero-kelhasha…*”

“Hey, guys, I know it must be terribly interesting, but could ya get us some food? We’ve been waiting for thirty minutes over here, and we’re starving!”

From the seating area, one young boy with a turban snail shell for a hat called out to them. The kitchen staff apologized profusely, but their words seemed empty, for after cutting something up, they would return to the window to pray, then set a pot to boil and return to the window to pray… It was clear the food would not be ready anytime soon.

“Man, talk about pious. There’s such a thing as being *too* faithful, you know.”

“It’s just their way out here in Shimane. Just like it was your way as a fisherman to attack that goldfish lantern we saw. We almost got into a lotta trouble back there…”

“Don’t change the subject, Plum.”

Nuts shot an unpleasant frown at the sweet young girl in the tusk shell hat sitting across from him as he rubbed his empty stomach.

“If that’s all they’re gonna do, they should close up shop. We come all the way to Shimane, and what do we get? I just wanted to have a nice dinner for once!”

Those two children, their eyes full of vigor despite their young ages, happened to be the new captain of the Imihama Vigilante Corps, Nuts, and his deputy, Plum. The two looked very dashing in their vigilante uniforms but also a little tired. They yawned in unison.

“I wonder how much longer we have to stay on standby,” said Plum. “The governor’s meeting ended a while ago. I can’t wait to get home and eat some alligator buns.”

“I was thinking we could take the day off and enjoy some nice Shimane food,” replied Nuts. “Fat chance of that now, though.”

“Oh, wait! My phone’s ringing! Hello, Governor?”

At the distinctive ribbiting of her telegraph frog, Plum pulled it from her pocket and placed her ear to its belly.

“Are you finished with business? …What? Get on our iguanas and assume patrol?!”

“What? What are we doing, declaring war on Shimane?!”

“Governor, where are you right now…? Ah, wait!”

As Plum panicked, the telegraph frog in her hand fell silent. She looked at it in shock but with a very worried look on her face.

“So? What happened? Did she say where she was?” asked Nuts.

“…Over there,” said Plum, raising a quivering finger. When Nuts saw where she was pointing, his mouth fell agape. “She said a holy war broke out and now she can’t leave. Why now, of all times…?”

“S-she’s at the towers?! Without a single guard?!”

“We were wrong. It’s not the Shimane people’s way or the fishermen’s way that’s the problem.” Plum fell back in her seat, her head in her hands. “It’s the governor’s way. Wherever there’s trouble, you can always find her. Oh well, what can we do? It’s not like she ever listens to us.”

Whenever an explosion rocked the upper levels of the tower, it released a violent shockwave that shook the whole town. It was like a vision into Hell itself, with rubble and screaming people alike plummeting from the upper levels down to the inky depths below.

“Dammit, that old man’s lost his mind…! I need to find Milo, fast!”

“You can’t! The rust is building up again. I must extract it immediately or else the mushrooms will tear you apart first!”

After conquering the Earth Tower, Bisco and Tirol returned to Amrit Healing (along with Kandori, for some reason, now professing himself to be Bisco’s most ardent supporter). Bisco understood the importance of his regular extraction sessions, but the tension was getting to him, and he found himself worrying about his partner more and more.

“You tellin’ me to just close my eyes and go beddy-bye when the whole city’s fallin’ apart—?!”

As Bisco yelled, a glittering Rust-Eater burst out of his collar. As Bisco stared at it in shock, Tirol wrestled him onto his back atop the balcony of the clinic.

“I told ya to keep yer blood pressure down! If I let ya go, Milo’s gonna kill me!”

“Thank you very much, Miss Tirol, ma’am! Now, brother dearest, hold still.”

“You’re welcome, but are ya sure this is hygienic? Rippin’ open his stomach out here where there’s all sortsa germs, I bet.”

“I agree, but if he will not move to the bed, then we have little choice. In any case, I am sure it will be fine. This is Bisco we are talking about, after all.”

“Hmm, yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“An’ what the hell’s that supposed to mean, huh?!”

As Bisco twisted and turned, Amli nodded to Tirol and removed her glass eye.

“It seems we are just in time. Your stomach cavity is nearly full… *Won-shad-amrit. Won-shad-amrit-snew…*”

For the third time, a pillar of rust rose out of his abdomen with a slurp and disappeared into Amli’s eye socket. Bisco was used to it by now, but when he weakly opened his eyes, he was surprised to see Tirol staring down at him, a satisfied grin on her face.

“Wh-what?! What the hell’s so funny?!”

“Oh, nothing… Just laughin’ at what kind of face the Man-Eating Redcap makes when somebody’s fiddlin’ with his insides. After all the trouble you put me through, it’s kinda nice to see you on the receivin’ end for once.”

“You rotten bitch… You’re the one they should be operatin’ on! To find out what’s wrong with that brain of yours!”

Bisco went red-faced and tried to wrest himself free but couldn’t so much as move a muscle during the operation, not to mention dislodge his head from between Tirol’s thighs.

“Hey! Remember to hold still! Aww, what’s the matter, does it hurt? Ya gonna cwy? You big baby.”

“Y-you… When I get outta here, I’m gonna… Tirol! Behind you!”

“Ha-ha-ha! Yer gonna have to try better than that! Just stay still and—”

Suddenly, Bisco sprang to his feet and hurled Tirol back into the room. Then he scooped Amli up in his arms, still giddy with Bisco’s life force.

“Eek! Mr. Bisco, sir…?!”

Then he, too, sprang aside, narrowly avoiding something enormous that crashed down onto the balcony, splattering blood everywhere.

“…Well, would you look at that…! Mr. Bisco, sir, you saved me!”

“Bleh. Bleeeegh.”

“Oh dear, the rust… Mr. Bisco, sir, be sure to vomit up the rest. It’s a rather unpleasant method, but I’m sure you can stomach it, so to speak.”

As Bisco hurled up the contents of his gut, Tirol approached the balcony with trepidation, peering out to see what had landed there.

“Urgh…what is that? A corpse…? An’ fresh, too!”

Suddenly Kandori appeared, apparently in the midst of an argument with Raskeni. “Lord Akaboshi! What happened?!” he cried. Raskeni followed after him with a “Hold on, Kandori! Listen to me…” Then, “Ah! Th-that’s…!”

As soon as they laid eyes on the fallen figure, they both cried out in unison.

““Kugunotsu!!””

The body resembled a bloodstained rag. It was a wonder they could even tell who it was.

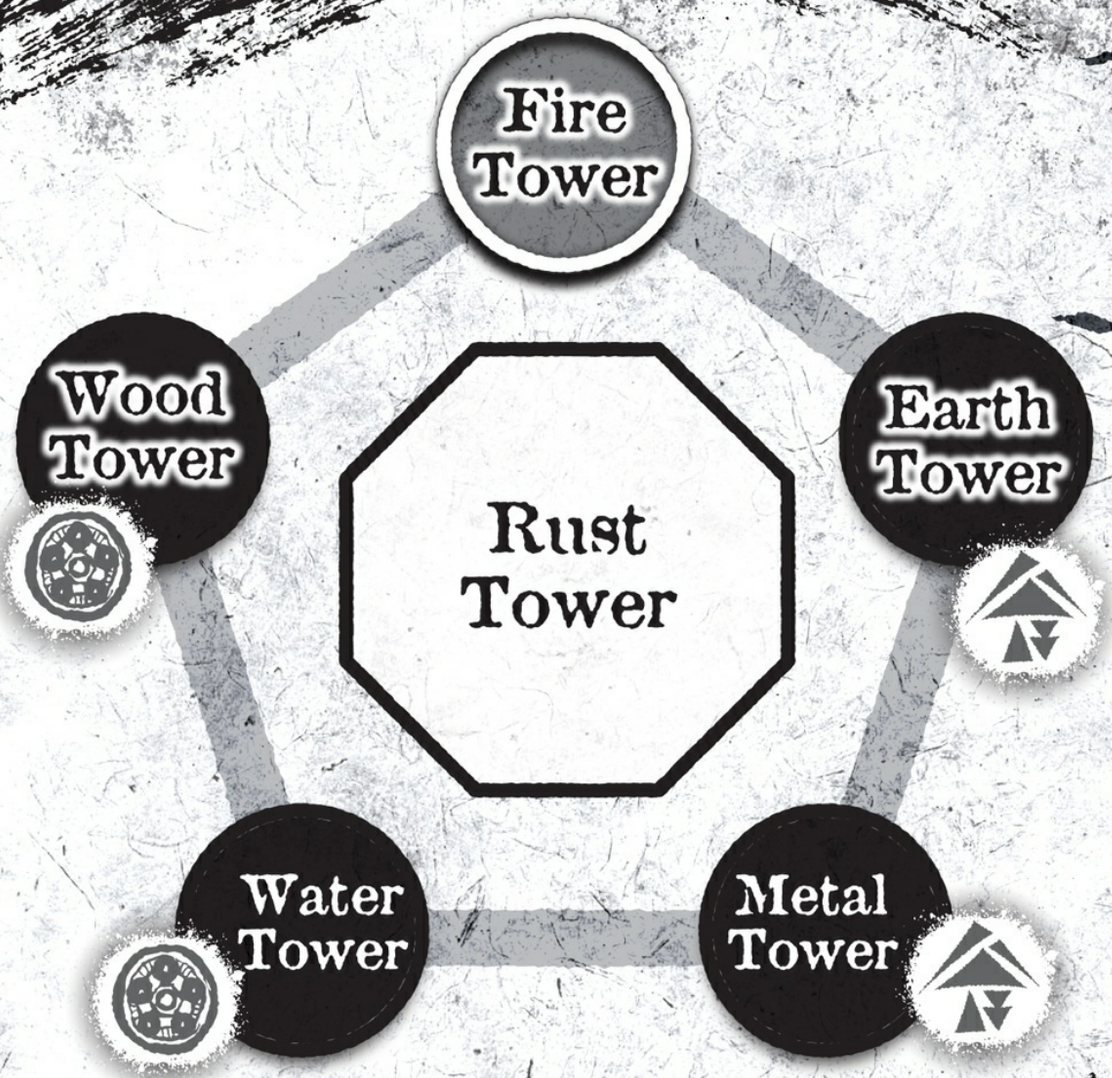
“You knew him, Kandori? Who was he?”

“There is no doubt. He is Kugunotsu, one of the six who defeated Kelshinha, and the leader of the High Hall in the Wood Tower. He kept his strength and magical power even into old age, so I did not expect him to fall to Kelshinha… Hmm. It seems already he is far stronger than we imagined.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, fool!” yelled Raskeni in a rare outburst of emotion. “With Corpulo and now Kugunotsu gone, there’s only Kyurumon left taking on Kelshinha! If he defeats her, it’s all over, and even if she wins, her ambition knows no bounds; she’s only going to take his place and become a second Kelshinha! That’s why we have to set out at once to steal back the two Scriptures he possesses!”

“A second Kelshinha, you say?” Kandori crossed his arms and stood there like a boulder, glaring down at Raskeni. “And what about you? Tell me, after you obtained the Scriptures under the pretext of helping Lord Akaboshi, what was it you were planning to do with them? You scorn Kyurumon, but to my eyes, the two of you are equally devious. Who’s to say you’re not after the title of Immortal Monk as well?”

Six Towers of Izumo



- Rust Tower = Former Head Temple of the Rust Speakers
- Wood Tower = The High Hall (Leader: Kugunotsu)
- Fire Tower = The Flamebound (Leader: Kyurumon)
- Earth Tower = The Wizened (Leader: Kandori)
- Metal Tower = The Gilded Elephants (Leader: Corpulo)
- Water Tower = The Mercurials (Leader: Hylmaleo)

“…How dare you…!”

“Drop it, you two,” came a voice from the balcony. “Why do you think you’re always fallin’ behind?” Standing in a puddle of rust, Bisco chastised the two through gritted teeth. His emerald eyes refocused at last, and the glint in his glare and renewed redness of skin showed he was more or less back to normal, given the circumstances. “Whatever. We all know I’m gonna have to take him down anyway. I’ll bring back the Scriptures, then you guys can fight over them all you want.”

“Lord Akaboshi, Kelshinha possesses two of the Scriptures. His might is beyond compare. Pray, take me with you. I shall protect you with my life.”

“No, thanks. I’ll go by myself.”

“Lord Akaboshi!”

“Mr. Bisco speaks true, Kandori,” said Amli, sounding a little proud. “As far as we inhabitants of the towers are concerned, Kelshinha is already unstoppable. Thus, we must rely on outside arts, those that are not beholden to our ways. We must rely on the strength of the Mushroom Keepers.”

Raskeni frowned ever so slightly as she watched Amli happily go on about Bisco. The man himself, however, turned and took up his cloak and bow, staring up at the tower heights where Kugunotsu had fallen from.

“I’ll go meet up with Milo and take down the old man. You two stay here and look after the Scriptures. He might use some kinda magic to get at them from a distance.”

“Goin’ by yerself, Akaboshi? Can you even walk?!”

“I can feel my strength returning. The Rust-Eater wants to break free.”

Bisco drew his bow and fired a volley of arrows, causing a series of King Trumpets to spring out of the side of the tower walls like a staircase.

“You mustn’t! I should go with you in case something happens!” cried Amli.

“You’ll just get in my way! I need my partner! Anyone who doesn’t understand the mushroom arts is just gonna get caught up in them!”

“Bisco, my dear brother…!” Amli ran up and clung to Bisco’s waist. “You…you need me! We don’t know when you might need healing! Take me with you, please! Let me help you!”

“No, Amli! You stay here!”

It was her master who called her back. Amli didn’t even turn around. With a single glittering eye, she looked up at Bisco. For two seconds, he hesitated. Then he picked her up, put her arms around his neck, and leveled an anchor arrow at the nearest mushroom.

“If you let go, you’re gonna die.”

“Eek!”

Bisco nocked his anchor arrow and dashed up into the sky, Amli’s overjoyed cry ringing in his ears. With lightning speed, he ascended the mushrooms to the tower’s upper reaches.

“Lady Kyurumon! We bring word that Lord Kugunotsu of the High Hall has fallen in battle!”

“Kugunotsu is dead…? And the Scripture?”

“It seems to have been taken… Two of the Scriptures are now inside Kelshinha’s body, which means his power has grown even further. I advise we fall back to the Fire Tower and prepare for total war.”

Kyurumon grimaced and muttered a curse under her breath. The anger mask raised its voice and bellowed at the assassin:

“I will return to the Fire Tower and rally the other assassins. The rest of you, go after Kelshinha. Whoever returns with his head will be made my Speaker.”

““Yes, ma’am!”” replied the assassins, before scattering off into the night. Kyurumon’s eye twitched with rage before she leaped across the power lines and headed back to her room.

“What on earth happened here…?!”

Kyurumon, flanked by her guards, arrived to find her room a scene of utter devastation.

“What is all this? Milo! Where’s Milo?! What has she done?!”

“L-Lady… Kyurumon…”

Just as she was about to lay the blame on Milo, Kyurumon heard a weak voice coming from the rubble. She ran over to find him lying there, his body covered in injuries.

“What happened? Who did this to you…?”

“Kelshinha,” said Milo weakly. “He came…to kill me. I fought him alongside the guards, but we were no match for his spear…”

“How dare he come here! …How on earth did you manage to survive?”

“He got away, but I wounded him. He should be out of commission for a while. I didn’t let him take the Scripture…or anything else in this room…”

“You are a stalwart soul. I will never forget your conviction.”

“Your words…are too…kind…”

Kyurumon laid Milo down on the bed and whispered sweetly into his pale ear.

“I surround myself with the strongest and most beautiful. Milo…your beauty, fortitude, and devotion are second to none. You deserve to be by my side always…”

She whispered as if in a trance, completely forgetting her anger from a moment ago.

“Won-lib-aspal-shad-karna…”

In a powerful voice, she spoke the syllables. Soon, the two guards standing beside her cried out, clutching their throats. Two thick streams of blood flowed out of their mouths and into Milo’s, as well as into the cuts all over his body. In mere seconds, the wounds closed and his pallid face became ever so faintly flushed with life.

“This is a miracle cure, a mantra that old fool Kelshinha revealed to me once in the bedroom…”

Kyurumon twirled her finger, and the three masks flew and hovered above the fallen guards. In that short moment, their bodies had shriveled up like

mummies, leaving them well and truly dead. The three masks lifted the bodies up by their robes and, one by one, tossed them into the fireplace.

“This is…healing magic?”

Milo stared at his pristine body in disbelief. Kyurumon smiled before her voluptuous body swayed and she fell on top of him.

“L-Lady Kyurumon! Oh no, y-you’re…”

“I have overused the mantras today… Milo, pray your modesty does not become rudeness. Comfort me. It is your duty, too, to please me. Is that not so?”

“W-well…”

From between her blue lips, her crimson tongue traced Milo’s collar. Milo tried hard not to make a sound as he looked into her captivating smile.

“B-but…Kelshinha could return at any time…”

“Heh-heh-heh. It was in this very room that I took his organs… While he lost himself in my body, I cut open his belly. Corpulo took his spleen. Kugunotsu, his liver…”

“…”

“His own students were able to pull the rug out from under his feet. He is a fool and a coward. We have nothing to fear from him now. He can never stand against my power.”

Not heeding Milo’s warning, Kyurumon continued to nibble on his ear. “Milo,” she said between heated breaths. “You did very well to guard my room, but Kelshinha can search all he likes. The Scripture he seeks is not here. It is somewhere far beyond his reach.”

“…Wh-what do you mean…?”

“What I took from him…was his lungs.”

Kyurumon sat up straight and, in the dim light of the room, opened her robe, baring her plump breasts before Milo’s eyes. He could clearly make out the scars lining her chest.

“They are inside me now, and he can never have them. No one can…”

“…You put the Scripture inside *yourself*?!”

“My breath is the breath of truth… I can bestow eternal beauty upon whomever I choose.”

Her nose brushed against his, and the rings in her ears chimed.

“Be mine, Milo, and I shall grant you beauty everlasting.”

Milo tried to object, but Kyurumon closed her lips around his. Her tongue was like a snake, relentlessly assaulting that of the sweet *maiden* before her. It was a devilish kiss, one that had enslaved so many women before him. The seductive air that spewed from her Scripture filled Milo’s own lungs. He tried to pull away, but she clasped him in her strong arms. Unable to speak a word, he tried to force her off him.

Suddenly, a sharp pain ran through her long tongue, and she looked down to see Milo’s teeth clamped around it. Before her eyes, what she thought was the young girl simmered with an aura of darkest black.

“Heh. Heh. Heh-heh-heh… Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

The thing laughed cruelly, still holding her tongue in its teeth.

“Y-you!! Ih can’h he…!!”

“You were always such a careful child… What possessed you to put one of my organs inside your own body…?”

With a wicked smile, the girl wrenched Kyurumon’s tongue between her fingers and lifted her off the ground.

“Now you have presented me with the perfect opportunity. I always wanted you, of all people, to feel the pain I felt.”

“On! Vawa! S—!”

But Kyurumon’s mantra was far too slow for the *girl*, who kissed her once more and squeezed her body with fearsome strength. Her bones cracked, and one by one her organs spurted blood, until blood poured from Kyurumon’s mouth and stained her pure white skin scarlet.

“Ugh… Gblhhh!!”

“*Won-shad-mudoshinha-snew.* Now pay for your betrayal, you loathsome whore.”

The *girl* chanted a mantra before placing her lips over Kyurumon’s and inhaling with all her might. Before long, a pair of reddish, glistening organs rose out of her throat, covered in tattoos. They were the Scripture, Kelshinha’s very lungs.

“Now they are returned to me.”

“Gh…hah…!”

Kyurumon coughed up blood and collapsed onto the bed, yet still, with miraculous tenacity, she extended one arm out toward the young *girl*.

“I—I’ll…”

“Hmm?”

“I’ll see you… in Hell, Kel… shin…ha…!”

Her hand reached his face and her nails clawed at his skin, flaying away the false layer and revealing the grinning face of the old man beneath.

“In Hell? Foolish to the end, girl. Just who do you think sits atop its throne?”

