

TOKYO,
THE MUNICIPAL
LIFE-FORM

3

SABIKU 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.

SHINJI COBKUBO ARTWORK BOOK



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LIFE-FORM**

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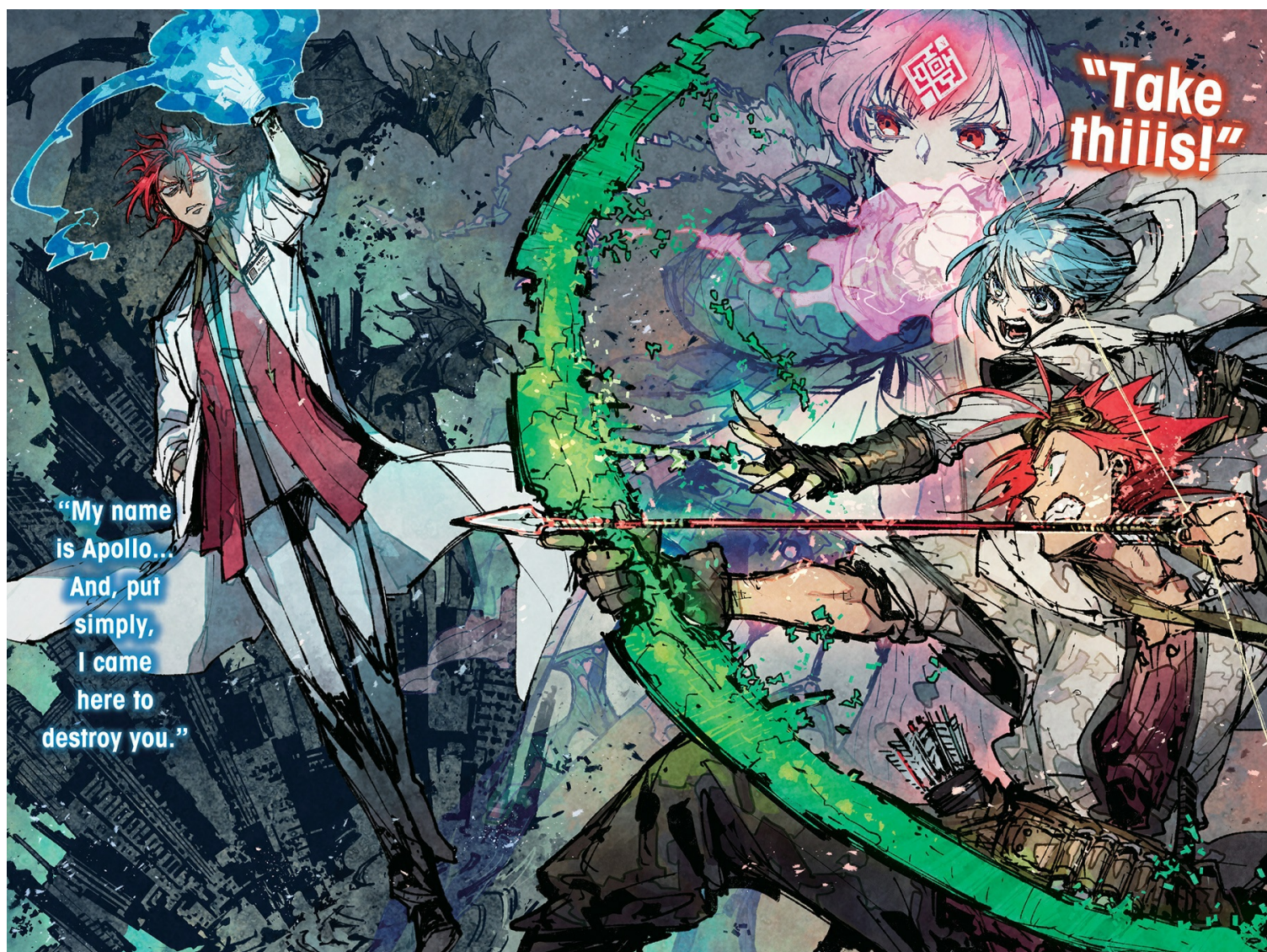
SABIKU IBISCO

*I will bring it all back...
From the ashes,
I'll bring you back.
No matter how long it takes.
Ten years, a hundred years.
I'll rewind it all.
Back to the way it was before...*



THE RUST WIND EATS AWAY AT THE WORLD

A BOY WITH A BOW MATCHES ITS FEROCITY



“My name
is Apollo...
And, put
simply,
I came
here to
destroy you.”

“Take
thiis!”



“Looks
like it's
our time
to shine!
Let's give
it all we
got!”

“Tokyo
will fall
by our
hands
this day!”



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A boy with a bow matches its ferocity.**

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BISCO

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Tokyo, the Municipal Life-Form

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ON
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Sabikui Bisco, Vol. 3

Shinji Cobkubo

Translation by Jake Humphrey

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SABIKUI BISCO Vol.3

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"Bisco, Milo! This is where it all begins!

"The walls of the past have come tumbling down,
and all that remains is a vast, infinite future!

"You must be the ones to take that perilous first
step into a shining tomorrow!"





As the mushroom-adorned wisteria diadem fell upon his sky-blue crown, Milo wondered at its curious heft. All eyes were on him, illuminated only by the wicker torches dotting the village in the miraculous silence of the night. He sat before a row of aged Mushroom Keepers, in front of whom kneeled the younger members of the tribe. From time to time, a child would call out and point at Milo with a smile, only to be admonished by their guardian.

“Iv iv your rive vuh Rust—”

“It is your life the Rust fears.”

“...Ret rat right g—”

“Let that light guide your way.”

Each time the toothless elder tried to speak, the priestess standing next to him cut him off and interpreted for Milo’s sake. While the constant interruptions clearly garnered some irritation, the elder nonetheless smiled at the beautiful young Mushroom Keeper kneeling at his feet and nodded in satisfaction before turning and yelling off to the side:

“Octoruff!”

O-octopus?

Milo looked up in confusion. Bisco and Jabi hadn’t briefed him on *this* part of the ceremony. Soon, a troop of younger Mushroom Keepers carried over a large mannequin, woven from leather and grass, in the rough shape of an octopus.