The beautiful skin of the young girl crumbled into rust and fell away, exposing Kelshinha’s full glory. With two Scriptures already inside his body, his muscles and figure were far beyond anything possible for such an elderly man. Kyurumon glared at him with all the hatred her vengeance could muster… before her head fell limp to the ground, and she breathed her last.

“…I had presumed you would put up a little more of a fight than that old fool Kugunotsu, but it seems I was mistaken. The viper’s legendary sense of smell must have declined much if you could not see through the Mantra of Transformation at all.”

Kelshinha looked down at Kyurumon’s body and muttered to himself, “How odd. I feel no emotion whatsoever for the one who was once to be my wife.” Then, with a single finger, he poked a hole in his own neck and tore away his chest. There in the beating, red mess of his insides sat rust-coated organs and a

single gleaming stomach.

“Liver. Pancreas. And now, my lungs… It no longer matters who possesses the remaining organs, for none can stand against the power of my mantra now…”

Raising the lungs in front of him, Kelshinha began to chant…

Then, with a *Thud!* an arrow shot through his mouth, tore a hole in his throat, and embedded itself in the wall behind him. Kelshinha scowled as the Scripture fell from his hand.

“Ngh?!”

From the wall behind him came a *Gaboom! Gaboom!* as the cactus mushrooms launched a volley of needles. Kelshinha dodged them by leaping off Kyurumon’s bed and onto the power lines outside.

“Grr. You!” he said through gritted teeth. Standing there before him was the blue-haired Mushroom Keeper, the Man-Eating Panda Milo Nekoyanagi. He had changed out of his female disguise and into his usual hunting garb, and even though his pounding headaches still raged and eye socket was all rusted, his eyes blazed like sapphires.

“I wondered who in this city was still fool enough to stand against me.”

“…I’m too late…!”

Ignoring Kelshinha’s taunts, Milo spotted on the ground the ghastly remains of Kyurumon and gently closed his eyes. Then, in a twinkle of azure fire, he shot Kelshinha a deadly glare.

“Impressive. You can still stand despite my meddling in your brain. I ought to commend you, but as I thought, you are nothing more than a demon who would strike back at a god. For you, there can be no salvation.”

“The one beyond salvation here is you, Kelshinha!” Milo wiped the blood from his face and glared at the old man, his eyes quivering with rage. “How dare you disguise yourself as me…to kill someone who practiced the healing arts!”

“Ha-ha-ha… Kyurumon never showed me so much affection in the bedroom as she did you. I wonder what she saw in that waifish figure of yours… Quite an enlightening experience, I must admit.”

“…You’re still looking down on me…” Milo’s sapphire eye became tinged with black, and a dark smile spread across his lips. From his throat came a deep, crushing voice. “You think I’m just Akaboshi’s sidekick? …Fine, look down on me all you want. But I’m warning you, it’s not my dying partner you should be afraid of; it’s me.”

Milo smoothly unfastened the emerald bow from his back and aimed it at Kelshinha. Even someone wholly unfamiliar with the Mushroom Keepers could see the skill his stance exuded. He stood proudly and confidently, a paragon of his kind.

…You worm…!

Perhaps reevaluating the threat Milo posed, Kelshinha coiled like a snake and

launched the iron pipe in his hand straight toward him like a javelin. Behind that feint, he began to chant a mantra.

"*Won-shad*— Gblh!"

A streak of light pierced the old man's face. Milo's mushroom arrow tore apart the iron pipe in mid-flight like a scrap of paper and continued on right between Kelshinha's eyes. His head swelled like a balloon and burst, but though the body staggered, it did not fall. The fountain of rust that burst from his neck gradually stopped and began to reshape into the form of a head once again.

"Grr… you…weasel!"

"On—shad—vacurer—snew…Restrain target."

"…?! Impossible. How did you know the components?!"

"How, you ask?" Milo gave a smile as he tapped his rusted eye socket. "You think you're the only one who benefits from being inside my head? I can see you, too, you know. I know what mantra you're about to use, the rules…even the meanings of the words."

"…So the lunatic act was just that—an act. All to fool me while I was in your brain!"

"There's two parts to being a Mushroom Keeper. To watch closely, and to believe." Milo spoke without emotion, and from his gently parted lips came a breath as hot as fire. He fixed two arrows to his bowstring and aimed them at Kelshinha. "Right now I have them both. It doesn't matter how many times you can regenerate; I will keep firing until your energy runs out."

"Y-you…you worthless imp! You simpering child!"

"Well, that child is about to tear you to pieces, Kelshinha!" Then, just as Bisco always did, Milo flashed his opponent a toothy grin. "I hope you rot in Hell, old man!"

Using the King Trumpets and his wire arrows, Bisco scaled the tower in an upward spiral, with Amli's arms wrapped tightly around his neck as the wind ran through her close-cropped hair. Her eyes glittered as she took in the wondrous sight.

“You are like a hawk, brother dearest! What a show, to spin around and see the other five towers like this…”

“Even though there’s only two of ’em left? Heh, if I were you, I’d ask for my money back!”

“Mr. Bisco, sir, you travel all over the country with Mr. Milo, correct?” Amli whispered dreamily into Bisco’s ear. “You must get to see such marvelous sights. Someday, I would wish to be free of these darkened streets and see the whole wide world for myself…”

Somewhere in her innocent voice, it sounded like she didn’t truly think it possible. Bisco paid her no heed, however, instead plucking a chunk of smoked hippo meat hanging from the window of a nearby restaurant before leaping into the night toward the neighboring tower.

“Ah! Brother, what have you done?” cried Amli, looking over her shoulder at the red-faced shopkeeper behind her. “You have to pay for that, you know!”

“I’m on my way to rid this city of its cancer. The least they could offer me is one piece of hippo meat.” Bisco bit into the meat as he leaped between the buildings, and soon it was completely gone. “Besides, my stomach’s been startin’ to feel better. The more I eat, the stronger I feel.”

“…That’s strange. The treatment is not yet over. Perhaps Kelshinha himself is getting weaker…? Ah! You did it again!!”

Amli cried out once more as Bisco swiped a string of five cow-liver buns and wolfed down four of them. The fifth he handed to Amli, who puffed out her cheeks in displeasure but still took the bun and popped it into her tiny mouth.

“You’re still eatin’ it, I see.”

“It was you who stole it. My conscience is clean.”

“Ha!”

Bisco gave a surprised chuckle when suddenly a body fell straight toward him from above. Dodging it, he saw that it had been one of the Fire Tower’s assassins, and his face grew grim once more.

“That was one of Kyurumon’s guards. She may be in trouble. Or perhaps she is

already…”

“That means Milo might already be fighting the old man! We gotta hurry!”

Spurred on by the strength slowly returning to his body, Bisco quickened his pace, firing arrow after arrow into the walls of the tower.

“…We gotta be careful of his weird regeneration power,” muttered Bisco with a frown, casting his mind back to the night his stomach was stolen. “You take an arm or a leg, and they just grow back like nothin’ happened. It’s kinda like my power, but way better. He can even survive havin’ his head blown off.”

“Your power is Regeneration, dear brother. It is different than Kelshinha’s power of Restoration. His body is created from Rust, which keys off the original form stored within the Scriptures, and he has set up a mantra command to revert to a previous state whenever the brain detects considerable damage to the flesh.”

“???”

Amli’s utterly incomprehensible explanation left Bisco lost for words, yet he continued to ascend the tower at breakneck speed.

“All you need to understand, big brother, is that unless the power of the rust stored within the Scriptures is exhausted, then Kelshinha is truly immortal in every sense of the word.”

Suddenly feeling concerned for the well-being of his partner, Bisco hastened his step.

“Well, he sure sounds like a monster, as you say, but here in the real world there ain’t such a thing as infinite power. Where does the rust inside the Scriptures come from?”

“Mr. Bisco, sir. You are not quite so dumb as Mr. Milo makes out,” said Amli with a giggle.

“What’s he been sayin’ about me? That dick!”

Then Amli lowered her voice and whispered into Bisco’s ear.

“I was taught it is faith that fuels the power of the Scriptures. Humans possess the power to live, to depend on others, and to believe in something. I was told

this was called 'Evolution.' The will of all creatures to adapt and fight for survival. This will is what gives birth to the Rust."

"Evolution…?"

"Yes. Here at the towers, we have chosen the power of faith. All those who come seeking immortality, their prayers, their desires… All of them are stored within the Scriptures, down to the last line of verse. There, they become rust. That is what I was taught."

"…Huh. So this old man is just usin' everyone's prayers to do what he wants? And he built this massive tower to do it. Pathetic."

Bisco turned to see Amli staring silently at his face with a curious look… Then, in a quiet voice, she asked, "Mr. Bisco, sir, I hear you seek to cast away the Rust-Eater's power."

"What's this all of a sudden? Did Raskeni tell you that?"

"You are very strange, sir. Everybody fears the Rust, fears death. That is why they come here. Why would you go to such lengths to abandon the power of immortality?"

Bisco looked into Amli's twinkling eyes, then he turned away and sniffed.

"'Cause I promised."

"You promised…?"

"A while back, to my partner. I dunno if he still remembers, though."

Bisco slowed down a little as he reminisced.

"He asked if partners stay united until death. And I said…" He paused. Amli awaited his next words with bated breath. Bisco looked a little uncomfortable, but continued. "…Yes. I said yes. Even though there ain't no rule that says that."

"…You said…you would die together?" asked Amli, the astonishment clear in her voice. "With Milo? And for that…you want to give up your immortality?"

Bisco looked uneasy at Amli's words. With faltering speech, he tried to explain himself.

"I already broke that promise once. I died before he did…and it made him cry.

A lot. He cried…and got mad…and told me to never leave him behind again. So…”

Bisco paused as if trying to find exactly the right words to express himself, but the Man-Eating Redcap’s limited vocabulary proved to be woefully insufficient. Amli blinked and turned her attention toward Bisco’s scar-riddled face, and the tattoo around his eye, without saying anything.

…Bisco Akaboshi.

You are a gentle hawk. True of course and steady of wing. Shining, brave, and noble.

Her violet eye twinkled with a new determination, charmed by Bisco’s mien.

Bam! Bam!

“Eek! Mr. Bisco, sir!”

“…Gh. And the more strength I regain, the wilder the Rust-Eater becomes.”

Gritting his teeth, Bisco tore out the glittering mushroom that sprang from his chest. Its base was drenched in his warm, wet blood.

“That broke my rib. The next one’s gonna pierce my lung.”

“Mr. Bisco, sir! Let me extract the rust again! We have to keep it under control or else…!”

“Nah, not now. Milo needs me.” Even when he was faced with his own death, Bisco’s emerald eyes glittered and burned. “Let’s go. If I’m gonna die anyway, I at least wanna put that old man in the ground first.”

It seemed Bisco only grew stronger the closer he was to death. The glittering orange spores of the Rust-Eater floated around his body, enveloping him in a warm glow. To Amli, it seemed she was gazing upon the makings of a legend yet to be written.

You came into my life like a storm… Your legs, free of chains.

You made me feel like I could also be like that.

No, not just me. I’m sure anyone looking at you would feel the same way.

Amli’s eyes quivered as she held on to Bisco, and she pulled her arms tightly

around his neck.

Fwip! Fwip! Fwip!

Milo sneered and fired his arrows, leaping backward across the power lines as Kelshinha followed in fierce pursuit, iron pipe in hand. While the power of his shots was nothing compared to Bisco's, he was several steps ahead in reading the old man's movements, and the arrows faithfully skewered his arms and legs.

Bam! Gaboom!

"Groooaaargh!"

Kelshinha let out a roar of anger and pain and plucked the mushrooms from his body one by one, ripping out chunks of flesh with them. He swung his spear with fearless persistence.

"Kah!"

Shwf!

Milo deflected the spearhead with the edge of his blade and pulled his bow taut. His arrow just grazed Kelshinha's neck and landed in the tower beyond, exploding into a burst of red oyster mushrooms. Kelshinha gouged out the flesh before the mushrooms could even take root and gnashed his teeth in such anger that he looked ready to blow.

"You thinking of your next mantra?" shouted Milo. "I can hear it coming in my head!"

"Won-shad-varuler-snew!"

Kelshinha leaped back, irritated, and muttered his spell. From out of thin air, dozens of Rust kunai appeared and flew toward Milo in unison.

Shwip!

Milo cast off his cloak and fired an arrow toward it. As it struck the cloak, the tip of his wire arrow exploded into a spiderweb of threadlike filaments that engulfed the kunai.

"*Slice target.* I saw that one coming, too."

“You insolent child!”

The steelspider thread wrapped up Kelshinha until he was completely paralyzed. Using all the strength he could muster, Milo tugged on the wire arrow and hauled the cocoon of silk overhead.

“Rrraaaaaaargh!”

With an almighty *Crash!* Kelshinha collided with the upper levels of the Fire Tower, and he slid down the wall before landing with a smack on the balcony of Kyurumon’s bedroom.

“Hahh… hahh… hahh…!”

As he felt the wire go slack, Milo broke out sweating.

…That was close. Thank goodness I was able to rile him up…!

Even Milo could see that in terms of ability, Kelshinha far surpassed him. That was why he had to be crafty. Despite the fact that Amli’s treatment had been completely effective, he had to pretend he was still of unsound mind.

No, it’s not over yet. I have to reclaim Bisco’s stomach…!

Wiping the sweat from his brow, Milo leaped from the power lines to where Kelshinha was freeing himself from the net and crawling along the ground.

“If… If I can just get to…the lungs…”

Kelshinha writhed on the floor, every bone in his body shattered. His endless torture at the hands of Milo had exhausted his regenerative capabilities. In fact, in this short time, his muscular body had completely shriveled up and reverted to that of a mere old man. He groped around for the Scripture, which Milo’s arrow had knocked out of his hand.

“You miserable wretch… I’ll tear you…apart…”

When he spotted the Scripture lying at the base of Kyurumon’s bed, drenched in blood, Kelshinha’s face lit up.

“Ah. There it is. There it is!”

As he slithered through the blood and reached out with one spindly arm to grasp it…

Gaboom!

A mushroom arrow exploded from beneath the bed, sending it and Kelshinha flying.

“Eee! Waargh!”

As the old man collided with the wall and fell to the ground, the sound of the Mushroom Keeper’s footsteps echoed around the room.

“So this is the Scripture. The source of your mantra powers.”

Milo held Kelshinha’s lungs up to his eyes and gazed curiously at the tightly packed letters tattooed around them.

“Is this what I’ve been hearing in my head all this time…?”

Noticing a pattern of some kind in the letters, he squinted closer.

“…These are no ordinary verses… If I had to guess, they look more like program code. So theology has access to some sort of technique that can harness the power of the Rust.”

“…Heh-heh-heh. Clever boy…,” said Kelshinha, scowling up at Milo. Weak as he was, somewhere within Kelshinha’s eyes still lurked a glimmer of intelligence. “…As you have so rightly discerned, the Rust can be commanded through specific sequences of sounds… That is what we call mantra. And I was not the first to uncover this wisdom; there were others—”

Fwip! Milo’s arrow whizzed through the air and grazed Kelshinha’s cheek. He readied another one as he placed the Scripture in his pocket.

“I don’t want to let you speak too much. You could be hiding mantras in your words, after all.”

And I don’t want to hear another speech like Kurokawa’s, he added under his breath.

“Just answer my questions. Where did you come across this technique?”

“I deciphered it myself,” said Kelshinha. There was pride in his voice, even as he crawled along the ground. “Long ago. Over a century, perhaps. It was I who discovered the workings of the Scriptures, back when they were mere holy

texts. The people of this city were nothing more than livestock…offering up their power over the Rust to God. Thus, I overwrote the target of that power. From God…to me…”

He changed the target of worship to himself…?! By tattooing the Scriptures onto his own organs…?!

Milo gazed in wondrous fear at the old man writhing on the floor before him, trying not to let his emotion show on his face. As evil as he was, he must have been one of the few people in the world who understood the Rust.

“Why is it worship that gives birth to the Rust? Doesn’t the Rust bring sickness and death to people?”

“No. The Rust is the fulcrum of evolution. It is those who refuse to adapt who die out, as is natural.”

“…”

“Those who can adapt, and harness the Rust, survive. Have you not witnessed the mutated creatures across the land? They are the next generation of life in this world. Those who have successfully aligned themselves with the Rust. You humans still fear the Rust. That is why you are inferior.”

“‘You humans’? So are you saying you’re not human?”

“That’s right. I’m not. The mantra grants control over the Rust. It is the next step in human evolution. I have transcended humanity and taken a step toward divinity.”

…If what he says is true, then using the mantra, I could control the Rust, and maybe even eradicate the disease from Japan entirely…!

Milo knew he was treading on very dangerous territory, but his curiosity as a medical professional would not let this lie. His bowstring still pulled taut, he pressed on with his questions.

“Could it be possible…to rid a person of the Rust?”

“Without killing them? Perhaps. However, if there is such a mantra, I do not know it.”

“There are mantras even you haven’t mastered?”

“I can use any mantra if I know the words. It simply does not interest me to discover them. I would sooner hunt for the mantra to wipe my ass after taking a shit.”

Kelshinha grinned a toothy smile as the tide of conversation appeared to shift in his favor.

Milo ground his molars in frustration. “Then, what about Bisco’s immortality…?”

“Akaboshi…is not…immortal,” replied Kelshinha between labored breaths. “He has not evolved to be above the Rust. He simply regenerates boundlessly and ages more slowly. He will probably die if his head is removed. If the flesh is destroyed, so, too, is he. However…”

Kelshinha calmed down a little as he started talking about Bisco. He muttered in a low voice, as if he had completely forgotten Milo’s presence, and dark flames resided in his eyes.

“However… However, while it is the Rust’s exact opposite, the Rust-Eater is still fearsome in its limitless power… This one stomach generated in a single day what would take ten thousand worshipers a year to produce! Akaboshi… possesses the divinity entitled only to me! He must be dealt with… He must…!”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, Kelshinha!” roared Milo, losing his patience. “If you can’t turn Bisco back to normal, then I don’t need you anymore. Give me back Bisco’s stomach!”

“I’ll exchange it for the Scripture. The one inside your pocket.”

“You must be joking.” Milo’s sapphire eyes looked down on Kelshinha without pity. “I’m going to kill you and rip it out of you myself. It won’t hurt; the blade is coated with numbshroom oil.”

Milo unhooked the purple shortsword from his waist and tossed it to Kelshinha. He scowled and looked back up at Milo but only met his cold eyes and the point of his arrow. After a while, he obediently took the blade, poised it over his own stomach, and took a deep breath…

“Raaaargh!”

Kelshinha suddenly leaped to the side. Milo's mushroom arrow landed in his thigh, and bloomed, but that didn't stop him.

"On! Shad-lib-va—"

Thud!

Just as Kelshinha chanted his mantra, an even stronger arrow tore off his tongue and pierced his throat, pinning him to the wall.

"I warned you…!"

Gaboom! Gaboom! Gaboom!

The slightest bit of regret showed on Milo's face as the oyster mushrooms tore the old man apart. His body floundered with the force of the expanding mushrooms before falling to the ground, motionless. Milo looked down and bit his lip in remorse. Remorse at losing the chance to learn the greatest healing arts the world may ever know…but more than that, remorse at taking the life of another sentient creature.

There was…no other way. I had to kill him…for Bisco.

"Lib-varuler."

As soon as he heard the warm, sickly voice murmuring in his ears, Milo sprang back, shocked. Then, from out of his pocket came a *Shwing!* as spears of rust shot out in all directions, piercing his body. Milo failed to land neatly and slipped on a pool of his own blood, falling onto the bed.

The attack had come from the Scripture itself. Sharp lances of Rust extended from the lungs, puncturing his delicate skin. Milo braved the intense pain and tried to stand up, when Kelshinha rushed toward him and delivered a roundhouse kick that caught his neck, sending him flying across the room and colliding with the far wall in a cloud of dust.

It was a decoy…this whole time…!

Blood flowed from Milo's mouth as he looked at the dead body, pinned to the wall by his arrow. Now it was not Kelshinha's, but that of the high priestess Kyurumon.

"You demons are all fooled by the same trick. First this woman…and now

you.”

As Kelshinha approached, Milo frantically tried to get to his feet, but found no footing in his own puddle of blood. Kelshinha stepped before him and snarled.

“You worm.”

The old man’s kick landed in the pit of Milo’s stomach. The pain was so unimaginably strong that he could not even breathe. All he could do was clench his fists and grit his teeth as Kelshinha grabbed him by the neck and slowly lifted him off the ground. He grinned a wicked smile as he gazed into Milo’s beautiful panda face. Then he grabbed the Scripture, still embedded in Milo’s body, and twisted.

“Waaaaarghhh! Graaaargh!!”

“The Immortal Monk…no, Kelshinha, the Rust Lord, is a benevolent god. I am willing to overlook your insolent behavior, your treacherous conduct, and allow you to surrender. Kneel before me and swear your eternal devotion.”

“Who would ever swear devotion to you?!”

“Heh-heh-heh. Very well. It would be most tedious for you to give in so easily. Tell me… which is more painful. This…or *this*? I can’t hear if all you do is scream.”

“Gaaaaaaagh!! Gaaaaah! Gyaaaaahhh!!”

With each of Milo’s ghastly screams, the blood bubbled and spilled from his open mouth as if he was gargling it. Just as he was about to pass out from the sustained torture, Kelshinha finally pulled the Scripture from his body, drawing thick, black blood. Before Milo’s now-empty eyes, he recited another mantra, and the rust spikes extending from the Scripture crumbled away. Then he opened his mouth impossibly wide and slowly gulped the Scripture down.

“…Now I have finally reclaimed three of them.”

Kelshinha proudly stroked his own chest and felt the power flow into his body. Milo could only watch, powerless, as Kelshinha lifted him up once more.

“Your organs have been torn to shreds. If left alone, you will soon die… without the powers of the Rust Lord, Kelshinha, that is.”

“…”

“The people of this city are not deserving of the immortality they seek. They are fools, little more than robots who rub their hands together in prayer and fill the Scriptures with Rust. However, you are different. You gazed back at me through my domination, and you unraveled the mysteries of the mantra by yourself. There is value in letting you live.”

“…”

“Rejoice. Once I am whole again, I will grant you immortality through the power of the Rust and make you my new high priest. Already, it is beyond your ability to kneel. If you wish to live, simply say the word… Make me a god, and pledge your allegiance for all eternity…”

Milo listened to him speak with empty eyes, and just as Kelshinha was starting to get irritated, he opened his mouth.

“You…are…”

“That’s right. Say it. I am Kelshinha, the Rust Lord…!”

“You…are…not…my…god.”

At Milo’s suddenly clear voice, Kelshinha’s eyes went wide with shock.

“My god is strong. He will…never break. And he’s kind…even though he can be a bit dumb at times… I already have a god. And there’s nothing left in me to devote to anyone else, because I already gave my everything to him.”

“You spurn *me*? Here, on the verge of death? When I am your only salvation?! Where is your god now?! He cannot save you!!”

“If faith…is only about being saved… Then I don’t need it.” Milo’s face was by now as pale as a sheet, and yet he mustered up a tiny smile. “There is nothing I want, except to offer myself, and to live my life in his service. And to fight for him…even if that means I must die for him…”

Kelshinha was struck dumb by the boy’s devotion, an acceptance of death so blindingly clear. While everyone else threw themselves at his feet and begged for eternal life, this boy simply stared in silence at his own approaching death and awaited what lay beyond.

It was something Kelshinha had never seen in over a hundred years of life.

“You fool…! You think death will save you from me?! You will rue your words this day as you burn in the pits of Hell for all eternity!”

“Death…will save me…?” Milo muttered with vacant eyes and chuckled. “You’ve got it all wrong, Kelshinha. Your time’s up. I’ve won.”

Kelshinha tilted his head as he struggled to understand the meaning of Milo’s words.

Just then…

Kerrashhh!!!

Like a bolt of lightning, an arrow tore into the room and pinned Kelshinha to the wall. Almost no time later, a cluster of oyster mushrooms sprang into being and launched him back in the other direction, sending him crashing into the opposite wall with enough force to shatter every bone in his body.

“…?! Gblaaaargh!”

Kelshinha growled as he writhed on the floor and trembled with fear at the dark shadow standing over him.

“Don’t think you’re the only one who keeps comin’ back, old man.”

“A…ka…bo…shi…!”

“Before I kill you, I want you to undo what you did to my partner. Stand up, old man, and tell me where you want me to open you up.”

“Khaaah!!”

Kelshinha sprang to his feet and leaped back, plunging the metal pipe in his hand deeply into his own stomach. When he saw the blood dripping down the corners of Bisco’s lips, an evil grin spread across his face.

Boom! Boom!

A great big pair of Rust-Eaters, larger than ever before, sprang out of Bisco’s back and his side, tearing through his flesh. The Rust-Eater antibodies had finally broken their fetters and started blooming without regard for Bisco, their host.

However, Bisco did not stop. Though the explosions rocked his body and blood dripped from his mouth, he let out not a single cry of pain. He simply walked, step by step, closer to Kelshinha, that same jade-green glimmer in his eyes. As the old man watched him approach, the very incarnation of wrath, he trembled and whimpered in fright.

“There, huh?”

“U… uggh… Ughuuh…”

Kelshinha stabbed the pipe into his Rust-Eater stomach, and every time he did, blood flowed from Bisco’s mouth, and another huge mushroom grew from his torso. Still, Bisco’s glare was unchanging, set calmly on Kelshinha’s face, as he stepped closer and closer.

“S-stay back…! Gr…grblh!”

At last, blood erupted from Kelshinha’s own mouth. Bisco looked at the quivering old man and grabbed on to the hand in which he held his spear. Then, with all of his might, he plunged it back in.

“Ggraaaaaargh!!”

“This is how you use a spear, old man. Keep your back straight.”

“H-have you gone mad, Akaboshi?! That’s…your own stomach!”

“That’s great. It means I can tell how much it hurts you… Milo was screaming much louder than that… It was enough to make my ears bleed.”

“S-stop! Stop it! Nooooo! Ghaaaaargh!”

Bisco seized Kelshinha’s neck so he couldn’t run away and pressed his forehead right up against the old man’s.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The Rust-Eaters burst forth all across his body without pause, crushing his organs, smashing his bones, and yet granting his muscles more and more strength. Bisco and Kelshinha stood opposed, spurting blood, each drenching the other in sticky crimson.

But their eyes were different. Kelshinha’s eyes were dark and muddy as he

shivered in panic, while Bisco's emerald eyes, staring down his partner's enemy, gleamed with resolve, and even pain.

"Wanna make this an endurance match, old man? If you can hold out until I die, you'll win."

"O-on! Kerd-uleshinha—!"

"…?!"

Kelshinha could bear the pain no longer and tried through his bloody throat to speak a mantra, when suddenly the spear embedded in his torso slipped out into Bisco's hand. Planted on the tip, Bisco's organ glittered like the sun, surrounded by gently glowing orange spores.

"Ah. My stomach!"

"Die, Akaboshi!"

The moment Bisco was distracted, Kelshinha launched a spinning kick into his neck. It sliced into the flesh like a knife, drawing blood, but stopped there, halted by Bisco's muscles, before it could chop his head off completely. Kelshinha simply stood on one foot, his other caught in Bisco's neck, trapped in his steely gaze, and began sweating all over.

"I—I thought…even you…should die…if…if I cut off your head…"

"Oh? With that rusty old kick of yours?"

Bisco's eyes seemed to leave trails in the air as he somersaulted, spinning his glittering golden body like a whirlwind and unleashing a rolling kick as deadly as the swing of a great battle-ax. The kick struck Kelshinha in the neck, too, and smashed his body into the ground. The floor cracked, and the Immortal Monk bounced back up, high into the air, and lodged into the ceiling.

M-my bones… The restoration cannot keep up…

Kelshinha groaned, embedded in the ceiling by the inhuman power of the Rust-Eater Bisco.

Just then, Amli finally caught up, landing in the room and shouting, "Mr. Bisco, sir! Now's our chance to take back the Scriptures! Open a hole and I'll suck them out!"

“Got it!” Bisco replied.

“…?! Y-you miserable worm! You mean to blaspheme against a god?!”

Schwip!

Bisco unsheathed his bow and fired an anchorshroom arrow, cutting off Kelshinha’s indignant roar and piercing his stomach, pinning him to the ceiling.

“Won-sharmada-kon-zen-mudoshinha-snew!”

The anchorshroom burst out of Kelshinha’s belly and expanded to full size. Then, at Amli’s mantra, it began to dislodge the three Scriptures from within his body. Seeing the source of his powers being stolen away, the old man bellowed.

“Wroooaaarrgh! You…! Youuu…!!”

“Looks like you’re back to being a coward again, old man.”

“Give me back the Scriptures! I’ll let you stand at my side, Akaboshi!”

“Hah. I’m honored.”

Bisco nocked another anchorshroom and fired it at Kelshinha’s chest. The lead mushrooms exploded all over his body, pulling him out of the ceiling and sending him crashing down onto the ground once more. There, the incredible weight of the anchorshrooms shattered the floor, and the floor beneath, and so on, and so on, sending Kelshinha plummeting down to the lower levels of the tower, until at last he traveled through the entire building and collided with the solid ground far below.

“AAAKAAABOOOSHIIIIIII!”

“Enjoy your climb outta Hell, you son of a bitch.”

As Kelshinha’s voice faded into the darkness, Bisco cracked his neck and plucked a Rust-Eater from his collar… Then, he looked down at his mushroom-riddled body and sighed.

…So this is it, huh?

Among all the golden mushrooms birthed by the Rust-Eater as it scrambled to repair Bisco’s body, one extended proudly from his left breast. He could feel its roots digging deep into his heart, and he knew that death was not far off. He

cracked his neck, and then, suddenly noticing the body of his fallen partner, he ran over to check on Milo. Amli was already there, sitting over him, her eyes filled with tears.

“…Amli.”

“Mr. Bisco, sir…!”

She threw herself into Bisco’s chest, her tears staining his clothes. Around Milo’s bloodstained body were dozens of empty vials, showing he had not given up on life until the very end.

In fact, it gave Bisco hope. He crouched down and examined Milo’s body. Locking away his negative thoughts, he slowly drew closer and seated him up gently in his arms.

“…Milo.”

“…”

“Can you hear me?”

His arm was damp with Milo’s warm blood. His partner’s body was stained completely red, and his face was deathly pale. Slowly, he turned to Bisco and gently opened his eyes. He blinked a few times upon seeing that emerald gaze staring back at him and smiled, like a child in his father’s arms.

“Yeah, Bisco…I can hear you…”

“…You gonna make it?”

“…I don’t think so… I’m sorry, Bisco… I tried…”

“…”

“…Oh, Bisco…I…I…”

“You already saved the world once. You’ve done enough. You can rest.”

“Bisco…I’m sorry. I’m so sorry… I just wanted…”

“It’s okay. I’m your bow, and you’re my arrow. I may have broken my promise once, but I’m not gonna let that happen again. We’ll be together always, Milo.”

“…”

“…”

“…I’m sure…”

“…”

“…I’m sure the two of us are headed for Hell, Bisco…”

“…Then let’s swim through the sea of fire together. We can do anything, as long as we’re together.”

“…Yeah, Bisco… We can…”

As the blood spilled from Milo’s mouth, he rested his head in Bisco’s arms with a half-happy, half-sad smile and squeezed his partner’s hand back.

Bisco, seeing his partner at peace, turned back to Amli, who was staring at the two with an expression of rapt attention, and he muttered, “Well, there you go. This is the end for us. I don’t care what you do with our bodies, but I think you better move ’em unless you want a bunch of mushrooms in the middle of your city.”

“Y-you cannot be serious!” Amli ran up to Bisco, the tears streaming down her face. “I-it is too soon to give up! There must be something we can—!”

“It’s perfect timing; we can both go out together,” said Bisco. Then, suddenly noticing it, he pointed to the golden stomach in Amli’s hands. “You can keep that. I ain’t gonna need it no more.”

“M-Mr. Bisco, sir…!!”

Bisco was so ambivalent toward his own death… Or rather, he was so determined to die alongside his partner that Amli’s gentle heart couldn’t take it.

You can have only one partner…

It’s someone to whom your very life is connected.

That is what you call a partner.

It’s a very simple thing, but so beautiful, and yet…

I can’t let you go, Mr. Bisco, sir! It’s too sad…!

Amli’s tears pooled on her cheeks and fell in great droplets…but when they

landed on the stomach in her hands, Bisco's organ scattered brilliant orange spores into the air. Amli was captivated by the sight, like falling petals, when…

Mr. Bisco's stomach…it's…?!

All of a sudden, Amli had an idea. Wiping her tears away, she set about collecting the Scriptures that Kelshinha had vomited up.

"Mr. Bisco, sir. There's still a way that— Aaah! What are you doing! Stop! Stoppp!"

Amli looked over to see Bisco with his dagger to his stomach, poised and ready. She ran over and tugged his arm away, gasping for breath.

"What?" he said, annoyed. "This is the way, ain't it? Aren't you supposed to disembowel yourself at times like this?"

"Just how determined are you to die, Mr. Bisco, sir?! You're giving up too soon! I just thought of a plan! A great one!"

"What is it now? You've done enough. You should get home before the mushrooms start growin'."

"Mr. Bisco, sir." Amli placed both hands on Bisco's head and turned it around, staring straight into his jade-green eyes. "There's a way to bring Milo back to life if we combine the power of the Rust with your power…the Rust-Eater's. You have too much regeneration while Milo has too little. If we balance them out, we might yet save both of you!"

"Use my life to help Milo…?!"

"By feeding him the Rust-Eater's power," explained Amli, her face serious. "If this works, it might mean that you and Mr. Milo become half immortal, but it's still worth it, right?"

At this, Bisco faltered. He looked at his dying partner then back at Amli again, and he nodded. Amli had already anticipated his response and begun chanting.

"*Ule-shad-shouki*," she intoned, unusually determined, sweat forming all over her body. "*Shouki-add-kon-zen-mudo-amli-bisco…*"

As she spoke the syllables, Kelshinha's Scriptures glowed with a purple light and levitated ever so softly into the air. Then Amli's and Bisco's bodies, and

even the golden stomach, were all bathed in the same violet aura.

"…The mantra is rejecting the Rust-Eater…! I must force it open…! Perhaps this will do it…!!"

"H-hey! What the hell is that?! I'm… I'm…!"

"The Mantra of Rebirth is only supposed to be performed with all five Scriptures, as it requires a vast amount of rust to function." Screwing up her face in concentration, Almi clutched her breast as she attempted to press on with the mantra. "But we only have three of them here, so I am using myself and you in place of the other two…!"

"Me…and you?! Amli, you're crazy! Stop!"

"Mr. Bisco, sir, take Mr. Milo's hand! We only have one chance!"

Bisco did as she said and grabbed on to his partner's hand, and Amli spat out the rest of the verse, a ferocious expression on her face, blood pouring from her eye socket.

"Shouki-shad! Kon-zen-mudo-amli…"

"Stop, Amli! You'll kill yourself!!"

"Add-bisco-snew!"

But just as the mantra was on the verge of completion, Bisco was suddenly engulfed in a gust of wind, and his heartbeat hastened, as fast as an alarm bell, pumping boiling hot blood all around his body and turning his skin a mottled orange, like the sun.

"Wh…what the hell?!" cried Bisco. His hair was bright as blazing fire. He looked just the same as when he'd first crawled out of the pits of death, at the miraculous rebirth brought about by the Rust-Eater.

The mushrooms covering his skin disintegrated into glittering spores, and the skin beneath was as good as new. Those spores then followed Bisco's arm to Milo's hand. There they stopped, probing him for a while, before interpreting him as part of Bisco and suddenly rushing to cover his whole body. They slipped inside and, with incredible speed, set about repairing all his damaged organs.

"…Wh-whoa! Milo! Can you hear me?"

“…”

“Damn, he’s out cold. Hey, Amli! That’s enough; you can stop the mantra now!”

But Amli kept chanting, even as blood dripped from her eyes and nose.

“Amli… Wh-what…?!”

She was unconscious. Even so, the words continued to form on her lips. Bisco was struck dumb at the little girl’s endurance but wrapped his arms around her and whispered in her ear.

“Amli…don’t die! Come back, Amli!”

“…!!”

Amli gasped as the light returned to her eyes, and the wind stopped. The rubble in Kyurumon’s bedroom had all been blown away, and the three sat, panting heavily.

“A-Amli! Your eyes…there’s blood…! Your head…it’s…!”

“…Mr. Bisco, sir…Mr. Milo…sir…I had…to…save you…”

“You idiot! Who cares about us?! Why does a kid like you have to die for us?!”

“He’s right, Amli! Stay still, I’m going to inject you with a lurkershroom medicine. It seems like you might have suffered cranial trauma, too, so I’ll administer an eggshroom injection. After that, I’ll sew up the damage around your glass eye.”

“Of course. Milo’ll have you better in no— Hmm?”

Bisco turned and gazed in shock at the sight of his partner, quickly setting about tending to Amli’s wounds.

“Stick out your tongue for me. Say ‘Aaah’… Okay… I’m sorry I was so rough before, Amli, I really needed the act to be convincing… Okay, I’m all done for now!”

He completed Amli’s treatment in the blink of an eye, then turned to see Bisco’s complete look of astonishment. Milo stared at him, confused for a moment, before flashing him a cheerful smile.

Slap!

“Owwww! What did I do?!” Milo whined.

“Gimme some warning before you come back to life! You’re gonna give me a heart attack!”

“H-how am I supposed to do that?! Anyway, you did the same to me!”

“W-wait a minute, what happened to your hair…?”

Of all the things to be surprised about, that was the most notable. Instead of its usual sky-blue color, Milo’s hair now shone a brilliant emerald green.

“What the hell happened to you…?”

Bisco grabbed a broken mirror off the floor of Kyurumon’s bedroom and held it up to his partner. Milo ran his hands madly through his own hair, trembling in shock.

“I guess it got mixed with the orange of the Rust-Eater,” said Bisco. “Gonna take some gettin’ used to, but it looks fine, don’t it? Nothin to get worked up about.”

“B-but… No! I don’t like it! It makes me look like a punk!”

“What, and blue don’t? How’s that work?”

“Ahem, ahem…! Excuse me, I’m glad you two are friends again, but we must hurry,” said Amli. “We have little time before the Flamebound’s assassins start sniffing around here, and we must be gone by then.”

“That’s right, we need to get Bisco’s stomach back! I’m sorry, Bisco, I thought I could beat Kelshinha and—”

“You messed up, bud. But don’t worry, I already beat him and got it back; it’s right here.”

“You… Whaaat?! You beat him?!”

Milo sprang to his feet. Spotting Bisco’s golden stomach lying on the end of Kelshinha’s spear, he breathed a sigh of relief.

“Th-thank goodness. I don’t know what I’d do if I came back and you didn’t, Bisco…”

“Nothin’ to worry about. There ain’t no way I’m losin’ to someone you were on equal footin’ with.”

“…Bisco, can I borrow it for a sec?”

“?”

Squeeze!

“Gwaaagh!!”

“Stop flirting, sirs! We need to get out of here!!” bellowed Amli, her usual gentle face rosy-cheeked with anger. Just then, a large figure landed behind her with a thud. As she turned to look, Amli paled a little, and her lip began to quiver.

“M-Master…!”

“Oh, hey! Raskeni! You’re just in time!” said Bisco, wresting his stomach back from Milo at last and flashing her a grin. “I just got my stomach back, and the rest of those Scriptures, too. An’ we would have died, too, if Amli here hadn’t saved us.”

“With the Mantra of Rebirth.”

Raskeni’s harsh voice cast a silence over the room. Bisco cocked his head in confusion while Milo took a step forward in his defense.

“Amli,” Raskeni continued. “You used the power of the Scriptures. Power meant for Lord Mashouten alone.”

“B-but Master, if I didn’t, they would have—”

“Silence, fool!! Have you no sense whatsoever?!”

A merciless backhand from Raskeni struck Amli across the face and threw her against the wall.