“Octopuses have long been the crab’s natural enemy,” explained the priestess, “and so it is a rite of passage for all new Mushroom Keepers to slay one with their mushroom arrows...or at least, that’s the new trial the elder came up with the other day.”

“You want me to...use my bow?” asked Milo, uncertain.

“Yeah,” said the priestess, a tanned woman with an attractive face, before sidling over and whispering into Milo’s ear, “but don’t worry too much about it. It’s more of a spectacle than a trial. If you fail, that’ll just make for a funny story.”

Milo looked once more at the dummy octopus before him, frozen in an

aggressive pose, its eight limbs raised in the light of the braziers as if to swallow Milo whole.

Wow. The workmanship is beautiful.

The Mushroom Keepers were always an artistic people, and this mannequin was no exception. Milo gazed in wonder at its well-sculpted form, while the priestess handed him a sheaf of arrows and his emerald shortbow.

Milo looked around to see all eyes focused on him. Every Mushroom Keeper, young and old, watched his movements with bated breath and twinkling eyes. Milo gulped, the atmosphere tense, and glanced back over his shoulder. On a constructed platform behind him sat two familiar faces: a girl with pink braids waving excitedly back at him, and beside her, Milo's trusted red-haired companion, a volume of manga in his hands, paying no attention to the ceremony whatsoever. When he felt Milo's prickly gaze on him, he looked up, appraised the situation, and motioned with his chin toward the octopus dummy.

...What a jerk!

Letting the anger toward his partner guide his hand, Milo nocked an arrow and pulled the string tight. The bow creaked under the surprising strength of his slender physique, and a murmur of suspense passed through the crowd.

...Fshew!

After taking a single breath, Milo opened his eyes and leaped into the air in a frightening display of agility, loosing three arrows, which stuck, all in a row, into the top of the octopus's head before Milo landed.

"Ohhhh!"

"Woow!"

"Amazing!"

The Mushroom Keepers cried out in awe, but their voices were drowned out as the clamshell mushrooms exploded into being, one after the other, with a *Gaboom-boom-boom!*

The force of the blast knocked the poor elder off his feet, but as the younger

members of the tribe helped him back up, he laughed and clapped.

“Milo!” he shouted, and the rest of the village joined in. “Milo! Milo!” they cried, hailing the name of their newest Mushroom Keeper. Then they all swarmed around him, lifting him up and tossing him triumphantly into the air, Milo too light to offer any serious resistance.

“Ah, here comes the new Mushroom Keeper... Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Milo, your hair!”

By the time the jubilant tribespeople finally released Milo from their celebration, his hair had been so tousled that it stood on end, causing no end of mirth for Bisco.

“Just stay Super Saiyan,” he joked as Milo tried to comb it down. “Don’t those guys turn into pandas, too?”

“They turn into apes, you dummy!”

“Hey, why are you angry? I thought you looked cool out there! And the elder seemed to like it, too.”

“I only came here because *you* said it was an important ceremony, and you weren’t paying any attention at all!”

“I didn’t really need to watch, though. I get to see you all the time,” said Bisco, and as the smell of fried fish came wafting over, he stood up from his seat. “And I already know you can beat a *real* octopus, anyway; I saw you do it myself.”

“But...”

As Milo wordlessly watched him go, Tirol grabbed Milo’s hand and slapped him hard across the cheek.

“What he said. Come on, Milo, let’s get some grub!”

“Owww! What did you do that for?”

“‘Cause I can’t stand watchin’ ya swoon over every word Akaboshi says! Ya gotta learn to fight back some more!”

The two of them raced over to Bisco, who had already ordered a roasted

Fanged Bonito, dripping with grease, and moved to a quieter location, where they sat and watched the celebrations unfold, eating their food as the meat juices dribbled down their fingers.

After slaying the Immortal Monk Kelshinha at the Six Towers of Izumo in Shimane, the group had headed to Shikoku in search of Bisco's hometown, a small village on the slopes of Mount Ishizuchi in Ehime Prefecture. Along the way, they bumped into Tirol, who had sold off the golden statue of Lord Gananja and earned enough cash to give her business a much-needed boost. Claiming that she wanted to trade with the Mushroom Keepers, she had hitched a ride on Actagawa, and today was the day they finally arrived.

They had been anticipating a warm welcome, seeing as how Bisco was returning to his ancestral home, but the treatment they received defied expectation. Bisco was treated less like a hero and more like a god, and people flocked to worship and revere him, as well as have him stroke the hands of babies (and the claws of crabs), in the hopes that it would cause them to grow up big and strong like him. (This was at Milo and Tirol's suggestion. If Bisco rubbed their heads as per tradition, they said, the babies might turn out as *dumb* as him instead.)

Of course, for Bisco, there could be nothing more discomfiting than being treated with reverence, and so Milo helped him out by disseminating some of Kurokawa's anime/manga/movie collection among the village. The new amusements completely distracted the Mushroom Keepers, who famously only paid attention to what was right under their noses, allowing Bisco some peace and quiet at last.

While Bisco and Milo were scheduled to leave the next day, this did not seem to bother the children of the tribe, who sat in the village square, their eyes glued to a TV set that had been placed there.

"Ah... No...!"

"How come?! The Spirit Bomb hit him head-on...!"

"Ha! Kids are so innocent. Imagine getting so absorbed in some dumb cartoon."

"I seem to recall *your* reaction to that scene was not so different, Bisco," Milo

replied.

“...”

“Must be nice being as innocent as a kid, huh?”

“C’mere, you damn panda!”

The two boys brawled like alley cats while the kids remained absorbed in their cartoon. Soon, however, one of the children began fidgeting, and eventually he pressed the pause button on the TV remote and stood up.

“S-sorry, guys! I have to go pee!” he said.

“Yutta!” said another, annoyed. “How many times are you going to do that?! It was just getting to the good part!”

“I’ll be right back! Just give me a minute!” he pleaded before scooping up a young steelcrab under one arm and running off into the darkness on the outskirts of the village. When he arrived at a bunch of statues commemorating honorable crabs that had fallen in battle, he unzipped and, displaying the trademark irreverence of little boys, relieved himself against one of them.

“Phew... I shouldn’t have had so much soda...” The boy sighed. Then to the crab in his arm, he asked, “How about you, Natsume? Do you need to go, too?” The crab, however, suddenly leaped out of Yutta’s grip and struck the statue with its claw.

“Wh-what are you doing, Natsume?! We’ll be in big trouble if you break that! Dad’s gonna kill us... H-huh?!”

At last, Yutta noticed it, too. The statue he was relieving himself against was not of a crab at all. In the dim light of the faraway village, he could see it was possessed of straight lines and right angles, and an overall more angular structure.

“W-whoa!”

Unlike the lively crab statues around it, this one lacked any sort of expression or shape at all. Timidly, he extended one hand out toward its flat, stony surface, but just before he reached it, there was a *Bang! Bang! Bang, bang, bang!*

One by one, enormous right-angled columns rose up from the ground all over

the field of statues. Even the one before Yutta shot up into the sky, expelling a gust of wind that fluttered the boy's jet-black hair.

"What...? What's going ooon?!"

The poor boy shrieked in fear, and a strong white light burst through the windows that were neatly and evenly spaced along the object's surface, spreading from one window to the next with an electrical *Crack!* and banishing the darkness from the field. Eventually, the whole area was lit up like midday, and the rising columns had shattered the statues previously there into unidentifiable rubble. They came up from the ground, stretching out like the branches of some cursed tree, their windows flickering randomly with bright white light.

"Oh...! W-waaah!"

Even now, they continued to grow in all directions, a forest of uncaring concrete that tore through the life of the land.

"I...I have to go tell the grown-ups!"

Tucking his best friend under his arm, Yutta collected himself and began running, but a line of columns burst from the ground one after the other —*Bang! Bang! Bang!*—as if following him.

"Waaaaah!"

The columns chased down the terrified Yutta before at last a pointed steel girder snagged the hem of his shirt and lifted him off the ground.

"Dad, help meee!"

As Yutta squeezed his eyes shut, gripped by terror, an arrow flew past his cheek and embedded itself in the white concrete wall with incredible force.

"W-whoaaa!"

The arrow opened a crack in the solid material of the column, and as the wire that was attached to the arrow rewound, a red figure burst into view, his cloak fluttering in the wind.

"Bisco!"

“Hang on tight, Yutta!”

Bisco swung his bow, bringing it down hard on the girder before carrying the young boy on his back and leaping once more into the night, away from the still-growing concrete.

“Get...the hell...off...my...turf!!” Bisco growled, drawing his bow tight in midair. His emerald eyes glimmered, and golden spores flowed gently from his lips like wisps of flame. The newly crafted bow in his hands creaked under the strain of his draw, and in a rush of color that spread outward from the grip, the bow’s indigo form was replaced with shimmering gold.

It’s...Rust-Eater Bisco!

The crack of the bowstring was like a gunshot in Yutta’s ear, and Bisco’s arrow streaked red in the sky before piercing the cuboid object. Then it was only a matter of moments before Yutta heard the *Gaboom! Gaboom!* and radiant Rust-Eaters burst from the thick concrete walls and started blooming all across its surface. In the blink of an eye, the mushrooms completely consumed the building, which strained for a moment before yielding to the crushing force of the fungi and falling to earth in a cloud of dust and rubble.

“What the hell?” muttered Bisco, setting Yutta down. Then he turned and fired one last shot, engulfing the entire swarm of cuboids in Rust-Eaters. Even as he watched the mushrooms consume them, Bisco’s countenance was grim. This was an enemy beyond anything he had ever seen. “White...boxes? This gives me the creeps. What the hell’s goin’ on?”

“Bisco, below you!” came his partner’s voice. At his warning, Bisco picked up Yutta once more and leaped back, just as Milo’s arrow struck the point where he had stood. Then a cluster of hen-of-the-woods sprang into being, devouring the cuboid object that had just started to sprout at Bisco’s feet. Even after Milo’s attack, the building continued to grow before it snapped in two under the strain, collapsing in a cloud of dust. As Bisco watched the mysterious life-form’s death, Milo landed beside him. “Is that boy okay? Thank goodness!” he said.

“Milo, what are those white towery things? Some new kind of mushroom?”

“I don’t know...! But they look just like office blocks.”

“Office blocks? You mean, like, those old buildings they have in spy movies? Why would they be growing in a Mushroom Keeper village?”

“I don’t know, Bisco. But we have to hurry! They’re fighting them on the south side of town as well! We’re under attack by *something*!”

“All right! Actagawaaa!”

After a few seconds, the shadow of the enormous steelcrab swept over the ruined building before landing with a *Crash!* beside the three boys. Without a moment’s hesitation, Bisco and Milo climbed up into their saddles and rode off, with Yutta shouting after them: “Go get ’em, Bisco! Kill ’em with your Rust-Eaters!”

“Yutta, grab the other kids and get ’em to the elder’s house! You understand?!” Bisco called back.

“Got it!”

The small boy gave a salute alongside his dear friend, the juvenile crab Natsume, as Bisco, Milo, and Actagawa raced off to join the battle.

Atop a small hill, Bisco stopped Actagawa and surveyed the devastating scene below.

“Dammit... My village...!” he cursed, grinding his teeth. What had only a few short minutes ago been immersed in celebration was now overrun with more of the same office blocks he had just encountered, the harsh white light that spilled from their windows erasing the orange glow of the fires. The forest of buildings burst up through each and every hut in the settlement and continued to spread even now, transforming the village into lifeless concrete. “Who did this...? And why?” he asked. “Why would anyone do such a thing...?”

Bisco...

Milo looked up at the shivering jade eyes of his partner, who was trembling with rage. Forcing his pity aside, he clapped his friend on the shoulder and smiled.

“It doesn’t matter who it is... We’ll send them packing, right, Bisco? Let’s go!”

“...Yeah!”

The flames of anger still roiled within him, but at Milo's words, Bisco felt resolute once more, and he took Actagawa's reins and steered him toward the new and mysterious foe that sought to ruin this night of celebration.

“Protect the children and the crablings! Don’t give them another inch! We’ll hold the line here!”

“Dammit, they got Takuboku! I need another crab! Doesn’t matter if it’s a young’un!”