“…?! Raskeni!! Have you lost your mind?!” yelled Bisco.

“I had thought you smart enough not to let down your guard around these demons. And yet not only did you do exactly that, you helped them, using power meant for our Lord.”

Drawing a shortened spear and pointing it at Bisco and Milo, Raskeni took

Amli's chin and stared into her eyes. She was bleeding from the nose and trembling in fear.

"…Fear not. I know it was only a momentary lapse in judgment. You understand that all we have belongs to our Lord. That we cannot allow ourselves to be distracted. Don't you?"

"Hic… I'm sorry… I'm sorry… Please forgive me, Master…"

"Oh, my poor dear. Don't cry. You were just misguided, led astray by a fleeting dream, that's all. Now, drop the formality… Call me…Mother…"

"Mother… Please, don't leave me… I'll never listen to them again…"

"…Raskeni! I knew it!" yelled Milo. Behind him, a fiery aura almost burned the very air with its intensity. Raskeni peered over to see Bisco's jade-green eyes flashing like gems.

"So you're Amli's mom, huh…?" he growled, with a voice that seemed to leak fire from his lips. "What kind of mom treats her kid like that…?! And at a time like this?! You're gonna break her heart!!"

"Are you trying to tell me how to raise my child, Mushroom Keeper?" sneered Raskeni, pointing her spear at Bisco's nose. "Before we are parent and child, we are Lord Mashouten's subjects. Of course we should act in line with his wishes lest we receive divine punishment… She still loves me, don't you, Amli? Say it."

"Hic… I…I love you, Mother… I love you, Lord Mashouten…"

"This is fucked up!!"

In a flash, Bisco swung the frame of his bow time and time again at Raskeni's neck, but she deflected the blows with her spear and countered with a devastating spinning kick that launched Bisco back.

"Gwargh?!"

"Won-shad-valo…"

"Watch out, Bisco!"

Milo jumped in and pushed Bisco aside the instant before countless rust spears launched upward out of the ground, ripping the ends of their cloaks.

“Urgh, what’s happening?” said Bisco. “I feel so weak!”

“It’s because you’ve given me half the Rust-Eater’s power! I’ll fight her, get down!”

“How are you gonna do any better? You were dead five minutes ago!”

Raskeni calmly stepped toward the two, a gentle smile on her face, and in front of her appeared several of her subordinates, clad head to toe in robes, forming a circle around the wounded duo.

“I must thank you for disposing of the other priests and bringing me the Scriptures… Next,” she said, pointing her spear in Bisco’s face, “I will take your stomach and all your other organs. I am sure Lord Mashouten will be very pleased.”

“This was your plan all along!” Bisco yelled.

“Of course it was. I never knew you earthly folk were so gullible.”

“It is because the Mushroom Keepers are mere barbarians,” said one guard.

“Yes, I suppose the mushrooms ate away all their brains,” added another, and they all began to laugh.

“I’m not gonna let you get away with this…!”

“Well, you must admit, you *are* far too trusting. That is why you keep having the rug pulled from under you like this.”

“Don’t talk like you know me… Huh?!”

Bisco roared at Raskeni, baring his fangs…then he realized something. The voice he’d just heard was not hers. In fact, it sounded oddly familiar.

“But allow me to issue a correction,” said the new voice. “The red one aside, my brother at least is no fool.”

The subordinates all turned to face the speaker.

“…?! Who are you?! Identify yourself!”

“How did it take you this long to spot me? Even Akaboshi isn’t this oblivious.”

“Enough jokes! Kill the impostor!”

At Raskeni's order, her lackies readied their spears. The figure leaped up as they lunged, somersaulting through the air, her long black hair trailing behind her.

"A…a woman?!"

"Kiraaaargh!"

The woman swung her hexagonal staff, mowing down all the underlings around her in a single sweep. Some hit the walls, while others were not so lucky and disappeared off the edge of the tower and plummeted toward the city below.

Raskeni herself moved to protect Amli and the Scriptures and chanted as the figure leaped into the air once more.

"Won-shad-varuler-snew!"

Spears of rust formed on the inner walls of the room and hurtled toward the figure. The black tornado hopped across the rubble and brandished her iron staff once more.

"Rrraaaargh!"

With a mighty swing, the woman snapped every last one of the spears in half. Then, quickly following up, she swung back at Raskeni.

"What?!"

Raskeni barely blocked the attack, like a steel bullet, with her spear, and the force launched her across the room, blasting a hole in the far wall.

"I-impossible. Just who are you…?!"

Raskeni peered through the clouds of dust at the imposing figure standing before her. Peeling off her robe and casting it aside, the woman swung her staff, ripping the air and flicking blood against the carpet.

She wore a business suit far from what one might expect to wear on the battlefield (though several of the top buttons were left undone). When her appearance was combined with the unmatched combat potential she had just displayed, it was impossible to tell if she was supposed to be a warrior or an accountant.

“I am former Imihama Vigilante Corps captain and Imihama governor, Pawoo Nekoyanagi!”

The air vibrated as she whipped her staff around and pointed it between Raskeni’s eyes.

“You speak one more syllable against my brother…and I’ll detach your wretched jaw from your head.”

“Pawoo!!”

“Blegh!”

Milo was ecstatic to see his sister swooping in like a superhero to save them, shaking his partner violently by the shoulders. Bisco’s eye twitched. “W-why the hell are you here?!” he shouted. “Ain’t you supposed to be in Imihama doin’…I dunno, governor stuff?”

“That is exactly what I am doing,” said Pawoo, looking down at her suit with a sigh. “Otherwise I wouldn’t be dressed like this. Alas, my aides advised me to ‘cover up’ and ‘look professional.’”

“I ain’t askin’ about your clothes, lady! How did you even know where we were?!”

“I told you, didn’t I? There’s a tracking device in Milo’s ring.”

“This one,” added Milo helpfully.

“Take that damn thing off already!!”

Tired of watching the boys’ farce play out, Raskeni lunged with her spear, but Pawoo brushed it away with a single sweep of her staff.

“Grrh! How can a woman be so strong…?!” Raskeni muttered.

“Careful,” replied Pawoo. “If I heard that in the office, I’d deem it gender discrimination.”

Pawoo’s staff was far weightier than Raskeni’s spear, roaring whenever it tore through the air and battering its opponent’s tip to pieces in just a few brief exchanges.

“You still want to continue?” said Pawoo. “Surrender and I’ll let you live. Just hand over the girl.”

“D-dammit…I was almost there. Who the hell are you…?!”

“I told you, I’m the Governor of Imihama. Or what, are you trying to tell me I don’t deserve that title?”

“I don’t think she cares, gorilla lady!”

“Shh, Bisco! She’ll hear you!”

But Pawoo whipped around with an expression of pure wrath. “I *can* hear you!! I’ll speak to you later!!” Spotting Milo, she smiled, but then she noticed the emerald color of his hair.

“Mi…Milo!! What…what happened to you?!”

“I-it’s okay, Pawoo, now’s not the time…”

“No, now *is* the time! Was it Akaboshi? Did he make you do it? I won’t allow it! It makes you look like a punk!”

As Pawoo was distracted, Raskeni suddenly scooped up Amli in her arms and leaped out of the bedroom along the power lines with the five Scriptures in tow. In moments, she had disappeared into the darkness of the city.

“Aaah! You…you let her get away!”

“Relax, Akaboshi. I know what I’m doing. We must let her go, for now.” Pawoo flicked her staff and replaced it on her back. Then she squinted at the golden stomach in Bisco’s hands. “She may not have put up much of a fight, but I suspect she could have killed me had she relied on the power of those things she called Scriptures. Perhaps she was conserving their power… Regardless, right now, we need Milo to…and I can’t believe I’m saying this, put your stomach back inside you. I will fend off that woman’s assassins while he does so.”

“No need. First priority’s gettin’ Amli back…”

“Only you are strong enough to do that, Akaboshi. And only with your full strength. Calm down and let us return to base for now.”

“Base?” asked Milo. “Do you have something in mind, Pawoo?”

Pawoo frowned a little at Milo’s green hair but continued.

“Not me, but Tirol does. That woman is a very smart young lady. She knew you two would get tangled up in trickery, so she got in contact with me. Actagawa is there at our base as well. It was tough finding somewhere large enough to keep him, let me tell you. In any case, let us go… Come, Akaboshi, grab on to me.”

“Who’d accept help from *you*—? Grh! Dammit…!” Bisco winced and grunted in pain. Pawoo leaned close enough that their noses were almost touching.

“If you’re going to be an ass about it…,” she whispered, and a devilish smile danced across her beautiful face. “…Come on, I’ll let you tell me what to do again. You’ve grown, Akaboshi. Gained a few scars… You’re looking more and more grown up by the day.”

“W-waaah…”

Bisco’s face burned bright red, and he turned away, shutting his eyes tight. Pawoo laughed, hoisted Bisco up onto her shoulder, and nodded to her brother, before leaping off into the dark city below.

“…He’s like a tiger most of the time, but when Pawoo is around, he looks more like a hamster.”

Milo chuckled at their relationship before following his sister’s gloriously fluttering hair into the night.

10

“So basically what you’re sayin’ is,” said Bisco, scarfing down his sixth helping of alligator fried rice and tossing the empty plate onto the pile, “that old dude Kelshinha never had the power to turn me back to normal in the first place?”

“I doubt it,” said Milo. “The Rust-Eater’s power was to break down rust and turn it into energy. Kelshinha’s power, meanwhile, controlled it and used it to create things. They work in completely opposite ways.”

“’Scuse me, can I get another plate of this?”

“Bisco! Are you listening to me?”

“Well, he ain’t gonna get it anyway,” said Tirol. “Besides, Akaboshi, slow down the eatin’ a little. We only just crammed that stomach back in… ’Scuse me, you got any steamed buns? Somethin’ a bit more filling maybe?”

“You folks sure are a hungry bunch!” answered the proprietor. “We got bear and tuna—what’s yer fancy?”

“Oooh gosh, I looove tuna! Some of that, please!”

“Then we’ll have four of those, please,” said Bisco.

“Huh? I—I’m good!” said Milo. “I’m full already…”

“I know. Two of ’em are for me.”

“And I will have two as well. So five, please, good sir.”

Bisco, Pawoo, and Tirol gorged themselves on food like they hadn’t eaten in days, while Milo looked on, exhausted from Bisco’s surgery, as if he were watching demons scarfing down human flesh.

“Don’t look at me like that, Milo. I’ve been busy with meetings and haven’t had a chance to eat yet.”

“Y’all are lucky Pawoo was here to do her peace talks or whatever, ’cuz I sure

ain’t no help to you in a fight!” said Tirol.

“Hah. Peace talks. What’d she do, break their fingers one by one until they complied?”

“Yep. Spot on. Just like this…”

“Waaagh! Hands off me! Owowowow! That hurts!”

Milo gave an exasperated sigh and turned to see how Actagawa was doing. “Parked” outside (if that’s the right word to use), he was eating merrily from a feed trough, surrounded by cooing bystanders and playful children, all crowding around him and reaching out to stroke his smooth, hard shell.

“All right. I got my stomach back; I’m nice and full; I’m ready to fight,” Bisco declared. “Hey, Tirol, you tracked down Raskeni yet? She ain’t left the city yet, has she?”

“No,” answered Pawoo. “I have the Vigilante Corps stationed all around the perimeter. Nuts and Plum are good agents. They won’t let her slip through.”

“Relax, you two,” said Tirol. “I got Kandori and his lackeys combing the city for her. You guys ain’t gonna be sticking your noses into every little thing. Why don’t y’all go take five instead?”

“Get real. Amli risked her life for us, and now she’s in trouble. You can’t expect me to sit around on my ass doin’ nothin’!”

“Ha! That’s rich! As if it wasn’t *you* who started this whole thing off in the first place by randomly takin’ pity on that old man— Mgh!”

“Shut it! Eat another one of your meat buns!”

“Mppphhhh!”

As the comedy duo did their thing in the background, Milo thought about his fight with Kelshinha, and the strange things the old man had said.

“The Rust can be commanded through specific sequences of sounds… That is what we call mantra.”

“The Rust is the fulcrum of evolution. It is those who refuse to adapt who die out, as is natural.”

“Those who can adapt, and harness the Rust, survive.”

…It was because he could restore his own body with the Rust that he came to be known as the Immortal Monk. It’s like some advanced technology from the old world, but he studied it like a mantra.

…The Rust…is the fulcrum of evolution… Perhaps the people of the old world used the Tokyo Explosion to scatter the Rust across the land…in order to force life to evolve and combat their decline…

As Milo was deep in thought, suddenly something popped into his head. A single line of mantra, one of the last vestiges of Kelshinha’s memories, came unbidden to Milo’s lips.

“…Won/shad/kshmd/snew…”

Before his very eyes, a small mote of dust appeared and began to grow… Eventually it took on the shape of a cube, solid and made of rust.

“Ah… aaahhh!”

“…? What, what’s up with you?”

“Um…nothing. Nothing at all…!”

Milo hurriedly pocketed the cube, sweating.

A mantra…! How did I do that?! I don’t even have the Scriptures anymore…!

All of a sudden, Milo’s thoughts were interrupted when several of the patrons in the restaurant screamed and pointed toward the entrance. There in the doorway, a large brute of a man stepped in, swaying gently, and collapsed in a pool of his own blood.

“Kandori!”

They all ran up to the bloodied figure, the former high priest of the Wizened, Kandori. Milo swiftly tore back the man’s clothes, revealing a number of spear wounds to his chest. Then he took a lurkershroom concoction from the pouch at his waist and administered an injection.

“I have failed you, Lord Akaboshi…”

“Don’t talk. You’re gonna be just fine… With all those muscles, there’s no way

she hit anything vital.”

“No, forget about me… You must hurry. Raskeni has recovered Kelshinha’s body, and she has all the Scriptures at her disposal.”

Milo and Bisco shared a worried glance at the sound of the old man’s name.

“That is why I failed. That woman has been loyal to Kelshinha from the very beginning. She was using you, not for her own ambitions but to restore him to glory. If Kelshinha is revived, he will no doubt attempt to execute the Mantra of Control. We six were able to stop him last time, but now…”

“The Mantra of Control?”

“It is an accursed mantra Kelshinha discovered that snatches away the target’s thoughts and replaces them with total subservience. Those affected can also chant the mantra affecting another, doubling, doubling, like a plague that covers not only this whole city but all of Japan…”

“Kelshinha can put the entire country under his control?!” cried Pawoo.

“That’s some twisted shit,” said Bisco.

“Let’s go,” said Milo as he finished wrapping his partner’s bandages. “I bet Amli will be there, too!”

“Kandori, where were you when this happened? Do you know where they’ve gone?”

“Most likely, they have retreated to the top of the Rust Tower. Take great care. With the Scriptures at her disposal, that woman is more powerful now than ever…!”

“She still ain’t as strong as I am now. Milo, Pawoo, get your things. We’re going.”

“Okay!” “All right.”

The trio leaped away into the air. Tirol stared blankly for a second, then shouted after them, “Hey! What about me?! Don’t just leave me here!”

“As long as you’ve got Actagawa with you, you’ll be fine! Just look after Kandori for us!”

“I can’t believe you— Hey, wait, the food! You gonna make me cover the check?!”

As Tirol hopped atop Actagawa, the other three sprang from power line to power line, making their way toward the single spire that towered over all others in the center of the city.

11

The Rust Tower. The nexus around which the other five were positioned. Looking closely at its bizarre appearance revealed that the outer wall of the tower was covered in what looked like intricate machinery. It had been built long ago, before the other five—a relic from old Japan. But whatever its ancient purpose had been, none could say, for the Rust had laid waste to it just as it had to the rest of civilization. Now it stood coated in a thick layer of rust, and from a distance it looked like a giant anthill towered over the city.

At its apex, a pair of shrouded figures laid down a shriveled-up corpse and stood still before it. The taller one in the red robe placed their hand on the shorter one, clad in white, and whispered:

“The Immortal Monk has given up his organs to achieve true enlightenment. He has passed through many trials. And now, by your hand, Amli, he will become the one true god, the Rust Lord.”

“…”

“Amli, you are the Heavenly Child. All has unfolded in this city in accordance with your wishes. All our efforts are about to be rewarded… True salvation is almost upon us.”

“…I never asked…to be the Heavenly Child.” Amli quivered and hugged her body. “I just wanted…to meet my father…to talk to him…and…” She turned and glared at Raskeni. “I wanted you to be happy. I just wanted my mother to be happy. That’s all I wanted, nothing more…”

“Amli… Cease this prattle. Do not call me your mother in the presence of—”

“Stop it!” screamed Amli, tearing back her hood. “Haven’t I done enough?! Why can’t we go back to how things were before, when you would cuddle me and say nice things to me!! That’s all I want! I just want my mom back!”

“Am…li…”

Amli's unusual behavior caught Raskeni off guard, and she took her daughter's tearstained body in her trembling arms.

Suddenly, a rumbling noise interrupted them, and the five Scriptures became bathed in a violet glow, rising into the air and spinning slowly around them.

Raskeni's face paled, and she stood up quickly. "Oh no. Lord Mashouten is becoming impatient. We must hurry and complete the Mantra of Rebirth… If our Lord is displeased, it is you who shall face the consequences."

"…"

"The five high priests who tore us apart are now dead. Once Father returns, we can be a family again. A happy family once more."

"Really…?"

"Yes. We'll be together forever, Amli…"

"…Together…as family…"

Amli concentrated on her dear wish, then nodded, squashing any last bit of doubt remaining within her. She stepped slowly, through the trembling air, into the center of the spinning legacies. She took one last nervous look back at Raskeni, who nodded, and Amli began chanting.

"Ule-shad-shouki. Shouki-addo-kon-zen-mudo-rebi-pada…"

The entire tower shook, as if in response to her words. From the five Scriptures came a vast quantity of rust, bathed in purple light, coiling around the inscriptions across the surface. As Amli continued the mantra, the tornado of rust grew and grew until it was a violet whirlwind stretching all the way up to the clouds.

"Haaah… haaah…! *Ule-shad-shouki-snew!*"

As the sweat began to pour down her face, Amli pressed her eyes shut and continued chanting, and the tornado swept up the five Scriptures as well as the dried-up corpse, brought them together, and began to form into a human shape with a *Fwshhh!* like a steaming iron.

"…Ah…"

“Lord Mashouten…!”

The billowing white smoke cleared to reveal an enormous man, clad in thick muscle, kneeling there silently.

“…Sssssss…”

With a long breath, like a hissing snake, the man rose to his feet. It was the Immortal Monk, Kelshinha…or so it must have been, but his muscles were so well defined, like an armor of steel, that aside from the white beard on his chin, it was almost impossible to recognize him as the same old man from before.

He slowly cracked his joints, experimenting with his new body, and then he gradually rose to his full height, letting out a hiss, his hot breath almost like steam venting out of a high-pressure boiler. Soon he stood tall and proud at the peak of the Rust Tower, displaying his full majesty in all its glory.

“I have…,” he began in a deep and imposing voice.

“Y-yes?!”

“I have…no clothes.”

“Oh, my greatest apologies, My Lord! I’ll get you some right away…”

Raskeni scurried off to find some, but Kelshinha simply raised his hand and muttered.

“Won-shul…”

“…?! Aaah!”

Raskeni flew into Kelshinha’s hand as if drawn there by a magnet, and there he tore off her crimson robe, tying it around his waist like a loincloth. Raskeni stood there in shame, her muscular, tattooed body on full display.

“Raskeni. You have done well.”

“…Long have we awaited your return, My Lord. You are even more magnificent than I remember.”

“Indeed.”

Any vestige of humility that once had traced the old man’s visage was completely gone, replaced with an unwavering confidence. As Raskeni laid

herself at his feet, he grabbed her blond hair in his burly hand and pulled her up.

“Ah…!!”

“How long do you intend to prostrate yourself before me? Let me see your face.”

“N-no… My sight would taint your eyes, My Lord…”

“Kyurumon is dead. From now on, you will be my first wife. I will not allow your face to be hidden. Your job now is to look beautiful for me.”

“L-Lord Mashouten…”

Kelshinha wrapped his muscular arm around Raskeni’s body, and she gazed lovingly into his eyes, her long lashes fluttering. As he leaned in for a kiss, she shut her eyes and waited…

“!!!”

Suddenly a sharp pain ran through her lip, and her eyes went wide. Kelshinha had bitten her, drawing blood.

“I will hurt you many more times than that. Submit to me, for the sake of your own happiness.”

“Ah… rrrgh…!!”

Raskeni’s expression was a mixture of fear and ecstasy as she looked up at Kelshinha’s face. It was clear her loyalty to him was absolute.

Meanwhile, Amli looked on with bated breath. Timidly, she met her father’s gaze and mumbled, “F-Father…I…am Raskeni’s child… Amli…is my name…”

“I remember you. You were always cute as a button, my dear.”

Amli’s face lit up at her father’s kind words. He stooped down and looked her straight in the eye, examining her face. She blushed like a rose and cast her eyes shyly to the floor.

“Hmm.”

Kelshinha suddenly stood up straight and stroked his beard.

“I still feel weak, but it matters not. Everything is ready for the mantra.”

“Lord Mashouten. Amli has put forth great efforts to realize your rebirth,” said Raskeni, kneeling beside him. “Pray, I ask that you favor her with your miracle of immortality.”

“…”

Kelshinha stood as still as a statue, pondering her request. As a single bead of sweat dripped from her face and hit the ground, he answered at last.

“Very well.”

Raskeni breathed a sigh of relief, and Kelshinha walked up to the trembling young girl and gently stroked her cheek…then gripped her by the throat and lifted her high up off the ground.

“…?! Gh…ha!!”

As Amli struggled in wide-eyed shock, her glass eye fell from its socket and rolled along the ground.

“*Won-shad-amrit*, was it…? Heh-heh. Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“L-Lord Mashouten!” cried Raskeni in despair, clinging to his leg. “Why? Why?! That girl has devoted her entire life to you! To your return!”

“Then she should be prepared to give herself up to me as well. Using the Mantra of Rust Extraction, she has taken the rust of this city and nurtured it inside her body. In some ways, that is the sixth Scripture. Thus, I shall take it back, and she shall enjoy eternal life…as part of my body.”

“N-no…! But she is your daughter, My Lord! Your own flesh and blood!”

“Indeed. And to my own flesh and blood she shall return. What bothers you? We can always make more.”

He bared his teeth and grinned. In Raskeni’s paling face, the light of murder glinted in her eyes.

“Mo…ther…”

As Amli squirmed, a thin stream of rust flowed out of her eye socket and into Kelshinha. His body brimmed with newfound power, and he grinned.

“Aha-ha-ha-ha! What powerful rust! You did well to gather this much. Or is

this all from the body of that rogue Akaboshi…?”

“Mo…ther…help…me…!”

“Won-shad-varuler-knew!”

Raskeni flew into action and fired a spear of rust from her outstretched palm. The spear impaled Kelshinha and sent him sprawling across the roof of the tower.

Cough! Cough!

“Ohhh, Amli…!”

“…Heh-heh. Ha-ha-ha. Aaah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Raskeni embraced her precious daughter with tears in her eyes and watched as Kelshinha stood back up. He laughed, as though the spear through his chest were no more than a scratch, and bared his teeth in a wicked smile.

“I knew you, too, would betray me, Raskeni. Your love for your child would spur you to raise a hand against God. In the end, you are nothing more than another head of cattle on this breeding farm.”

“…I was blind… I was blind! Amli! Amli…please forgive me…!”

“However. You have indeed done well to raise and train her, and that should not go unrewarded. I had planned to tear out her guts in front of you, but I shall permit you to die first. Come.”

The morning light glinted off Raskeni’s teeth as she launched herself into a spin.

“Wrrraaaarrrgh!”

Her spear of rust pierced his heart, dripping blood onto the floor. And yet Kelshinha did not so much as quiver. He simply smiled back, like a demon, and shot his hand toward Raskeni’s face, gripping on to her head.

“An impressive thrust, for a woman. I have changed my mind. I shall make you my thrall.”

“No…no…please…no… Kill me…”

“Fear not. You will soon forget it all. The pain you’ve suffered and your

lingering attachments…such as that child called Amli over there.”

“NOOOOOOOOOO!!!”

Kelshinha’s superhuman grip tightened like a vise. The sound coming from within, the sound of a human’s head turning to rust, was enough to make anyone cover their ears in horror. As he roared with laughter, Amli stabbed a spear into his foot with all her might, causing him to stagger and drop Raskeni. She hit the floor with a thud and curled up into a ball, trembling.

“Nooo! Mother! Mother! Don’t die, Mother!”

“Am…li…Amli. I’m sorry. I’m sorry… Please believe me. I never wanted…”

Blood and tears swept down her face as she gently caressed her daughter’s cheek.

A cruel kick to the side from Kelshinha sent her flying across the ground, where she landed in a crumpled heap. Her mind and body utterly broken, she lay there wordlessly, blood spilling from her mouth, until she stopped moving completely.

“Do not touch my child with your filthy hands, whore.”

Kelshinha looked at the body of the woman who was once his wife, as if he were looking at an unsightly piece of garbage in the corner of the room.

Just then.

“…You fiend.”

Kelshinha felt an unsettling presence from behind and turned around to face it.

“You fiiiend!!” yelled Amli as she gripped her open eye socket. The purple rust that flowed out of it materialized into a spear in her hands—a large and brutal weapon of rust that looked very much at odds with the young girl’s delicate appearance.

“Oh? Impressive. So this is what one born of my blood is capable of.”

“Diiiiie!!”

Amli sprinted forward as if possessed by a god of war and swung the spear

like a flash of lightning. Kelshinha blocked the strikes on his hardened rust body and simply laughed, amused.

“Now this is what I call father-daughter bonding! Ha-ha-ha! Very good, my girl!”

“Shut up! Shut up, shut uuuup!!”

Amli was livid, tears streaming down her face. Finally, her lance pierced his neck…

“Hmmm. You have passion, my child. Excellent.”

“…Grh!”

Kelshinha’s expression didn’t even change as the blood spurted from his neck. He simply sneered his wicked smile as Amli struggled and tried to pull the spear back out. Then, he grabbed her by the throat and began to squeeze.

“You did well. You have impressive speed for a child… And a girl, at that. It is proof you are of my blood.”

“…You’re not…my father…!!”

“Oh? Are you at that age? Don’t speak like that. I am your only true ally in this world, a bond thicker than water… That of blood. We are family.”

“I’m not…your family!! Give me Mother! I want my mother!!”

“Oh, your mother? You want your mother? Let’s see, where has your mother gotten to, I wonder?”

Kelshinha mimed looking around mockingly before returning to Amli, his smile wider than ever.

“My child. Could this, perhaps, be the mother you speak of?”

Kelshinha whistled, and Raskeni’s rusted body rose clumsily to its feet like a marionette driven by a particularly inept puppeteer. Then its right leg snapped clean in two, and the whole thing toppled to the ground again.

“Do you mean this rusted puppet? I cannot tell; I am quite shortsighted in my old age…”

“Ahhh… No… Nooooo!! Motheeer!!”

“Rrraaah-ha-ha-ha-ha!!!”

As the bloodcurdling screams of his own daughter reached his ears, Kelshinha laughed as though he were listening to beautiful music.

“I like you, my child!! Your name is Amli, correct? I shall keep you together with that whore mother of yours. Then, if I ever get bored living as a god, I can listen to your delicious screams.”

“*Sob*…hic… Some…somebody help… Anyone…”

“Help? Help? Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Who is there left who would help you? Any allies you once had, you betrayed for my sake. The only person who can save you now, Amli, is me. Now, kneel, and swear your eternal devotion!”

“Please, help me! Somebody, anybody, heeelp!”

Amli screamed until her throat was about to tear.

A red-hot arrow ripped through the air like a meteor, impaling the arm holding Amli and ripping it straight off Kelshinha’s body.

“Hmm! Ha-ha… So you’ve come… Akaboshi!”

Just as Amli herself was about to slide off the roof of the tower, a steelspider thread arrow billowed up like a parachute, hauling her into the arms of the panda-eyed Mushroom Keeper.

“Amli! Grr, what have you done to her?! Bisco, be careful! He’s stronger now than ever—!”

Milo went quiet when Bisco landed by his side, lowered his bow, and peered down at Amli with soft jade-green eyes.

“…Mr. Bisco…sir…”

“…”

“I…”

“…”

“I never had…anyone…”

“…”

“I…never had a family, did I? It was all just a pathetic dream I made up…”

“You do have a family.”

“…”

“Didn’t you say you’d make me and Milo your big brothers?”

“…”

“You think that’s just a pathetic dream?”

“…”

“I don’t. I don’t think it’s pathetic at all…”

Amli didn’t answer and instead closed her eyes. A single tear ran down her cheek. Bisco’s gentle jade-green eyes soon burned with emerald fire, and he faced forward once more. Kelshinha had already regenerated his lost arm and now bore his usual toothy grin, boldly advancing toward Bisco.

And so there, at the top of the Rust Tower, the Man-Eating Redcap Bisco Akaboshi and the Immortal Monk Kelshinha prepared to begin their bloody battle.

Kelshinha was the first to speak. “You know what you are, Akaboshi? You are the only man in this entire city with the power to stand against my crusade. The power of the Rust-Eater. It grants you a spark of divinity, faint and fleeting though that spark may be. I must snuff it out while I still have the chance.”

“…Amli had no one…”

“…?”

“…Amli had no one…except you.”

“…”

“You were meant to be her father. You were meant to be there for her. You’re a scumbag. A scumbag who doesn’t give two shits about his one and only daughter!!”

“As if any of that crap interests me. Why should I care about whether a single child smiles or cries? Oh, I see. You want her body to screw, is that it? Well, that is no concern of mine. Swear allegiance to me, and you can do what you want

with her, and that useless mother of hers as well…”

Crrrackkk!

The sound of bones colliding echoed far out over the city as Bisco rushed forward and struck foreheads with Kelshinha.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha…!” Kelshinha bellowed as the blood dripped down his face. “Why so savage, Akaboshi? What have I done to make you detest me so?”

“…I don’t have time to list all the reasons…”

The light in Bisco’s glare seemed hot enough to melt through steel and met Kelshinha’s violet gaze with such intensity that it was throwing off sparks.

“’Cause if I don’t rip you a new one in the next five seconds, I’m gonna lose my fucking mind.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

The two figures spun faster than the eye could follow and delivered a pair of kicks that clashed like crossed blades.

“Witness the power of a true god, Akaboshi! Burn this sight into your eyes!”

“You’re the one I’m gonna burn! To ash!!”

As blood spurted from their legs, the two leaped back. Bisco drew his bow while Kelshinha made a hand sign and took up a stance as if to chant.

“Shaaah!”

A spear of rust flew out of the tower itself. Bisco leaped into the air to dodge it and lined up his bow on Kelshinha.

“Raaargh!”

Just as his arrow was about to hit the old man, a wall of rust rose out of the ground to stop it. The arrow struck the wall and exploded into a glittering golden Rust-Eater mushroom.

“…He used a shield?!”

“Bisco, watch out!”

As Bisco wound up dazzled by the bright light from his own attack, countless

rust kunai flew toward him, stabbing him as he threw up his arms to shield his eyes.

“Grr…you bastard!”

“Bisco!” cried Milo, firing his anchor arrow to help, but Kelshinha created a whip of rust that ensnared it midflight and snapped it clean in two.

“I think not, worm.”

“W-without a mantra…? He doesn’t need to speak the words anymore! He can just think them!”

“What’s the matter, boy? Having trouble predicting my actions? Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Know your place!”

“Grah! Waaagh!”

The whip kept going and struck Milo, knocking him off the tower and sending him plummeting toward the city below, while plucking Amli from his grasp and pulling her back.

“No! Nooo! Mr. Milo, sir!”

“Amli!!”

“Graaaargh!!”

Pawoo suddenly appeared and, with a slicing downward swing of her staff, severed the rust whip, freeing Amli from its grasp. The black-haired warrior woman glared at Kelshinha with spite.

“What kind of father are you…? That’s your daughter!”

“My, my. You demons are so very fond of that phrase,” said Kelshinha, unruffled. “Well, that daughter you love so much is about to go splat against the stones.”

But Pawoo had already leaped into the air once more, reaching her arms out toward the falling Amli, when suddenly, from her blind spot, flew a short spear that stuck into her side.

“Gaaagh?!”

Pawoo just barely managed to grab hold of Amli and roll along the floor of the

tower as blood gushed from her flank. She looked up at Amli's face, smiled, and then was struck hard in her wound by a swift kick.

"Gggaaagh!

"Keep…your…hands…off…"

"Nooooo! Mother! Stop this! Return to normal, Mother!"

"…the…Heavenly…Child… you… heathens…"

"That cur…! Are there no depths to which he will not stoop…?!"

Standing above Pawoo, treading her heel into her bleeding wound, was none other than Raskeni herself, the entire top half of her face now covered in rust. While her mind was completely eroded into being Kelshinha's thrall, her combat ability was as sharp as ever. It seemed she was not, in fact, dead but had been puppeted while she was still alive.

"Raskeni!"

"Yes…"

At Kelshinha's command, Raskeni tossed Amli into the air, and the old man snatched her up with his whip. Even as he did so, he continued to block Bisco's arrows with walls of rust.

"Rrraaah-ha-ha-ha-ha!! Is that all you have, Akaboshi? Is this the fabled power of the Mushroom Keepers? Mere child's play before the might of the Rust Lord Kelshinha!"

"Now you've done it… I'm gonna fill that mouth of yours with mushrooms!"

Bisco deflected Kelshinha's whip with a couple of well-placed kicks and fired an arrow right toward his leering maw. As the old man swung his spear to deflect it, Bisco closed in on him and brought his face right up before his eyes.

"You must be mad, Akaboshi!!" Kelshinha grinned, and he thrust his spear, impaling Bisco in the gut. Yet even through the pain, Bisco's eyes seemed to fire up all the more, and he moved his body forward, sticking himself deeper on the spear, and thrust the arrow in his hand deep into Kelshinha's mouth.

"Gaaaagh!!"

“Can’t use your shields this close, can you, old man…?!” said Bisco, a cascade of blood falling from his mouth. Kelshinha’s tongue gradually began to glitter like the sun, but just as the Rust-Eater mushroom was about to spring forth to its full, glorious height, Kelshinha raised Amli in his hand and squeezed her body like a clamp.

“Aaaaaahhh!!”

As if in response to her cries of pain, a stream of rust flowed out of Amli’s eye socket. The rust engulfed Kelshinha’s tongue, holding back the burgeoning Rust-Eater stalks.

“Ahhh…you sacrificed your own flesh. Very becoming of a god, Akaboshi. Your devotion is admirable.”

“Y-you bastard… You’ll kill her…!”

“As goes the father, so goes the daughter. What shame is there in yoking her life force to my own? …Besides, Akaboshi. The stage is nearly set. The believers of this city are gathering below, ready to watch me perform the Demon-Cleansing Tale.”

“…T-tale…?!”

“Now, that heavy mushroom… A leadshroom, you called it?” Kelshinha bashed his forehead into Bisco’s and grinned. “I like it. How does it work? Something like this…?”

Kelshinha twisted the spear in Bisco’s gut, and there was a *Boom! Boom!* as several incredibly dense lumps of rust formed inside him. Kelshinha had used his mantras to copy the leadshroom’s effects.

“Wraaargh!! You bastard!”

“Rrraaah-ha-ha!! That look suits you, Akaboshi!!”

With his other hand still firmly clasped around Amli, Kelshinha hurled Bisco into the center of the tower and leaped atop him, sending the three of them crashing through the floor. Through the great cloud of dust kicked up, the only sound was the noise of each of the lower floors collapsing one by one.

“Akaboshi!!” cried Pawoo, struggling to her feet with her staff, as a lumbering,

ghoulish creature blocked her path.

“You shall…not pass… You must not…obstruct…the sacred battle…”

“You fool! You would give up your own daughter to protect him?!”

“Daughter…” Pawoo peered into Raskeni’s vacant eyes as she hesitated for a moment. Then, “I am a puppet… I have no daughter…”

“…Hmph! Useless woman!” Pawoo cracked her neck, took a deep breath, and keeping her body as fluid as water, let her beautiful long black hair flutter in the breeze. “Fine. If words won’t make you understand, then perhaps my staff will.”

“…Die…demon…”

“My staff was originally supposed to be a nonlethal weapon. After Tetsujin’s mask, let’s see… I’ll split open that shell around your heart that Amli so fears.”

“Do not speak…that name…!”

Even tarnished as she was by the Rust, Raskeni’s foot was swift and her spear as true as ever. Pawoo parried the blow with her staff, fixing her attention on the small sliver of humanity still guiding her opponent’s strikes.

Now, then. How exactly do I go about doing that?

Raskeni’s spear scratched Pawoo’s cheek. For some reason, as she wiped away the blood, she recalled how, only a year before, that part of her face had been covered in rust.

It was a strange-looking god, its enormous body a dull gray illuminated by the light of the braziers. It had finely honed muscles and six strong arms that extended from its body. In five of its hands it held a heart, a kidney, a liver, a spleen, and lungs, and in its sixth it gripped a spear, pointing upward as if to pierce the heavens. Its eyes were wide, with a wicked smile so broad it seemed its mouth would tear. Coupled with its imposing height, it looked the very model of wrath, ready to swallow mankind whole.

In fact, it was clear now that the statue of the Rust Lord represented all that Kelshinha wished to become.

Before that god stood hundreds of monks, fighting for space despite the vast size of the central circular room of the Rust Tower. They threw themselves at the foot of the statue and, of course, repeated their prayers with undivided zeal.

“Won-culvero-kelhasha.”

“Won-halcuro-kelhasha.”

The monks were stacked on top of one another, piled up like wandering dead. Ironically, the sight of that place of worship was like a vision into Hell itself.

“Look at all this, Akaboshi.”

The idol’s open palms were like a stage, and that stage was stained with blood. Enough blood that it spilled over the idol’s fingers and dripped down its wrists.

Atop the stage stood the Rust Lord Kelshinha and the snarling devil who dared oppose him. They had not been fighting very long, but from the way the bloodstained Bisco panted and leaned against the idol’s thumb for support, it was clear it had been a fierce struggle indeed.

“Gaze upon my loving worshipers. Over ten thousand of them, all thanks to the Mantra of Control. Puppets, come to offer me their power of evolution.”

“Only because you forced them to…! You stole their minds and made ’em chant against their will!”

“Exactly. However, they’re all the same… Everybody here has one wish and one wish only: to receive immortality. They believe in nothing else. Very soon, though, this mantra will spread, from these towers to Shimane, and from Shimane to all of Japan. Soon, every last human in the world will bow before the Rust Lord!”

“Not if I can help it!”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha…! *Won!*”

Bisco gritted his teeth, took up his bow, and fired an arrow toward Kelshinha. The old man grinned and replied with his mantra, causing several polished rust shields to appear in midair, gleaming like mirrors. The arrow bounced off them like a billiard ball, hitting Bisco in the shoulder.

“Ghah!!”

“Mr. Bisco, sir!!” screamed Amli.

“Oh, did that snap your arm tendon?” said Kelshinha. “The Rust-Eater is not so powerful as I imagined. How long does it take to grow back?” Then he cracked his shoulder and tossed her high into the air. When she reached about the height of the statue’s chest, she stopped, frozen in midair, and began writhing.

“I know I cannot lose, Akaboshi, but you could at least put up a bit of a fight. Look.”

Kelshinha stopped and raised his hand toward his thousands of followers. Streams of rust began flowing from the eyes, ears, and mouths of all those in the front row, swirling up inside the temple.

“We are playing out the gods’ victory over demonkind. We should be able to cultivate some very fine quality rust indeed…if you perform your part well, that is.”

Eventually, the rust all began flowing into Amli's body, and she screamed like her throat would tear as the mass of metal entered her.

"No-nooo…noooo!! Aaaaghh!!"

"Amliii!!!"

The rust all disappeared inside her in the blink of an eye, leaving her shaking her head and trembling with fear.