South of the village, near the gates, shouts filled the air and a great battle was taking place. Strange clumps that shone blue in the night sky rained down upon the land like meteors, destroying whatever they touched, be it hut, crab, or man. In their place appeared telegraph poles, phone lines, tarmac roads, and other things of a municipal nature. The battleground was now a disordered mixture of the Mushroom Keepers’ rustic settlement and the harsh concrete and metal of the cities of old.

The seasoned Mushroom Keepers of the village wove deftly between the buildings that sprang from the ground, and though they fought bravely with their bows and crabs, one after another they fell to the overwhelming might of their mysterious foes. To Tirol, who moved from shadow to shadow, trying to remain out of sight, it was clear the Mushroom Keepers were fighting a losing battle.

“Sheesh! This whole thing’s really gone to hell! Is the sky fallin’ at last?” she said as she watched from her hiding spot. The strange invaders moved even faster than the Mushroom Keepers, and Tirol found it difficult to focus on one long enough to work out precisely what it was. All she could hear was the occasional *Clang!* of a blade or a mushroom arrow as the villagers’ weapons found their marks.

“What kinda force can take on the Mushroom Keepers and win...? Grrr... No use thinkin’ about it. I gotta gather my stuff and get the hell outta here!”

Tirol hoisted her rucksack onto her back and was just about to dip out of

cover when something landed at her feet with a *Crash!* Tirol squealed in fright before approaching the strange object and peering toward it. It seemed to be one of the assailants. One of the Mushroom Keepers must have brought it down, Tirol thought, noting the string of fungi eating away at its belly. It was some kind of humanoid automaton, superbly engineered, still throwing off sparks as it died.

Its arms were most striking. They were about 50 percent longer than the average human's, while the rest of its body was smooth and glossy, with incredibly pale white skin, and its head was partially covered with a crimson metallic weave that looked not unlike human hair.

"...What the heck is this?"

Tirol leaned over curiously, gazing at its white, expressionless face. Suddenly, the top half of the figure sprang to life, and it shot out its right arm. In a matter of moments, a small blue glowing cube materialized in the robot's palm.

"Launch... Ci...ty... Ma...ker..."

"Nnnwaaah!!"

Tirol leaped back and, drawing the crowbar at her waist, bashed the figure hard on the cranium, caving its skull in. The robot subsequently missed its shot, and the glowing blue cube flew past Tirol and hit a stone lantern behind her. With a scraping, metallic sound, the lantern was immediately transformed, leaving only a telegraph pole where it had once stood.

"Holy macaroni! What the hell is goin' on here?"

Tirol barely had time to shiver in fright before she heard a tremendous explosion coming from the village gates. Next, she heard the cries of the Mushroom Keepers and the crashes as their steelcrab mounts hit the ground. Every fiber of her being was telling her to get out of that place as quickly as possible, but as the earth shook around her, Tirol found herself rooted to the spot in sheer terror.

There was something out there.

Step. Step. Step.

Out in the wilderness, there was something distinctly human drawing closer. Tirol heard its echoing footsteps.

Step. Step. Step.

As the sound cut through the chaos, the cluster of urban invaders terrorizing the settlement seemed to respond to its presence, turning and focusing their bright lights on the approaching figure.

“People used to call you apes...,” said a voice, “but I didn’t think you’d actually *become* apes! You could never hope to defeat the White Apollos with Stone Age weaponry like that! And you truly think yourselves human?”

There stood a man dressed in a lab coat, his hands in his pockets and a sour look on his face, staring straight ahead with his oddly bright-red eyes. His hair, a deep crimson, billowed in the wind like a flame.

With every step he took, asphalt spread out beneath his feet like ripples on a pond, so his boots never once touched the earth. Several more of the white automatons lined up behind him, and it was obvious now that they were all modeled after him.

“Die, you monster, diiie!”

The man seemed almost lost in thought, when suddenly a furious scream came from above, and down flew a Mushroom Keeper atop his trusty steed, swinging his greatclaw toward the intruder.

There was a *Boom!* as the claw ripped the air, but the redheaded man didn’t even look up at the oncoming attack. Right before the claw could connect, it came into contact with a layer of glowing particles that formed a barrier around the man and disintegrated into a pale-blue mist.

“Wh-whaa?! That thing took out Yasunori’s claw!”

“Riding crabs now, are we? How incomprehensible. How inconceivably absurd. The world’s gone mad. Utterly mad...”

The redheaded man raised his hand, and a gust of the blue particles swept forth. The giant crab flew backward as though hit by a wrecking ball, and it sailed through the air before crashing into a small house, which then exploded

into a block of flats.

“Yasunoriiii! Curses, you bastard!”

The dismounted Mushroom Keeper now drew his blade in anger and came at the redheaded man like a wild dog. However, the intruder effortlessly grabbed him by the neck and forced him to his knees with superhuman strength.

“The bugs in the restoration program were particularly pronounced here in Shikoku. Some other kind of particle was nullifying the effects of the Apollo Particles, and I thought for sure I sensed their presence here...but I must have been mistaken. There’s no way primates such as you could possibly create something like that.”

“...Heh. Heh-heh. Laugh while you still can...”

“And why is that?”

“There’s a god protecting our village. A mushroom god. Bisco will... Bisco will —”

Suddenly, a small office building burst from the Mushroom Keeper’s throat, silencing him for good. Spreading from his neck, where the redheaded man gripped him, little buildings and telegraph poles sprouted through his skin and tore the man’s lifeless body to shreds. In moments, all that remained was something that looked like a tiny model city, which the redheaded man cast aside in frustration.

“I was not laughing,” he said, completely missing the point. “These primates need to learn some manners.” He turned to the fleet of white robots behind him and said, “Phase one of the cleanup is complete. Now we must pull up the roots. Four of you, head to the elder’s house. Three of you, destroy the—I can’t believe I’m saying this—the crab farm, and—”

But before the redheaded man could finish giving his orders, a single arrow landed in the white chest of one of the robots. The others all turned to look, their expressionless faces devoid of emotion, before...

Gaboom!

...the explosion of fungus smashed the robot back while the others leaped

away. The redheaded man, however, stood still, frowning at the newly appeared mushroom.