"No… So many…people…inside me…"

"Stay with me, Amli! Once I kill the old man, I'm comin' to save you!"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha. Now that would be an impressive plot twist. Such a marvelous development deserves to be witnessed by so many more people, don't you think? Akaboshi, let me show you something."

Kelshinha twirled his fingers, and all the rust inside Amli began flowing back out, through her eye socket. It reared up, like an enormous serpent, and shot outside in the direction of the Metal Tower, wrapping around the building.

"I have birthed a lizard. Soon, it will bring us more guests."

"What the hell is that…?!"

Bisco stared in awe at Kelshinha's power, his anger replaced with sheer astonishment. Before his eyes, the Metal Tower bent and flexed and transformed into an enormous golden lizard. The lizard crashed through the outer protective wall of the towers and into the larger city, where it swept up panicking townsfolk in its long tongue and deposited them inside the Rust Tower. There, the confused townsfolk were entranced by Kelshinha's mantra and began chanting toward the platform along with all the other monks.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha… Still not enough. Amli, drive the lizard faster."

"Ah…ah…Mr. Bis…co…sir…please…"

"…!!!"

"…kill…me…"

"Amli…!"

"Rrraaah-ha-ha-ha-ha!! The child is completely hollow now. She has nothing

left to believe in. Not her father, nor her mother. An empty bowl. Soon her worthless sense of self will be washed away, too, by the grinding rust. She won't even remember her name."

"…Then I just gotta kill you before that happens…"

Even as the blood poured down his body like a waterfall, Bisco seemed more alive than ever, as if each of the wounds Kelshinha inflicted on his body were nothing but more kindling for the fire.

"I'm the Rust-Eater, old man… Once the spores inside me awaken, they'll chew you up…!"

"Hmm. Even now you continue to spout drivel." Kelshinha looked displeased and readied his spear in one hand, thrusting it toward Bisco as he struggled to stand up straight. "Then try it, Akaboshi! Struggle against me, die, and offer me your rust!"

I ain't plannin' on dyin' here! Milo…! What should I do?

Bisco leaped into the air, readying his bow, and Kelshinha jumped up to meet him. The fervent worshipers raised their voices even louder in prayer as the battle between good and evil reached its climax.

Darn it, I'm stuck…!

The wounds inflicted by Kelshinha's whip had been unexpectedly deep, and as Milo fell from the roof of the Rust Tower, he found himself without the freedom to draw his bow and fire one of his trusty parachute arrows.

There's nothing I can do… Somebody watch over Bisco for me…!

Milo squeezed his eyes shut and prepared to hit the paving stones, when a giant orange shell swept him up with a *Swish!* and rolled along the ground to break his fall. As soon as Milo felt the familiar smoothness of his shell, he slipped out and hugged Actagawa's massive claw.

"Actagawa! I knew I could trust you!"

The giant crab, meanwhile, urged Milo up into the saddle and behind the reins.

"You're right, Actagawa. We have to save Bisco. He's inside that tower over

there…”

Suddenly, an enormous lizard crawled through the wide-open gates of the Rust Tower Milo pointed at and deposited a great number of people there, among them several of Imihama’s iguana cavalry who had been guarding the city. Then the lizard slowly changed direction and headed elsewhere in search of more offerings.

“Wh-what the…?! Did a mantra do that…?!” muttered Milo as he trawled Kelshinha’s memories for clues. Meanwhile, the lizard arrived in the outer city and began scooping up citizens in its tongue.

“He’s trying to gather more worshipers…! I have to put a stop to that, or Bisco’ll lose! Come on, Actagawa!” he cried, whipping the reins, and the giant crab leaped up and off the tower wall, bounding toward the golden lizard in the distance.

“Deputy Plum! The city folk aren’t listening to me!! They’re just muttering… and heading toward the towers!”

“Damn, what’s going on…?! What’s happening over there?!”

The Imihama Vigilante Corps had recently found their rest and relaxation canceled and been saddled with the task of protecting the townsfolk. A strange purple bubble had recently appeared around the central tower, and at the same time, the people of the city had begun acting strangely, ignoring the guard’s commands.

“Is something drawing them in?! …Dammit, if only Pawoo were here…!”

“Plum!! Watch out!”

“Gh?!”

Nuts rushed in and pulled Plum out of the way, seconds before a huge set of fangs dug into the ground where she had been standing, taking an enormous bite out of the earth.

“Wh-wh-what?! Aaaahhh…! Wh-what’s that?!”

Standing above Plum was a giant golden lizard, its jaws teeming with countless people and its crimson eyes glaring down at the two vigilantes, who’d

barely escaped its fangs.

“I just saw the Metal Tower turn into that thing! It’s a shape-shifting monster!!”

“A monster? Nuts, what can we even do against that thing?!”

“I’ve never seen anything that big, even in the Calvero Sea. I don’t think the governor could…”

“Then we don’t stand a chance,” said Plum. “What should we do? Wanna make out before we die?”

“Don’t be stupid! I’m not going to give up so easily!”

As the lizard swept down for another attack, the two leaped aside and ran for their iguana mounts. Hopping atop their trusty steeds, Nuts handed a harpoon to Plum, who shouted, “It’s just like eel hunting, right?”

“You sure you can handle it?”

“Sure can!”

The two veered their iguanas around and took off after the lizard, who was trampling vigilantes underfoot. They overtook it, running beneath its eyes to distract it, and as they dodged its teeth and claws, they slowly entangled the beast in the long, sturdy ropes that extended from the rears of their weapons.

“Now we’ve…”

“…got you!”

The two leaped from their mounts and drove their harpoons through the lizard’s front feet, pinning it to the ground.

“That’s Calvero fisherman eel hunting. Easy as pie.”

“Easy, my foot. I saw you back there peeing your pants.”

The other vigilantes erupted into cheers when suddenly the lizard detached its arms and legs, transforming into a golden snake. Then it swallowed the Shimane citizens into its gaping maw and launched them toward the Rust Tower. The screaming townsfolk became caught in the violet force field surrounding the tower, where their thoughts were immediately erased, and

they all began to chant in unison.

“D-dammit! That monster can do anything!”

“Nuts, we don’t stand a chance! Let’s fall back for now and—”

In the short moment Plum yelled to her partner, the massive snake whipped back around and snatched the young girl out of her saddle, taking her high up into the air in its fangs.

“Eeeek!! Nuts!!”

“Plum!!”

As his precious friend was snatched away before his very eyes, Nuts clenched his teeth and groaned. Hadn’t he been training so that he’d never have to suffer this feeling again? As the tears started to well up in his eyes, he suddenly spotted something above. Silhouetted against the sun, casting a shadow down on the snake’s body, a giant orange *something* was streaking toward the creature like a meteor.

“Th-that’s…!”

“Go, Actagawa!!”

The giant crab’s claws tore through the snake’s snout, freeing Plum from its jaws. As she screamed and fell to earth, the man in the saddle caught her in his arms.

“Plum, is that you?” he said.

“I-it’s you…!”

“I almost didn’t recognize you! Oh, sorry, now’s not the time for catching up!”

“Wait! Don’t you know how much I… Milo!!”

Milo dropped her into the saddle of her waiting iguana, then launched Actagawa toward the snake once more, tearing through the cut in its face and ripping skin and flesh apart. As the serpent cried out in pain, millions of gold coins spilled out of its body in place of blood, scattering throughout the streets.

Actagawa continued running along its body until he reached the base of the towers, by which point the enormous serpent had been sliced cleanly in two.

The creature, of course, did not rise again, and so Milo leaned over in the saddle and gave the giant crab a high five. (High two?)

“Phew! Nice work, Actagawa!”

The crab raised his pincers in triumph as Milo gazed up at the tower. Although the golden serpent was slain at last, in that time it had gathered so many townspeople, they could hardly fit inside, and now they flowed out of its doors, still chanting fervently in its direction.

“Darn it, there’s already so many…! Come on, Actagawa, let’s go!”

Actagawa crouched as if to leap toward the central tower, but noticing something strange, he stopped.

“Actagawa, what’s wrong…? Wh-what the…?!”

The two halves of the fallen snake suddenly started wriggling, and shot off toward the Fire and Earth Towers. Coiling around them, the snakes seemed to take on the forms of those elements, with one becoming wreathed in flame and the other gaining thick scales as hard as steel.

“…Just how strong can Kelshinha’s mantras get?!” cried Milo as the two snakes descended upon Actagawa, worming their way through the buildings of the city.

Every time Raskeni launched a spear at Pawoo, a swift swing from her iron staff snapped it in half. Yet the battle was showing no signs of wearing down as the spears of rust seemed to be capable of endlessly re-forming themselves.

I can’t keep fighting with this wound in my side. I need to end this, quick!

“Give…up…”

“You’re pretty strong for a woman. Did you teach Amli to fight like that, too?”

“Don’t…speak…my…daughter’s…name!!”

Raskeni conjured a spear of rust from the roof and, using it as a distraction, hurled her own spear at Pawoo. Pawoo just barely managed to dodge, the spear grazing her neck, and grinned. She grabbed Raskeni by the throat and pulled her close with fearsome strength despite her slender arms.

“So you remembered she was your daughter. Perhaps that string avoided Kelshinha’s puppetry? What if I tug on it instead…?”

“Ah… Ah…?”

“Do you know how lonely that girl feels in Kelshinha’s hands? How much she needs someone she trusts?”

“No…! That means nothing to me…! Stop!”

“She wants her mother…”

“SHUT UUUP!!”

Raskeni made a sweeping motion with her spear, slicing Pawoo’s chest, splattering droplets of blood on the ground, like red paint. Pawoo leaped backward to retreat, but Raskeni chased after her, pushing her against the edge of the tower, looking down over the city streets far below. Pawoo ducked and weaved to avoid Raskeni’s spear, stepping back ever closer to the ledge.

Dammit! I underestimated her! There’s nothing I can do now!

As Pawoo fell and landed on her back, Raskeni climbed atop her and lifted her spear for the final blow. Suddenly, a single tear flew from her face and fell onto Pawoo’s cheek.

“I am…”

…?!

“I am…a demon. All I gave that child was misery. I am no longer worthy to hold her in these tainted hands. Now…I know not what to pray for…”

She’s going to…!

Just as Pawoo saw the glint of sanity in her tear-filled eyes, the entire tower shook, throwing Raskeni from the rooftop and toward the city depths.

“Rrraaargh!”

Pawoo stuck out her staff, and Raskeni instinctively caught on to it.

“Don’t let go! I’ll pull you in!” cried Pawoo as blood dripped from the corners of her mouth and her open wounds, wetting her clothes as she tried desperately to hold on.

“Dammit! I’ve lost too much blood…!”

“Why? Why would you spare me?” cried Raskeni from the other end of the staff as tears streamed down her face. “Why didn’t you kill me during that fight? You had the opportunity so many times! I am evil! Nothing more than a demon who would resurrect her dark god just to satisfy her own lust!”

“Even so, you’re still her mother!!” Pawoo’s voice cut through the rumble of the towers. “Your sins will be judged by tribunal, and you’ll have all the punishment you seek… But I cannot allow you to die here! I, and my brother, cannot ever allow another child to be orphaned without doing anything to stop it!”

“…! Actagawa! To the right!”

Displaying the climbing ability his species was famed for, Actagawa leaped onto the tower to avoid the shape-shifting twin snakes of fire and steel. But he was on the defensive. Against his foes’ perfectly coordinated attacks, Actagawa could not bring his deadly claws to bear.

Darn it all! At this rate we won’t even be able to help ourselves, let alone Bisco!

Taking advantage of Milo’s indecisiveness, the steel snake seized Actagawa in its huge jaws. As the crab struggled to escape, there was a horrific creaking noise until at last his enormous claw was torn off.

“Aaagh! Nooo!!”

Deprived of his ultimate weapon, there was no way left for Actagawa to fight against these monsters of mantra. Next, the fire serpent attacked his legs, and those not being as tough as his claws, Actagawa let out a fearful screech.

“Actagawa!” cried Milo, letting go of the reins and drawing his bow. Though he was weaker than Bisco, all he could do was hope that his mushrooms would work against this new foe.

I have no choice! Or else Actagawa’s going to die!

Motivated, he drew an arrow from his quiver, then suddenly felt something strange. He looked down at his hand.

"…?! Wh…what the?!"

Floating above his palm was a small shining green cube of…*something*, whistling as it spun in the air. It shrank and grew with Milo's breaths and continued to spin as though waiting for his commands.

"The Rust is the fulcrum of evolution."

"Those who can adapt, and harness the Rust, survive."

"…A mantra? Am I doing that…?"

Milo looked at Actagawa's crushed-up claw and got an idea. He took a deep breath and whispered to his friend.

"Actagawa, you could defeat them if you had your claw, right?"

Actagawa blew a single bubble in response, which popped in front of Milo's eyes. Milo smiled to shake off the stress and focused all his mind on Actagawa's arm.

"Won/shad/add/viviki/snew! (Grant target desired weapon!)"

In response to Milo's mantra, the green cube started spinning faster and flew over to Actagawa's arm, leaving an emerald trail. The particles flying off it stuck to the joint and began restoring the broken claw…only stronger than ever before. Even then they showed no signs of stopping and gushed forth in ever-increasing amounts, until Actagawa wielded an enormous emerald claw even larger than his own body, glinting in the dazzling sunlight.

"Wh-whoa…!"

Even Milo trembled at the magnificent sight, but Actagawa brandished his new weapon immediately and crashed it into the serpent's skull with all his might. The blow struck so hard that the steel snake's eyes leaped out of their sockets, but Actagawa wasted no time and immediately stuck the claw down the creature's throat, expanding it with an ominous creaking sound until the snake's neck split wide open.

"A-Actagawa…! Th-that was amazing!"

As the huge snake cried out in pain, Actagawa lifted the steel snake's entire body and lashed it like a whip against one of the nearby towers. Then, to finish

it off, he launched it toward the Rust Tower, breaking down the wall and revealing the enormous temple as well as the statue within.

“Bisco!!” cried Milo as he spotted his partner standing atop the idol, and as the fire serpent rushed in to enclose the boy in his jaws, Actagawa held them open with his emerald claw.

“Don’t get between Bisco and me!!” Milo yelled. The green cube in his hand, apparently interpreting this as a command, clung to Milo’s hand as he drew back his bowstring, coating the arrow in emerald dust. Milo loosed the arrow through the snake’s wide-open mouth and into the crown of its head. The arrow sped up like a rocket, launching the fire snake back, away from the Rust Tower and far off into the distance, where—with a *Gaboom!*—it exploded like a firework into a brilliant green mushroom Milo had never seen before. The snake’s body transformed back into the Fire Tower and crashed into the ground, sending a shockwave throughout the land.

“Hahh…hahh…! We did it!”

Milo gazed in wonder at the glorious mushroom when he suddenly heard a familiar voice from up above.

“Milooo! Catch me…!”

“…! Actagawa!”

Milo immediately spurred the crab into action, catching the two women before they hit the ground.

“Pawoo!”

“Are you trying to kill us? Thanks to your rumblings down here, we nearly died!”

“You’re hurt…! I’ll give you an injection right away. And Raskeni is…”

As Milo administered his lurkershroom medicine, Pawoo looked between the woman and her brother and gave a small nod.

“Kill me, Milo…,” muttered Raskeni in a voice barely audible over her tears. “Now, while Kelshinha is distracted by his fight with Bisco, while my mind is my own. Once it is over, he will make me his thrall once more…”

“…Raskeni. Look this way, please…”

Raskeni did as she was told and turned to face Milo. He steadied his breathing and raised his hands as if in prayer. Soon, the green cube in his hands began to spin and float.

“A mantra?! How do you know…?!” asked Pawoo.

“B-but I’ve never seen this glow before… Is this the Rust?” asked Raskeni.

Milo placed his fingers to his lips and quieted the two before pressing the cube into Raskeni’s rust-covered brow and muttering:

“Won/shad/amrit. Won/shad/amrit/snew. (Extract mantra from target.)”

At Milo’s order, the cube became green dust and covered Raskeni’s forehead, turning the infected parts bright emerald. Raskeni simply stayed still, shocked, and before even ten seconds had passed, her forehead had returned completely to normal…albeit with a peculiar green glow stretching around her brow.

“That was…Amli’s Mantra of Extraction. How did you…?”

“The mantra itself, I stole from Kelshinha while he was inside my head,” explained Milo, slipping the cube back into his pocket. “But I don’t know what this green thing is. I don’t think it’s rust, and it’s not a Scripture. I think I received it when I was given Bisco’s Rust-Eater blood. It’s something altogether new, a perfect balance between the Rust and the Rust-Eater. At least…that’s how it feels to me.”

“…To steal the mantras from Kelshinha’s mind and take them one step beyond… What a genius!” said Raskeni in awe.

“I’m not a genius,” Milo replied. “I just went to school.”

“Akaboshi turned my little brother into a magician,” said Pawoo, climbing atop Actagawa and pointing farther into the temple. “I’ll have words with him later for this, but for now we must stay calm. He and the townsfolk require our help.”

“You’re right! We’ve gotta go help him right now! Actagawa, are you okay?!”

Seeming almost annoyed by the large number of people atop his back,

Actagawa nonetheless headed for the Rust Tower. Even now, with the tower half destroyed, the brainwashed citizens flocked toward it in droves, and beyond those crowds was the giant idol in whose hands Bisco fought for his life.

“There he is! Bisco!!” yelled Milo, but Actagawa had already leaped above the sea of people, climbing the walls of the tower toward the battlefield where his sworn brother stood.

“It is futile, Akaboshi, futile! Your arrows will never break my shields!”

“Bullshit! There’s nothing my arrows can’t break!!”

Bisco’s bow creaked as he poured all his power into his arrow; until the blood spurted from his back teeth. He released it, sending it flying into the mirror of rust, breaking through the surface, true to his word, and piercing all the way through the shield.

“Rrroooargh!”

The arrow lodged itself in Kelshinha’s chest, and stalk after glorious stalk of Rust-Eater mushroom erupted with a *Gaboom! Gaboom!* from his back. The shock sent Kelshinha to his knees, and he glared up at Bisco.

But even Bisco was starting to feel the heat. As sweat dripped down his brow, he looked once more at Jabi’s bow in his hands. There was a deep crack running straight down the middle of it, and it would be of no more use to him now.

D-dammit! My bow’s finally giving up…!

“Hmm! Splendid, Akaboshi! Now this is the majesty of a demon worthy of taking on a god! Gaze upon these fervent spectators! They are simply dying to see our historic battle!!”

It had been a close battle indeed. Bisco’s bow and Kelshinha’s spear were evenly matched, and the idol’s hands, which served as their battleground, now ran red with the two fighters’ blood, overflowing like crimson waterfalls.

However, even as the Rust-Eater inside him hurried to fix up Bisco’s wounds, his power of recovery was leagues behind Kelshinha’s.

“Shaaa…”

The old man stood and raised his hand to the air, and the rust swirling above their heads, taken from the worshipers, flowed into him. In the blink of an eye,

his torn flesh knit itself anew, and even the Rust-Eaters lost their sheen and wilted. Meanwhile, the worshipers slouched as their life force was stolen from them, before collapsing to the ground, unconscious. Fresh believers rushed over their fallen bodies to replace them.

"…S-stop! You idiots, stop! Can't you see he's just suckin' out your life and leavin' you for dead?"

"That is exactly what they wish for. It is the greatest honor for their miserable lives to become my blood."

Dammit…! I gotta do somethin'…!

For a second, an image formed in Bisco's mind of him blasting away all the worshipers with a mushroom arrow, but soon that image clouded over and disappeared. Perhaps once, Bisco would have resorted to an idea like that, but he was a better man now, who knew the power of love and compassion. Unfortunately, it was that compassion that now put him at the mercy of evil.

"You know what it is you lack, Akaboshi? It is this, the power of creation. The Rust-Eater knows only how to destroy. It cannot ever grant it to you. You can only ever become a god of destruction, not of creation!"

"God this, god that! Shut up already! I'm a Mushroom Keeper!" yelled Bisco as he raised his shattered bow. Just then, there came a voice from up above.