Gaboom! Gaboom! Gaboom!

A boy with sky-blue hair jumped between the buildings, firing off arrow after arrow and covering the white robots in mushrooms. Then one of his arrows exploded into a spiderweb-like fungus that entangled multiple nearby robots in its snare. As the bundle fell helplessly to the ground, the boy's giant crab raised its greatclaw high...

"Get 'em, Actagawa!"

Sssmash! The earth shook as the weight of the crab's claw shattered the robots into tiny little fragments. One of those fragments fell at the feet of the red-haired man, who grimaced in anger.

"...Such a violent people. Have you just been killing each other all this time? You don't even have humidifiers...or air-conditioning!"

An arrow twinkled in the air as it shot toward him. The man swept his arm, deflecting the arrow from its path, and it hit a nearby building, exploding into a glittering mushroom.

"...Hmm? That arrow... It tingled..."

"You're the boss man, huh? You must be if you can deflect an arrow like that."

The finest of the Mushroom Keeper tribe landed before the man. His fluttering cloak was filled with twinkling stars, and as he drew the next arrow from his quiver, he snarled through gritted teeth, "I don't appreciate you actin' like you own the place with your fancy magic. Now, who the hell are you?"

"A-Akaboshi! Wh-where the heck have ya been?!" yelled Tirol as she scuttled out from wherever she had been hiding and ducked behind Bisco like a frightened child. Leaving Actagawa to finish off the remaining robots, Milo landed beside Bisco, too, like his shadow, and eyed the redheaded man cautiously.

"I could ask you the same question...", said the man, looking up casually at the shining Rust-Eater before locking eyes once more with Bisco. "Who are *you*? Or

to be more precise, my question is this: Can a person who leaps an average of 1.86 meters in a single bound truly be considered human?"

For the first time, Bisco and the red-haired man looked at each other and froze. Milo and Tirol both froze when they saw it as well.

"Hey, Milo. Doesn't this freak look just like Akaboshi?!"

"Y-yeah...! He seems a lot smarter than Bisco, though..."

Indeed, the intruder looked exactly like Bisco might if he'd cleaned himself up and let down his bangs. The tough, manly look of his face was the same. The only differences were the color of his eyes and his bearing: He had none of Bisco's wildness, and instead possessed an intelligent, sophisticated air.

"You're the one who killed Yasunori and Iwakura! Tell me your name, bastard, so I can kill you and offer it to their graves!"

"It's considered good manners to give your own name before asking it of others," replied the man, "though I wouldn't expect a monkey to be well-versed in etiquette..." As he raised his gloved hand, the blue particles surrounded him once more. From the frown on his face, it seemed he realized this monkey standing before him was not like the others. "By Iwakura, would you perhaps be referring to that one over there? Before he died, he did mention that 'Bisco' would be able to kill me... I suppose you are this 'Bisco' of whom he spoke?"

"How can ya not know Bisco?! The Man-Eating Redcap, Rust-Eater Bisco? Have ya been living under a rock?!" cried Tirol. "Come on, it's your turn now. Who are you and whaddaya want?"

At first, the red-haired man simply extended his arm toward Bisco, but then he muttered something to himself, apparently changing his mind. He looked Bisco in the eye.

"My name is Apollo," he said. "And, put simply, I came here to destroy you."

"Look out, Bisco! He's not going to listen to reason!" shouted Milo.

"I can see that!" Bisco replied.

"I have now fulfilled my courtesies, you filthy apes!" said Apollo, and a blue cube shot from his palm like a comet toward Bisco. Bisco fired off a Rust-Eater

arrow in retaliation, which collided with the cube mid-flight, shattering it. Where the fragments fell, tiny miniature cities sprouted from the ground.

“...! You dismantled my particles! As I thought, the source of the bug is here after all. But... Could it really be these mushrooms?!”



“What’s wrong with mushrooms, asswipe?” retorted Bisco, firing off a couple more shots.

“Launch:Wall:Protect!” said Apollo, and at his mantra-like command, a jet-black wall rose from the ground and blocked the arrows.

“?! The Rust-Eaters... They ain’t takin’ root!”

“Launch:City:Maker!”

Next, a rapid-fire barrage of blue cubes came from Apollo’s hand. Bisco flitted around the settlement, evading them, but the glowing projectiles followed him doggedly, and even his arrows bounced off the black walls protecting Apollo, without even giving the mushrooms a chance to grow.

“Shit! This ain’t good!”

“Won/shed/kerd/snew! (Protect target area!)”

Milo leaped to Bisco’s side and chanted a mantra, creating a wall of green spores. The pursuing cubes crashed against it one after the other, but Milo’s shield kept them all at bay.

“That bastard,” growled Bisco. “He’s got a barrier like what Kelshinha had. This bow’s not gonna be enough!”

“Okay,” replied Milo, “then I’ll give you the Mantra Bow!”

“Yeah!”

Apollo was charging up some kind of attack in his hands to break through Milo’s shield, so Milo quickly and silently muttered the mantra to himself, and the green cube traced out a brilliant emerald arc in the air. A shining longbow appeared in Bisco’s hand, looking as though it could pierce the very stars themselves, and it gleamed like the fang in the corner of Bisco’s grin.

“Now get him, Bisco!”

“City:Maker:Blast!”

“Take thiiiis!”

The second Apollo fired the cube, imbued with all his might, Bisco released his arrow, and it impaled Apollo’s blue cluster of particles with a bright-orange

streak and a scattering of golden motes.

“!!”

Apollo threw up his jet-black shields to defend himself, but even they only slightly altered the course of Bisco’s extraordinary arrow, which struck Apollo in the arm and tore it clean off.

“...Wh-what?!”

Apollo clenched his teeth in pain and surprise, yet still he raised his other hand toward the now defenseless duo, and blue particles danced along his arm as he charged up another attack. The two boys had been launched into the air by the incredible recoil of Bisco’s Mantra Bow and now drifted helplessly toward the ground. They were sitting ducks.

Gaboom!

Suddenly, a shining Rust-Eater mushroom burst out of Apollo’s side, launching him off in the opposite direction. *Gaboom! Gaboom!* A second and third explosive growth sent him flying all over the place before he finally landed on his hands and knees, an orange arrowhead in his hand. He coughed, and a strange white dust, like sand, hit the ground.

“Im...possible... The spores... They’re devouring the Apollo Particles...!”

In stark contrast to his previous expressionless demeanor, Apollo was clearly aghast over what was happening. He coughed a few more times before the two boys finally fell unceremoniously to the ground.

“W-we did it, Bisco!” Milo cried.

“No, not yet!” replied Bisco. “I don’t know how, but he’s still alive!!”

The two watched Apollo struggle to his feet. Somehow, the mushrooms had not killed him. He was using his strange particles to keep the Rust-Eater’s growth at bay. He glared at Bisco and Milo, clutching his stump, as the white dust poured from his wounds.

“I must withdraw...,” he said. White sand spilling from his crimson eyes, he slowly took a step back. “It is proper manners to recognize the strength of one’s opponent. You win, this time... However, I believe I understand...what was

hindering my urbanization. These...organic particles... They've been obstructing the Apollo Particles. I shall triumph next time...if I can just get past you..."

"You think we're going to let you?"

"Milo!"

"Launch:City:Maker...!"

Milo leaped to his feet and leveled his bow, but Apollo slapped his remaining hand to the ground, and a steel girder shot from the earth and pierced Milo's leg, pinning him to the spot.

"...! Wh-whaah!"

"Milo!"

Apollo pressed his attack on the wounded duo. Like setting a hunting dog on its prey, he levitated his severed arm into the air and fired it toward Milo.

Damn, my leg! I can't move!

"Rrraaaargh!"

At the last second, Tirol came out of her hiding place and threw herself in front of Milo. Swinging her crowbar sideways, she caught the flying arm on the wrist and severed it in two.

"Hahh...hahh! Yeah! How d'ya like *them* apples, asshole?"

"Tirol! Get out of the way!" Milo shouted, but Apollo was too fast. Discarding its arm like a lizard's tail, the hand continued moving on its own and latched on to Tirol's face.

"Wagh! What the heck?! Get off me— Waagh! Aaaagh!"

The hand fired a stream of blue particles into her head, and there was a horrific crunching sound, like termites eating at wood. Tirol screamed out in pain as the hand clamped down on her, hard.

"It hurts! It hurts! Milo! Bisco! Get it off!"

"Tirol!" screamed Milo.

"You bastard!"

Still on the ground, Bisco fired a Rust-Eater arrow at Tirol, tearing the hand from her face with unparalleled finesse. There was a *Gaboom! Gaboom!* as the mushrooms blossomed, and then Apollo's hand fell silent and unmoving at last.

"Transfer...preparations...complete... Tokyo in five...four..."

"What did you do to Tirol, asshole?!"

"I must hurry...and create an antidote... It's the spores... The cause is mushroom spores..."

As Apollo walked away, his body began to disintegrate into countless blue particles. Bisco fired an arrow after him, but just as it was about to hit, Apollo disappeared completely into blue mist and was blown away on the breeze.

All that showed he was ever there was the destruction left in his wake: a village half-transformed into a city and the remains of the Mushroom Keepers and crabs who fell in battle against him...and Tirol, who now labored with heavy and ragged breaths.

"Tirol!" cried Milo. "Ahhh, what has he done...?"

When Bisco heard his partner's tragic wails, he rushed over to help. But when he took one look over Milo's shoulder at Tirol, he fell silent.

From the leftmost part of where Apollo's hand had grabbed her, down her neck, all the way to her collarbone, Tirol's skin was covered in a miniature cityscape. Even now, it seemed to be spreading, tiny buildings and roads bursting out of her skin.

"Why, Tirol?! I told you to stay hidden!"

"Ah-ha-ha... Yeah, ya did... I guess I've just been around you two idiots for so long, I caught the stupid."

"What about the Rust medicine? Where is it?" Bisco asked.

"I've already tried that! But it's not working... The disease is still spreading!"

Tirol gave a resigned laugh. "Ah-ha-ha... I guess that's it, then. What a rotten life I had... *Cough! Cough!*" When she coughed into Milo's chest, little buildings and telegraph poles were mixed in with her blood. Already, the infection had spread to her lungs.

“Cough! But...it was a fun life, ya know... ‘Cause...I got to meet you...”

“You can’t give up yet!” pleaded Milo. “I can still save you!”

“C-come...visit me in hell...when ya get the chance, won’t you? I’ll be waiting... Milo... Akaboshi...”

“No! This can’t be happening! Tirol! You can’t die!” Milo cried with teary eyes. Just as he did, though, something started to happen. A host of green spores began floating around him.

Don’t let her die!

As if whipped up by Milo’s determination, the spores grew agitated and became a fiery orange color. Milo squeezed his eyes shut in concentration, and the spores combined into a miniature sun.

“...What the hell is this?! Milo! Hey, Milo! Snap out of it!”

“Bisco! Tirol’s gonna... She’s gonna...!”

“Pull yourself together, dumbass! Look at that! Did you make it with your mantra powers?”

At Bisco’s voice, Milo seemed to calm down a little, and he slowly opened his eyes...to see before him a brilliant crimson cube, quite unlike his usual one, giving off a radiant gleam.

“Wh-what the heck?!”

Milo squinted at it. It was unlike anything he had ever seen. It gently rotated, as if surveying the state of Tirol’s body, before drifting over toward her gently parted lips...and disappearing inside her body with a ridiculous *Shthunk!* noise.

“?! Wh-whaaa?!”

“Whaaah?! What is it doing? It won’t listen to me!”

Breaking free of its master’s control, the cube darted around inside Tirol as she clutched her throat, causing her whole body to shine crimson.

“Ah! Wait—! What? What’s...? Are those my *lungs*? Hey! Get outta there! You can’t touch a lady’s organs like—! Ah-ha-ha-ha! Stop it! That tickles!”

“It’s out of control! I can’t stop it! Bisco, do something!”

“Wait, look at that...! Look at what it’s doing to Tirol!”

The cube’s green light swept over Tirol’s body and erased the miniature city, causing it to disintegrate into white dust. The two boys stared in shock at the miraculous recovery, while Tirol herself was unable to contain her discomfort, alternating between fits of laughter and screams as she flailed in Milo’s arms.