"Ladiiies aaand gentlemen! Are you *really* enjoying this bloody battle? Wouldn't you much rather see something else instead?!"

A cheerful woman's voice quite at odds with the seriousness of the battlefield rang out over their heads. The mindless worshipers settled down and looked around fearfully. High up, at the statue's breast, stood the girl with pink jellyfish hair, wearing a quite outrageously revealing outfit.

"Look up here, guys! Just 'cuz the Metal Tower's gone don't mean the Gilded Elephants are outta business!"

"What is that vixen up to…?!" growled Kelshinha.

"Won-gewn-toreo-lib-snew! Go get 'em!"

As Tirol completed her mantra, the huge swirling mass of rust floating high

above the shrine turned into a trove of golden coins, raining down on the people below.

“Whoa, it’s gold! Gold!”

“Treasures! Treasures raining from the sky!”

The worshipers, who had been so engrossed in Kelshinha’s battle a moment before, lost interest in an instant and started fighting among one another for the coins.

“Whaaat?! You blasphemous whore! You are in the presence of a god!”

“Ha-ha-ha! You’re goin’ senile, old man! Don’t ya know people in this world only care about two things: their lives and money!”

“Tirol! Where did you come from?”

“Just shut up and fight! He can’t regenerate while they’re distracted!”

The ornaments of Tirol’s exotic garb jingled as she moved, dancing atop the giant statue. A mysterious wind swept up the coins and cast them far outside, and in a thunder of footsteps, the whole crowd ran after them.

“Y-you fools! You irredeemable fools!”

“Ha!” taunted Bisco. “Without their power, you’re like a deflated balloon.”

“Silence, brat!”

Kelshinha lunged, his spear only grazing Bisco as he dodged. Now that his Rust powers were limited, he relied only on his strength, which still far surpassed Bisco’s.

Damn this old man…!

Without his trusty bow, Bisco had only his feet and blade to rely on, and even with the Rust-Eater’s boundless energy filling him with power, it was all he could do to fend off Kelshinha’s relentless attacks.

He’s… strong! Stronger than anyone I’ve faced!

“I’ve changed my mind, Akaboshi. I shall kill you and take those organs of yours to be my new Scriptures!”

“…Dammit,” muttered Tirol with ragged breaths. “They’ll turn back in five minutes. That old man’s power is off the charts! An’ Bisco ain’t gonna hold out much longer. Where the hell is Milo?!”

“Ms. Tirol, ma’am!”

“Nyeh?”

“Ms. Tirol, ma’am, over here…!”

Tirol looked over in the direction of the voice and saw Amli, fastened to the statue’s chest by chains of rust. She scuttled on over as fast as she could for a closer look.

“How are you so pale…?! Is this because of all the rust you’ve been suckin’? At this rate, you’re gonna—”

“Listen to me, Ms. Tirol, ma’am,” Amli groaned as the rust tightened around her wrists. “The rust inside me needs to be expelled. However, if I just release it into the air, Kelshinha can still reach it, and if an ordinary person like you takes it into yourself, he can always suck it out of you… However, if there was someone who could devour the rust entirely…”

“Y-you don’t mean…!”

Tirol’s cry of surprise alerted Kelshinha, and he turned his attention upward to see who was trying to steal his precious Amli. Spotting Tirol, he leaped up to meet her.

“You bastard!” cried Bisco, jumping to intercept him.

“Out of my way, demon,” Kelshinha said, readying his spear, and the two clashed. Bisco’s blade-like kick knocked Kelshinha out of the sky, but in return, the old man’s spear landed directly in Bisco’s eye.

“Gh…aaagh!!”

“Nooo!! Akaboshi!!” cried Tirol.

“Muah-ha-ha-ha… I wonder, can you regenerate your brain? Well, it will matter little once I extract your organs and make them my new Scriptures…”

Dammit! I can’t stand, my legs won’t move…!

Kelshinha walked slowly up to Bisco when suddenly he felt someone approaching from the side and quickly leaped back.

“Kraaargh!”

“Hmm!”

The heavy iron staff snipped off the tip of his beard and cracked the ground at his toes.

“You bastard, what have you done to Akaboshi?!” yelled Pawoo.

“Ahh, another rat has come to pester me…!”

“Varuler-snew!”

Just as Kelshinha blocked Pawoo’s attack on his spear, countless rust spikes emerged from the ground beneath his feet, impaling his torso and causing the old man’s face to twist with anger.

“Make that two rats, you senile old fool!” came Raskeni’s shout.

“Y-you vixen…!”

Kelshinha looked as if steam were about to spurt from his ears, and his entire body flushed red with blood as he tried to fend off the combination of Pawoo’s staff and Raskeni’s mantras. While his three opponents stole his attention, Milo sprang high over all of them, landing atop the statue and smashing Amli’s restraints with his blade.

“Mr. Milo, sir!”

“Thank goodness I made it in time, Amli!” said Milo, stroking the girl’s pale cheeks and flashing her a broad smile. “Now we’ve gotta help Bisco, come on!”

“Yes!”

Milo nodded to Tirol and scooped Amli up on his back before bounding off like a hare, landing beside the bloodied body of his partner.

“Bisco! Can you hear me? It’s me, Milo!”

He was lying face up on the ground, eyes and mouth wide open, showing no signs of life. Even the orange glow of the Rust-Eater spores seemed dimmer than usual as they fluttered around him.

“…Bisco! It’s no use, the Rust-Eater is too weak…!” cried Amli.

“What do you need?” asked Milo. “Is it my blood?! I’ll…I’ll give him one of my organs if he needs it! Just please, save him!” he cried, his face filled with grief.

Yet Amli strode toward Bisco with a peaceful smile and a calm step. She kneeled down and cradled his head in her arms before turning to Milo.

“We are in luck. Mr. Bisco… My brother is strong.” She took Milo’s hand and placed it over Bisco’s. “You understand that more than anyone else…brother.”

“Amli…!”

“I must return to Mr. Bisco all the rust I have taken from him. The Rust-Eater will devour it all…and he will return to normal.”

“S-so you just have to do the opposite of that thing?! The thing with your eye…?”

“But Akaboshi’s belly’s all healed over now,” noted Tirol. “Where you gonna put it?”

“That is true. The opening can be anywhere. I wonder…”

She paused a little before turning to Milo and Tirol with a big bright smile on her face.

“I know! Now that we are family, a kiss would not be out of the question, would it?”

““Whaaaa?!””

But before the two could voice their objections, Amli pressed her lips against the unconscious Bisco’s, and an unimaginable torrent flowed out of her body and into his.

Ga-Boom!

As the current surged into him, the sleeping Rust-Eater mushrooms suddenly popped to life all across his body. As the Rust-Eater inside him sucked up all the rust Amli was supplying, the wounds across his body closed, the blood surged once more in his veins, and even his hair seemed to flicker like a flame once more.

“She just wanted an excuse to kiss him! Milo, are you okay with that?!”

“What else could we do?! I’ll let her off this time!”

Milo gazed at Amli with pale eyes, shouting to be heard over the intense gale emanating from his partner’s body.

Ten seconds later, the wind died down, and Bisco’s eye shot open. Then he blinked a couple times and looked down at the source of the soft feeling upon his lips and around his tongue.

“Ngmghhh!” he cried, writhing. Amli sat up with a “Paaah!” and wiped her mouth contentedly, her face bright red as she eyed Bisco shyly.

“That was wonderful, Bisco, my brother…”

“Wh-what?! Wasn’t I stabbed? Hey, what happened to the old man?!”

“A-Akaboshi!” Tirol shrieked. “How are you still alive? Is this some practical joke?!”

“Huh?!”

Bisco placed his hand to his face and discovered that the spear Kelshinha had thrust into his eye was very much still there.

“What the hell?!”

Suddenly Milo cried out, “Bisco! Watch out for Kelshinha!”

“Akaboshiii!!” yelled the old man as he called upon his superhuman strength to fling the two women aside. Then he brought the full weight of his mantras to bear and conjured up an enormous bell from the rust, which he heaved toward Bisco, Milo, Amli, and Tirol.

“Die!”

“That bastard! He’s tryin’ to crush us all at once!”

“I’ve got it! *Won/kard/syed/snew! (Protect my surroundings!)”*

“Me too! *Won-kerd-syed-snew!*”

Milo’s and Amli’s mantras caused a green and purple dome to envelop the four, and no matter how many times Kelshinha hurled the bell against it, the

barrier would not give.

“You fools! Your makeshift mantras are no match for mine! I shall crush you!”

“He’s right, we can’t keep this up for long!” yelled Amli, using up what little rust remained inside her to power the shield. “We have to take him out!”

“Dammit,” muttered Bisco. “If only I had my bow…!”

“Bisco, keep doing that.”

“Huh?!”

“Imagine the strongest bow you can,” said Milo. “Imagine pulling it, the most powerful bow you can handle.”

Bisco looked at Milo and blinked, before nodding and dedicating the full extent of his imagination to his partner’s request. With the most beautiful form he could visualize, he mimicked pulling back the bowstring to full draw.

“You are the Mushroom Keepers’ shining star,” said Milo. “Do you know why you are so strong?”

“…”

“It’s because you believe it, Bisco. The stronger you believe, the stronger you become. Your bow. Your mushrooms. Your partner. And yourself…”

“Won/shad/add/viviki/snew. (Grant target desired weapon.)”

As soon as the final syllable left Milo’s lips, the spinning green cube flew into Bisco’s outstretched left hand. Then, from that hand, a glimmering emerald bow appeared, tracing out a semicircle in the air, and a twinkling bowstring materialized between his fingers. Soon Bisco held in his hands a solid greatbow, incredibly tight, more powerful than any he had ever wielded, and yet held fast in place by Bisco’s strength.

“Wha…?! What the hell is this?!”

“Uhh, a bow?”

“I know that, you idiot!”

Suddenly, Tirol yelled, “Waaah! Pay attention, the shield’s collapsing!” and Bisco immediately shifted back into combat mode. With one eye, he locked his

aim on Kelshinha and released the arrow.

Fwip!

"…?! Where did that bow come from? *Won!*"

Kelshinha hurriedly threw up a shield, but Bisco's arrow shattered it in one blow and kept going.

"What?! Impossible! *Won! Won!*"

Shield after shield rose out of the ground, and each was pierced straight through by Bisco's mushroom arrow, which showed no signs of stopping and landed with a thud in Kelshinha's collar.

"…?! Grrrrrrh?!"

"W-we got him, sirs!" cried Amli.

"Yeah, but the mushroom didn't take root. I ain't got the hang of this bow yet…!"

"Akaboshiii!!"

As powerful as his shot had been, it was not enough to stop Kelshinha's mantra, which powered up with rage. Bisco hurried to nock a second arrow, but the greatbow was too stiff, and he could not fire it with his usual accuracy.

"Dammit, these arrows are too weak. We need a spear or somethin'!"

"Waagh! Don't look over here! How long are you gonna keep that thing in there?! Pull it out already!" Tirol shrieked.

"Huh?!"

"That spear! Pull it out!"

At this, Bisco finally turned his attention to the spear lodged in his eye. He slowly wrenched it out, until, with a sickening pop, he held in his hands something not too dissimilar to a greatarrow, glittering golden with Bisco's Rust-Eater blood.

"Of course! Tirol, I can use this!"

"Gyaaagh! Still don't look over here! There's a massive hole in your face!"

Bisco took a deep breath, and his body began to shine. He channeled all that power into his bow, slowly drawing back the Rust-Eater greatarrow. As if reacting to him, the arrow shone ever brighter the more he focused, until its golden light lit up the entire temple. As Bisco locked his aim on Kelshinha's heart, Milo placed a hand on his back, and his breathing slowed and slowed until Bisco reached a state of pure concentration, completely free of impatience or anger.

Milo recognized his partner's breaths. They were those he always felt through his back when the two fought together.

"…You're going to win, Bisco."

"…What if…" Bisco expelled glittering golden dust from his mouth as he spoke. "What if I had ended up like him? I might have chosen the same path, to obsess over strength at the cost of my humanity…if I never went to Imihama…if I never met you…"

"…"

"The world might call that evil, but he was only chasing after what he believed in. And he almost reached it. Just one more step. He was devoted…his mind free of distraction…"

"But he was lonely."

"Yeah. Which is why he'll never beat me."

A flurry of golden spores erupted from the silent Bisco, falling around him like sparks. The Rust-Eater had now completely re-formed his missing eye, and there was not a single sign of emotion to be found within those jade pearls.

"What is that look…? Where is your anger, Akaboshi? Your fear? Are you not afraid?!"

When he saw Bisco's unusual behavior, Kelshinha halted his attack and concentrated all of his Rust power within his stomach.

"There can only be one god! One! Me! I alone rule over this rusted world! Only I! Akaboshiii!" screamed Kelshinha, his mouth open so wide it seemed his jaw would come off. Then an unbelievably large spear of rust, so thick it would

be better called a pillar, erupted from his body with incredible force. Kelshinha gripped the spear in his hands and, with a single swing, sliced through the great idol's neck like a hot knife through butter. The decapitated head crashed to the ground amid the worshipers' panicked screams.

"Wh-what strength! Mr. Bisco, sir! That will surely break through the shield!" cried Amli.

"Waaaargh!" screamed Tirol. "Whaddaya waitin' for, Akaboshi, my permission?! Fire! Fire!"

"Akaboshi! Your subjugation shall be etched into the traditions of this land forevermore!!"

Kelshinha leered down the length of his spear, at the tip of which stood his four opponents, and among them Bisco, who glared back stoically, glorious like a god of the sun.

"Old man."

"…?!"

"You were pretty tough. I wasn't sure how to beat you without resortin' to cheap tricks…!"

As soon as Kelshinha's staff pierced Milo's and Amli's shields, the spores around Bisco flared up, as if he were on fire. Multiple thin filaments of golden sparks ran along the length of the arrow, glowing orange as if magma were about to burst forth from them. Then, at last, the greatarrow shone a blinding white, as dazzling as the midday sun.

"See ya later!"

Fwoom!

Bisco's cataclysmic arrow became a streak of pure, burning light that rent the earth and sky asunder. It struck the tip of Kelshinha's vast spear and stopped.

"…Hah. Ha-ha-ha! Is that all? …?!"

Gaboom! Gaboom! Gaboom!

Then, just as it looked like the arrow had lost its momentum, a great

glimmering Rust-Eater burst out of the tip of Kelshinha's arrow, running a fissure right down the haft. The arrow slowly sped up again, advancing and picking up speed as though burrowing through the spear. In the blink of an eye, the culmination of Kelshinha's Rust power was eaten up by the mushrooms and exploded into rubble.

"No… Nooo!"

Thinking fast, Kelshinha dispelled the rust spear and refocused his power into a multitude of shields arranged into a line, but Bisco's arrow showed no signs of having slowed down at all and crashed straight into the first shield, denting it magnificently.

"I-impossible… Impossible…!"

With a *Crash! Crash!* the glimmering arrow broke through one after another of Kelshinha's shields.

"I cannot lose! I am the Rust Lord! The great god Kelshinha!"

As the sweat dripped down his body in buckets, Kelshinha was soon reduced to his final shield, the tip of the arrow mere centimeters from piercing his skin.

“Only another god may slay me! Only a god!”

“If that is true,” said Amli, landing neatly beside Bisco and yelling in Kelshinha’s direction, “then Mr. Bisco…no, both Mr. Bisco and Mr. Milo, are gods beyond anything you could hope to achieve! Now vanish, demon! Become reduced to dust! To faith without conviction! To belief without a cause!”

What Kelshinha saw in his final moments were two stars, azure and crimson, each giving strength to the other. Those two lives shone opposite each other, illuminating Kelshinha’s path to darkness. They represented something the old man never wanted to admit existed: a level of divinity even higher than his own.

“I…was wrong… The divinity was not within Akaboshi at all… It was in the bond they shared…!”

Thuddd! Gaboom! Gaboom!

“Akaboshiii!!”

Then Bisco’s arrow impaled Kelshinha at last with one final scream. The endless Rust-Eaters, born of the spores falling from Bisco and Milo, ravaged and gorged themselves on Kelshinha’s nigh-inexhaustible supply of rust, tearing apart his flesh as they burst forth from his muscular body.

However.

“I will never lose…”

Gaboom!

“Never…”

Gaboom! Gaboom!

“Akaboshi…I will never lose to you…”

Kelshinha was possessed. This was no mere stubbornness, but a grudge born of hate. When he thought of a mantra, a mushroom burst from his brain. When he opened his mouth to speak, one burst from his tongue. Still, Kelshinha ripped each of them out with his bare hands, slowly advancing, step by terrifying step, toward Bisco. Amli closed her eyes in fright, but Bisco stepped forward to meet him and stared the human time bomb of Rust-Eaters directly in

the eye. Bisco was golden, shining like the sun, a paragon of the divinity that Kelshinha had devoted his entire life to attaining.

"…Kaaahhh!"

Suddenly, all the rust spurted out of Kelshinha's body, an incredible volume that disintegrated upon exposure to the air. Then, at last, all that remained was the dying old man, nothing but skin and bones, looking exactly as he did when Bisco first rescued him from the bandits' lair.

"…Rgh…rgh…"

"…"

"…You were the true god…this entire time. I await your divine punishment for the hubris of this foolish old man."

"I'm not a god, and I'm not a demon, either. I'm a Mushroom Keeper."

"…"

"I ain't tryin' to punish you. I'm just followin' my own beliefs. I still think you're a massive asshole, but I don't think you were wrong. You had strength, old man. I ain't arguin' with that."

"…"

"But ideals like that are like magnets. They pull each other in, clash together again and again, throwin' off sparks, and in the end…"

"One of them must fall by the wayside. I see… And now, Akaboshi, only you remain."

"Well," said Bisco, and with the face of a young boy who had completely forgotten what this whole intense, life-or-death struggle had just been for, he smiled. "I guess that's more or less it. Tough luck, Gramps!"

Gaboom!

As Kelshinha stared in awe at the young man's face, he felt the final Rust-Eater mushroom expanding inside him. With all his strength, he held it back and spoke.

"…Hear me, Akaboshi. My mantras are techniques to command the Rust as

one wishes. They are limited in power by the words one uses to control them, but they stem from a greater power. Perhaps that power is enough to command the Rust to remake the entire world as one sees fit."

"Remake…the world?"

"There is already something in this world with that power. I called it god. Our world is, and always has been, in the hands of this god."

"…?! Dude, what're you talking about…?!"

"Listen to me. That god did not predict your existence in this world. You are a pair of gods it did not foresee. Rust-Eaters. The Rust is your prey. And so that god will no doubt turn its boundless power upon you… A power from long ago… before the Tokyo Crater was… Gblh…!"

"Hey, old man! Don't die on me now! Tell all this complicated stuff to someone who gets it!"

Kelshinha expelled a cloud of rust, and a cluster of Rust-Eater mushrooms burst through the walls of the tower. The walls came tumbling down, and the worshipers, now returned to their senses, fled in mad panic as Actagawa scooped up as many as he could and hid them beneath his safe, sturdy shell.

"Hurry! Four to an iguana! Anyone strong enough, carry someone with you!" yelled Pawoo, standing at the head of the crowd, commanding the Vigilante Corps. Raskeni stood with her, shouting out over the sea of believers.

"Worshipers! All the gods in this place are dead! But you may still live! There is a god within each of you! So do not pray, but stand, and flee this place at once!"

At their orders, the iguana cavalry and Kandori together carried scores of people out of the collapsing tower.

"Bisco! There's no more time. We have to get out of here!" cried Milo, coming back after helping Tirol and Amli escape. Bisco glanced at him, then took out a syringe of mushroom vaccine from his pocket and stabbed it into Kelshinha's neck.

"Aaaagh?! Wh-what are you doing, Bisco?!"

“Thou shalt not kill the elderly,” he answered, looking back at his partner over his shoulder. “It’s one of the Mushroom Keeper’s rules. I can’t just leave him to die. All his rust power has been sucked out. He’s just a shriveled-up old man now, same as when we first found him. He’ll die soon enough. I just want to let him choose how he goes.”

Milo found it hard to say anything in response to the determination in Bisco’s voice. He just stared, as though he were gazing upon something very beautiful, and then nodded. He took his partner’s hand and leaped off the idol’s hands, out of the tower.

And there, watching in amazement as the mushrooms tearing his body apart withered and died, kneeled Kelshinha. As the color returned to his features, he slowly held his hands up before his face.

“I lost it all…

“A hundred years…

“A hundred years I toiled…in search of power over the Rust…power over death.

“And he took it all away…with a single arrow…

“Akaboshi.

“If only I had that power.

“If only I had *his* power…

“If only I had the power of Akaboshi’s organs…!!”

Kelshinha yelled out from the bottom of his lungs and stood, tore Bisco’s arrow out of his own chest, and turned, hurtling like a rocket toward the two boys.

“Give me your stomach again, Akaboshiii!!”

“Not sure what I was expecting…”

The split second before Kelshinha’s strike connected, the two Mushroom Keepers whirled round, completely in sync, and with a pair of roundhouse kicks, sent Kelshinha flying into the idol far behind.

“But you know, that kind of attitude ain’t bad!”

Then the two released their arrows, a pair of comets that flew after Kelshinha and impaled him, Milo’s in the head and Bisco’s in the heart, pinning him with a *Crash!* into the statue.

Gaboom! Gaboom! Gaboom!

As if the arrow wasn’t strong enough before, the Rust-Eater, activated by the pair’s bows, spread out its mycelium not just over the statue, but all over the walls of the tower, spreading its spores throughout the temple.

“You idiot! That’s way too strong!” yelled Bisco!

“Oh no! I’m sorry! It’s going to explode!”

The two leaped into the air, where Actagawa caught them and extricated them from the tower in the blink of an eye.

Gaboom! Gaboom! Gaboom!

BA-GOOM!

One last explosion heralded the arrival of a supremely tall Rust-Eater mushroom that blew the tower to bits.

“L-look, Bisco! It’s a mushroom tower!”

“Quit your gawping, idiot!”

Actagawa sprang high into the air with the Mushroom Keepers upon his back and landed on the single bridge connecting the towers to the outside world, where he stuffed his masters inside his belly and rolled along the ground. The bridge was collapsing steadily behind him, faster than he could escape, and with just thirty meters to go, it seemed he was destined to fall into the unfathomable abyss below.

“Hold on to this, Akaboshi!”

From just ahead, Nuts disembarked from his iguana with a harpoon in his hands. To the end was tied a rope, and Nuts hurled the harpoon toward Bisco. Just as Actagawa was about to lose his footing, he wrapped his smaller claw around it and just barely hung from the outer cliff.

“Y-you did it! Well done, Nuts!”

“He’s too heavyyy! Plum! Call the others!!”

Actagawa was a particularly heavy steelcrab, and already the other end of the rope, attached to an anchoring point stabbed into the ground, was beginning to loosen and pull up dirt. Nuts’s face went red as he heaved on the rope with all his might, when he suddenly felt a soft touch at his back, and around his body closed the arms of the beautiful governor lady. With her fearsome strength, Pawoo pulled on the rope with both hands.

“Excellent work, Nuts! I knew you were the right man to take over as captain!”

“G-Governor! Stay away from me, I can’t concentrate!”

“Hmm? Why not? Keep your head together, or Actagawa will fall!”

“Your boobs are touching my back!!”

Pawoo gave a blank look before exploding into laughter. As she did, the other Vigilante Corps members, as well as several onlookers, all crowded around and pulled on the rope in unison. There were easily thirty people there, but with the strength of a hundred, they hauled Actagawa up and over the ledge, where he collapsed, exhausted, and tossed his two masters to the ground.

“…Ugh…I’m tired… How am I not dead yet? I’ve certainly been unlucky enough.”

“Ah-ha-ha! That’s true! …Hey, Bisco! Look at that!”

Milo propped Bisco up and pointed. Standing tall and proud where the Six Towers had once stood was an enormous Rust-Eater, tall enough to be considered a tower itself. It scattered its shimmering spores onto the gentle breeze, and upon its cap was a nebulous pattern of red and green. Bisco’s and Milo’s Rust-Eaters fused together, the two colors interweaved in a beautiful contrast.

“We just turned their temple into a massive mushroom… Why can’t we ever leave a place the way we found it? These religious types are gonna be pissed.”

“I’m not so sure. Look…”

Milo pointed to the crowd, where one by one, people started walking toward the giant mushroom. When they reached the cliff edge, they got down on their knees. There were easily over a thousand of them now. The entire Vigilante Corps looked on in confusion as they prayed.

At no one's orders.

Asking for nothing.

They simply kneeled before the divine radiance of the Rust-Eater, with no creed or doctrine in their hearts and no words on their lips.

"…"

"…"

Milo simply took in what he saw and awaited Bisco's cynical remark…but none came. Even he was stunned into silence by the sincerity of the scene before him. Milo smiled as he looked at his partner's face, and he decided not to poke fun for the time being.

"Shall we pray, too, Bisco?"

"Nah. I think we've done enough damage for one day. It's our prayers that gave birth to that thing in the first place!"

Bisco turned away from the mushroom tower and waved to Actagawa, who was scuttling stealthily away, apparently fed up with the people around him treating him like a divine beast. The two boys laughed and ran over to meet him.

“Now, Mr. Actagawa, sir. Your claw seems to be in excellent shape.”

On the former site of the Six Towers shopping district, Actagawa gave his newly regenerated claw a few swipes and held it proudly overhead. But that was not all. Raskeni had also given him a makeover, and now Actagawa’s entire carapace bore a golden pattern of paint that lent him a most majestic air.

“These are the markings given to those brave warriors who fought against the evil Immortal Monk… Tee-hee, though it is a bit pretentious of me to say that, is it not?”

“Wow! You look amazing, Actagawa! Like a *kabuki* actor!”

“Tch. It’ll all come off once he molts anyway.” Bisco yawned. As Milo pinched his ear, Tirol smiled at the familiar scene, now a traveling merchant girl once more. She turned to the happy-looking mother and child, and asked:

“I dunno if y’all helped us or if we helped you, but either way, it seems things are settlin’ down at last. What’s next for you two?”

Amli crossed her arms behind her back and gazed over at the two Mushroom Keepers…before she felt Raskeni’s hand on her shoulders and turned around and smiled.

“To tell you the truth, I would love to go on a journey someday like my brothers. But first, I must stay at the towers…no, in this new city. I have a feeling that *its* journey is only just beginning.”

Tirol followed Amli’s gaze and saw that, with the Vigilante Corps’ help, the destroyed shops and restaurants were reopening. However, now in place of their old goods, all the trinkets they sold were based on mushrooms.

“Mushroom amulets, mushroom prayer beads, mushroom incense… How mushroomy can ya get?!”

“Well, I can hardly blame them,” smiled Amli. “After all, our temple is a mushroom now.”

The two looked up over the rubble of the city, to the magnificent Rust-Eater that towered far overhead. Now, it had been adorned with brightly colored rope and wholly accepted as one of Shimane’s holy symbols.

“All the faith in this city was no match for the faith those two had in themselves…and in each other. That mushroom there is proof of that, and Amli and I are witnesses to it. Perhaps it can’t make up for all my sins…but I should like to take a leaf out of their book and preach their way of life. Everyone believing in themselves…wouldn’t that be nice?”

“You startin’ up another religion again, after all that?! An’ who’s gonna lead this new religion, huh?”

“Tee-hee. You would do well to lower your head in the presence of the head priestess, Ms. Tirol, ma’am,” said Amli, sticking out her chest.

“You are?! Of all the friggin’…” Tirol began as she grabbed Amli’s shoulder, but the young girl easily slipped free with a playful smile on her face and gently skipped over to where Bisco and Milo were.

Raskeni turned to Tirol. “…I have you to thank as well,” she said, looking a little apologetic. “If you had not uncovered my wickedness, I shudder to think how many more lives would have been lost. I am only sorry that I have nothing to offer in thanks.”

“Eh. I wasn’t hopin’ for a reward or nothin’ anyway. I don’t need one.”

“You mean to say…”

“Now, now, now. That don’t mean I’m just gonna let the smell of money pass me by.”

Tirol turned and flashed her a devilish grin before reaching up her top to the oddly large lumps in her chest and pulling out a golden Gananja statue she had hidden there. It was encrusted with sparkling gems of all different colors, clearly an incredibly valuable item.

“Th-that is the sacred idol of the Gilded Elephants…! When did you…?”

“Well, ya won’t be needing it in that new religion of yours. Don’t worry, I’m happy to take it off your hands!”

“Lord Akaboshiii!!” yelled Kandori, throwing himself at Bisco’s feet just as he was getting ready to leave. “Must you leave us so soon? Will you not lead us to glory as our new god?”

There were tears streaming down his rugged face as he pleaded with Bisco. “Get real. I’m just a Mushroom Keeper, none of this fancy god business…,” he said.

Suddenly, Milo whispered into his ear, “Bisco,” he said, and Bisco cleared his throat and straightened his posture, before turning to the man at his feet.

“Kandori. Are you telling me that in all the country, across all of Japan, the only place worthy of my blessing is right here in Izumo? Is that it?”

“N-no! I’m not saying that at all…!”

“I must travel to spread the spores of salvation. The seeds here have already been sown, but they need careful nurturing if they are to grow. I cannot do that, but…hm…oh, I know.”

Bisco’s solemn pretense having worn out already, he raised Kandori to his feet and looked him straight in the eye.

“Amli and this new religion can take care of that. She’ll be this city’s seed of hope. She’s our precious little sister. So, Kandori, with your might, and your wisdom, please watch over her.”

“Y-yes! I will protect her with my life!”

“And try not to fight with Raskeni too much. I know there was a lot of shit between you, but that’s in the past now. Try to get along.”

At the sound of her name, Raskeni looked up from picking through rubble and locked eyes with Kandori. She looked a little uneasy because of the contents of his conversation but still smiled back her most beautiful smile.

“L-Lord Akaboshi! Your wish is my command!”

As Kandori choked up with emotion, the two boys shared a grin. Behind him, the grateful monks of the Wizened placed their hands together in thanks.

Kandori turned to address them in a booming voice.

“People! From now on, the Wizened are under the command of Her Eminence Lady Amli! Let us put our knowledge and virtue to good use once more for the prosperity of this fine land!”

“““Yes, sir!”” replied the priests in unison and began setting about restoring the city to its former glory.

“You know, for a sect supposedly obsessed with knowledge, they’re pretty easy to boss around,” said Bisco.

“It’s a shame we can’t stay and help, but we have to keep going,” said Milo. “We need to replace your bow, and for that we must continue on to Shikoku and return to your hometown.”

“Wait, what happened to the one you made? It just kinda disappeared while I wasn’t looking.”

“Yeah. I guess that only exists as long as I’m concentrating on it. It was quite tiring to keep up, too… I’d say I’d only be able to manifest it for about a day at most.”

“Damn, I liked that bow. Make it for me every day.”

“What am I, your wife?”

“Mr. Bisco, sir!” Amli suddenly ran up and leaped onto Bisco’s chest, looking up at him with wide, innocent eyes. “Brother, you are going away now, are you not?”

“Yeah. I need to get back to Shikoku…and after that, wherever the wind blows. Perhaps it’ll bring me back here; who knows?”

“Have you heard that Master and I…I mean, Mother and I, are to lead the city along a new path to enlightenment?” Amli smiled. She looked as though she had somewhat grown up over the last few days. “From now on, we will worship your way of life, sirs. To nurture the god inside ourselves…and to someday share them with another…”

She stroked Bisco’s cheeks in a rather seductive manner for her young age before giving Milo a similarly precocious smile and asking, “I would like for you

to name our new sect. Would you happen to have any ideas…?”

“Any ideas?! Er…I don’t know… Bisco, anything come to mind?”

“The Kusabira sect,” declared Bisco, completely undeterred by Amli’s overbearing behavior. “Lord Kusabira was an old god of mushrooms worshiped in Tottori, but Kelshinha destroyed all traces of him. Now the old man’s dead, I think it’s the perfect time for him to make a comeback, don’t you?”

“The Kusabira sect… What a wonderful name…” murmured Amli with rapt devotion as the flames of passion swirled in her violet eyes. “Mr. Bisco, sir, I think we should allow polygamy in this sect… What do you think…?”

“Gwaaagh! Milo!”

“No, no, and no!!! Absolutely not, Amli! One husband, one wife!”

“Oh well, if that is what one half of our god says, then I can hardly argue with that,” said Amli, skipping back and giggling from the bottom of her heart.

It was as if all the sad and lonely times she had experienced so far were nothing more than grains of sand to be washed away by the sea.

From then on, crabs came to be considered divine creatures in Shimane, and the eating of their meat was forbidden, much to the chagrin of all the restaurants who had made a name for themselves selling such cuisine. Amli and the Kusabira sect took in all those citizens of Shimane who had lost their way, and their praises were sung in public, but this one backward tradition always continued to attract criticism, the sole blot on an otherwise spotless reputation.

“Well, after all that, not only did we *not* cure my immortality…”

“…But you made *me* immortal as well.”

“You tryin’ to say this is all *my* fault, huh?!”

“Well, whose is it, then?”

Bisco and Milo yelled at each other atop Actagawa’s saddle, the giant crab still clad in his glorious golden body paint as he trudged down the long road to Shikoku. The two boys looked so healthy, it was hard to imagine all the struggles they’d been through over the past few days.

Pawoo would be glad to know that Milo’s hair change did not appear to have been permanent, and already it was growing back from the roots in his natural sky-blue shade.

The one thing Milo did still possess from his adventure, however, was the knowledge and power of Kelshinha’s mantras. And whenever he willed it, the small green cube would appear once more in the palm of his hand. Milo gazed at it now and thought back to Kelshinha’s last words, the ones Bisco had relayed to him.

“My mantras are techniques to command the Rust as one wishes. They are limited in power by the words one uses to control them, but they stem from a greater power. Perhaps that power is enough to command the Rust to remake the entire world as one sees fit.

“You are Rust-Eaters. The Rust is your prey. And so that god will no doubt turn its boundless power upon you… A power from long ago…before the Tokyo Crater was…!!”

“…”

Milo clenched his fist and crushed the slowly rotating cube and turned to look

at his partner. Bisco was loudly yawning without a single care in the world for the troubles whirling around within his partner's fragile heart, so Milo reached out and slapped him across the back of the head.

"Owww! What the hell was that for?!"

"Must be nice, not caring about other people!"

"Well, I can't help it! If Amli hadn't done what she did, we'd both be lyin' dead in the Rust Tower right now!"

"That's not what I mean! You remember what Kelshinha said, don't you? That someone even scarier than him was here in Japan, and he'd be coming after us two next!"

"Oh, you're talking about that…?" Bisco finished his interrupted yawn and, without the slightest sign of concern for his partner's worries, continued, "There's always been somethin' out to kill me, from the moment I was old enough to walk. It ain't nothin' new to me… Besides," he said with his usual devilish grin and flash of his canines, "now we got that weird magic of yours to help us out. If you can do that thing you did to Actagawa's claw again, I don't think there's anything in this world that can stand against us."

"I don't think you should trust it so much, Bisco. Even I don't know how it—!"

As if to cut Milo off, Actagawa suddenly raised his greatclaw in triumph. Milo swallowed the rest of his objection and gave their trusty steed a grateful pat. Meanwhile, Bisco squinted off into the setting sun and muttered under his breath to nobody in particular,

"It's like Jabi once said. I'm like an arrow…"

"…?"

"…Once fired, I can never change direction. All I can do is fly straight ahead. If there's a wall, all I can do is break it down. And if I can't, then that's where I die."

"…You're really not very flexible, are you?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, your highness, have I displeased you?? You got somethin' to say, yeah, say it to my face!"

“No, I don’t. You just keep on doing what you’ve always done. I’ll watch over you.”

“Don’t say that like you’re my guardian or something!”

“I am, aren’t I?”

As the two continued to argue, Actagawa came to a sudden stop. The pair peered down at him in confusion as a crowd of people approached from behind.

“B-Bisco, look at that…!”

The two turned to see a huge flock of survivors from the Gilded Elephants, carrying their treasures of gold and silver on their backs as they ran toward the two Mushroom Keepers.

“I see them! I knew they’d gone this way!”

“We’ll never follow that little girl! Oh, Mr. Akaboshiii!! Be our leader! Our gold, our prestige, and even our bodies are yours to do with as you desire!!”

“Erk!!”

Heading the crowd were the drag-queen priests who had handled Bisco’s initiation into the Gilded Elephants, and as the huge cloud of dust that represented his ardent followers closed in, Bisco, along with Milo and Actagawa, fled as fast as the crab possibly could in the opposite direction.

“There really never is a quiet moment with him, eh, Actagawa?”

“And what’s that supposed to mean, asshole?!”

And so the darkened silhouettes of the two Mushroom Keepers and their trusty steelcrab headed off toward the setting sun, putting the land of Shimane behind them and setting their sights on Shikoku, the land of Bisco’s hometown.

MANTRA CHEAT SHEET

Pre-Command Words

- won: begin a mantra
- nigie: halt a mantra
- skerva: activate a mantra from external storage

Target Words

- kerd: target self
- shad: target other

In-Command Words

Rust Manipulation

- vacurer: bind with rust
- varuler: attack with rust
- viviki: create weapon from rust

Healing

- aspal: restore something to the target
- amrit: dispel a mantra's effects, returning the target to ordinary rust

Special

- sharmd: extract an organ

Nouns

- ule: stomach
- toreo: gold
- karna: blood

Final Words

- snew/knew: complete a mantra and have it take effect immediately

Example Sentence:
"Won-shad-vacurer-snew." → Bind target now.

AFTERWORD

I made an old man the main character again.

And this time he's the bad guy. Top billing. The book's even subtitled "Bloody Battle with Lord Kelshinha," so that probably tips you off that I have a bit of a soft spot for the guy. To trample all his blind followers into the dirt, absorb their power, and use it to ascend the staircase of his own ambition is very clearly an evil act, but it is a positive evil. Unlike Kurokawa in Volume 1, he has the power to believe in himself, just like Bisco. This makes him Bisco's strongest foe yet.

In the end, though, he lacked love and thus was defeated by Bisco's and Milo's bond. I liked the way he died, defiant to the last. What a *him* way to die. A proactive death, no regrets.

And then we have the other person who liked that character almost as much as I did, the trickster of this volume, Raskeni. While all of Kelshinha's other pupils abandoned him, she fell in love (perhaps he appealed to her maternal instincts) and strove to grant his every wish, enabling his every destructive act in the process. Perhaps if she had held him in check, his daughter, Amli, could have taught him how to love, and then, maybe… But then again, Kelshinha was a pretty hardheaded old man so perhaps it wouldn't have made a difference.

Meanwhile, the good guys. To begin with, I had intended to have only our three *dramatis personae* (or perhaps one of them is a *dramatis cancer*) and then round that out with Amli a little later. It was my manager who first suggested to me the idea of bringing back Tirol, and I found her so easy to work with that I ended up relying on her quite a lot. Then it was, like, "Well, at this point why don't we bring back Pawoo, too?" "Sure," and before I knew it, I was adding her and the Calvero fishermen as well. It was looking quite busy by the end of it all.

And so, despite all of Kelshinha's thousands of followers, all it took for Bisco

to defeat him was two. Himself and, of course, Milo. Blind belief won by fear or charisma will never amount to even a single bond born of mutual understanding…

The theme of this work was, “What does it mean to believe in something?” and this is my answer. It means that you really come to grips with what that something is and actively place your trust in it.

(By the way, *Sabikui Bisco* was written for the purposes of entertainment, and I have no intention of infringing upon the reader’s personal philosophies. Just thought I’d make that clear!)

There may always be more Kelshinhas out there in the world—people who seek to capitalize on the faith placed in them by others and trample all over their followers for their own benefit. You may even have to deal with them yourself, and when that time comes, I hope you will remember Bisco’s words. That a god lives inside each and every one of us. And as arrogant as it may be, I’d like to think that somebody out there will make use of that thought in their time of need.

I leave you with all my best wishes and prayers for the future.

Shinji Cobkubo

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