“Look, Bisco! It’s turning her back to normal!”

“She’s like a flopping fish... Well, if she’s got that much energy, I guess it means she ain’t about to croak.”

“How can you say that at a time like this?!”

Tirol continued to thrash about as if possessed before giving one last spasm and falling still. Then she shot to her feet and, with strange, robotic movements and unsettling cracking noises, turned to face the two boys.

“City Maker ninety-four percent erased. Normal movement restored. In order to maintain organic system life span, this device will remain present until such time as City Maker root user is deleted.”

From out of Tirol’s expressionless mouth came an incomprehensible stream of jargon, and Bisco and Milo turned to each other in disbelief. Ignoring them, Tirol looked herself over before crossing her arms and going, “Hmm...I hadn’t planned on leaving Milo yet, but with such a strong desire, there wasn’t much I could do. If I hadn’t intervened, this girl would have fallen prey to the city.”

“...Hey, Tirol. What’s the matter? Something still wrong?” Bisco asked.

“Nope. I feel totally fine.”

“Totally fine...? But you...”

Though the jellyfish-haired girl did seem to be looking a lot healthier, her usual cheeky expression was nowhere to be seen. Instead, she sported a noble, almost manly look, and most strikingly, her signature yellow eyes were now bright red.

And on her brow, there was some kind of mark. A diamond-shaped, geometrical pattern that glowed and dimmed with a faint red light.

“...Do I look different to you? I suppose I must. But that’s what girls are like at

that impressionable stage in our lives. Look away for a moment, and we can change. Just like that.”

“It’s been five seconds. And we were looking at you the whole time.”

“Do you not trust me, Bisco? After all we’ve been through together?” Tirol’s red eyes flared wide, and she stared into Bisco’s eyes with fierce resolution. “I’m the genuine article. Your friend, Tirol Ochagama. Height: four feet and eight inches. Weight: seventy-eight pounds. Twenty-one years of age. Likes: money and hot chocolate. First fell in love at eleven, and a troubled relationship followed. My ex-boyfriend hated jellyfish, and it is for that reason that I subsequently styled my hair after one. My measurements, from the top, are...”

“Okay, okay! I get it! You don’t have to tell us all that!”

“Hey, Tirol?” asked Milo. “Has the infection really stopped? Does it still hurt?”

“Indeed, it has! Some of the substance still remains internally, but the urbanization of the surface has been completely erased. This part is fine now. This part, too...”

Tirol started stripping off articles of clothing until she stood before the boys in only her underwear. When she moved to remove those, too, she suddenly slapped herself across the face, knocking herself to the ground. Then she slowly sat up, rubbing her swollen cheek.

“Th-this one is surprisingly willful, to still be able to exert control over the body like that... What’s that you say? If I’m going to give a striptease, I should be charging for it? What is that supposed to mean...?”

“Tirol! Who are you talking to? What the heck is going on?”

“Looks like demon possession to me,” said Bisco. “We’d better get her to the elder’s place; they’ve got incense that can help with this kind of thing. Besides, there might be more of that guy’s goons around. I wanna make sure everyone’s okay.”

As if on cue, Actagawa dropped from above, quaking the earth as he landed, and the two boys leaped atop his back. Without even waiting for Bisco’s helping hand, Tirol sprang up behind them and clung to Milo’s back.

“Okay, Bisco, let’s go! We have to figure out what’s wrong with Tirol!”

“...Tirol,” Bisco said. “Was that thing you said earlier true? The reason you style your hair that way is to get back at an ex?”

“It is true. It says as much in my memory banks...,” Tirol said, then once again slapped herself across the cheek, causing her nose to bleed, before continuing. “...I mean... Er...you must pretend you didn’t hear that. Apparently, it’s supposed to be so that it’s easier to remember my store, Jellyfish General.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought, right?” said Milo.

“This girl’s gettin’ weirder by the second. Actagawa, take us to the elder’s place, pronto!”

Actagawa kicked aside one of the white robots that still littered the ground before responding to Bisco’s guiding hand and taking off like a bullet toward the center of the village.

They came to be known as terrorist acts of urbanization.

The country was rife with talk of white automatons with red hair who appeared simultaneously across the country, “urbanizing” all they touched. They cared not whether their targets were natural or man-made, or even human or animal. They urbanized everything, transforming it into the concrete buildings, telegraph poles, and traffic lights of the cities of ancient times.

Without any warning whatsoever, this bizarre, unprecedented phenomenon swept the nation, embroiling all of Japan in pandemonium. All prefectures sustained heavy damage in the attacks, but none more so than Kyoto, the nation’s seat of power. Overnight, the capital fell, the chain of command collapsed, and Japan was plunged into chaos. It was Imihama that stepped up to seize control.

“We of Imihama Prefecture have confirmed the sudden appearance of an enormous city in the Tokyo Crater, to the south of Saitama. We believe the machines that have been attacking our lands are coming from this city.

“People of all lands, all creeds, all businesses, all tribes. People of Japan, put aside your differences and come together in defense of our country. We gather our forces at Imihama.”

It was unclear whether the other prefectures would be quick to swallow their pride and take Pawoo up on her offer, but the young and beautiful governor of Imihama had faith.

This was simply not the time to be worrying about saving face.

“Shot... Unset. Launch:City:Maker... Shot.”

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The white robots soared above the city of Imihama, chanting their curses and

raining down destruction in the form of blue cubes upon the land below. Well-ordered, methodical cityscapes engulfed the land wherever they fell.

“Get the people to the shelters! And when those fill up, take people into the sewers!”

“Captain Nuts! Get back! It’s too dangerous here on the front lines!”

“Don’t be absurd! If we let up anymore, the bureau will be in danger! We have to hold them here until the talks are complete!”

As the Vigilante Corps’ iguana cavalry rushed to meet their foes, ranks of Mushroom Keepers supplied covering fire. It seemed that after Kyoto, the next target on the terrorists’ list was Imihama, Kanto’s last bastion.

“...Grrr. They’re indiscriminate...!”

Pawoo looked through the reinforced glass of the bureau window, out at the urbanization spreading throughout the streets of Imihama below. A grim frown crossed her perfect features. Even as she waited in the boardroom for discussions to commence, she still had about her the proud bearing of the former Vigilante Corps captain, and ever at her side she kept her trusty iron staff in her hand. It was all she could do to not rush out of the room and join the fighting herself.

“Please welcome Chairman Zenjuro Matoba, of Matoba Heavy Industries.”

“From Tottori, the provisional representative of the Mushroom Keeper tribes, Great Elder Gifune.”

“From Banryouji Temple in Iwate, High Priest Ochagama.”

“From Shimane, High Priestess Amlini and her Speaker, Raskeni.”

The top brass of all the important organizations of Japan were gathering. Pawoo took a deep breath and put her desire to fight aside before turning and welcoming her guests one by one.

“Amli, thank you for coming, and with Raskeni, no less. I know things must be rough for you in Shimane right now.”

“Think nothing of it, Miss Pawoo, ma’am,” Amli replied. “Were it not for you, the Kusabira sect would not exist.”

“Right now, you are the leader of mankind, Pawoo,” said Raskeni. And then, whispering in Pawoo’s ear, she added, “You leave the sects to us, and focus on uniting the tribes and businesses.”

Pawoo nodded. One after the other, Japan’s household names sat down at the negotiation table. This was a place where the world’s worst enemies would have to learn to work together, and it was none other than Pawoo who was tasked with making it happen.

“Ever since the death of that old rat Kurokawa, our relations with Imihama have been going south,” said Chairman Zenjuro Matoba, prodding the table with a meaty finger and peering scornfully with his dark eyes at the faces around him. “I was just considering cutting you off completely when you forced me here...and to make matters worse, I see you’ve invited a bunch of uncivilized mushroom-eaters around the table as well!”

“You got a problem with mushrooms?” scoffed Elder Gifune, the aged woman representing the Mushroom Keepers. “You know, for a man with an awful lotta factories, you sure put out some trash. One shot from our mushroom arrows is enough ta put yer machines in the scrap heap, where they belong! I will give you one thing, though: They make for excellent target practice!”

“Y-you dare call our weapons trash?!”

“Well, what else should I call ’em? Garbage? Hunks ’a junk?”

“Elder, please! Like you, the chairman is here to discuss a matter of great importance.”

Elder Gifune, however, did not seem the least bit put off by Pawoo’s remonstrations. Across from her, the chairman’s face went as red as a pig’s.

“Hmph! If I allowed the supreme Matoba Heavy Industries to ally with mushroom-eating barbarians, my predecessors would roll in their graves! Governor, excuse me, but I must—”

Suddenly, as if to cut him off, something crashed through the ceiling and landed in the middle of the table. It was one of the white android invaders, a single arrow piercing its face. It flailed with jerky, creaking movements for a moment before... *Gaboom! Gaboom!* A rapid succession of mushroom

explosions brought it to a halt.

“E-EEK! That’s one of those...those things!”

“Don’t get yer undies in a twist. It’s dead,” said a voice from above. An old man dropped through the hole in the ceiling and adjusted the tricorne hat that fell atop his head a second later. Then, just to make sure it *was* really dead, he stamped on the robot’s neck and kicked its severed head aside.

“It’s the hero, Jabi!”

“So spry for his age!”

A murmur of admiration passed around the room. Jabi stopped and peered at the faces seated around the table, and when his eyes fell upon Gifune, he became visibly displeased.

“Bleh. I see you invited the hag.”

“Ill-mannered as always,” she replied. “You youngsters oughtta show your elders some respect.”

“Master Jabi! How glad I am to see you safe and well. Have the invaders made it inside the building?”

“Nah, just this one. But there ain’t no end to ’em. If you guys got talkin’ to do, you’d better get on with it, ’cause they’ll be here soon.”

Pawoo nodded and turned to the noisy table, shouting over the muddled voices.

“Everyone, I hope you now understand the situation we’re in. It is not just this room. Innocent lives are at stake all across Japan! It would be a great tragedy if we were to lose our people, our lands, because of shortsighted bitterness and resentment. We must unite our hearts and turn to face our common foe!”

Pawoo stood there, staff in hand, her long black hair streaming behind her, as the table fell silent. Then, after a moment...

“Agreed.”

“We will support Governor Pawoo!”

“Very well.”

...one by one, the people around the table put their squabbles aside and shouted out their words of support. Even the dour-faced Matoba suppressed his anger as he thought about the profit margins at stake and managed to squeeze out a reluctant, “Very well, let’s just get it over with.”

“Hyo-ho-ho!” Jabi laughed. “It seems the young lady is now a fine businesswoman as well!”

“Hah. Don’t insult me. My heart still belongs to the battlefield.”

Pawoo cleared her throat and turned to a large display embedded at the front of the room.

“Now then, everyone. I’m sure you’re all weary from your long travels today, but time is wearing thin. Let me get straight to the point. We have succeeded in taking some high-altitude photos of the huge city that suddenly appeared in the Tokyo Crater. We believe... Hmm?”

Just as everyone turned their attention to the photos, the image faltered for a moment before being replaced by static.

“A breakdown? Just what I needed... Okay, well, no matter, we still have printed copies. Hand them out and we’ll—”

“...Ah. I can hear someone’s voice. Is it working? Hello? Can you hear me? Is that the Imihama Prefectural Bureau? Let me know if you can hear me.”

“Wh-what is this?!” asked Pawoo in astonishment.

A voice that sounded like it belonged to a young girl could be heard through the white noise of the static. As Pawoo and the other people in the boardroom murmured in confusion, the image suddenly changed, and the red-eyed jellyfish girl appeared on the screen.

“...Oh! I think I got it! It’s not totally stable, but it’ll do.”

“Tirol, you’re okay!” said Pawoo with relief when she saw the image of her friend appear. Then, remembering she was still in front of several important people, she cleared her throat and continued. “How are you doing this? Actually, I’m in a meeting at the moment. Can this wait...?”

“I simply hacked into the broadcast satellite. I knew that Kurokawa had a link

from Imihama, but it just took me a while to find the correct channel... Ah, I see you've gathered all of Japan's leaders. The timing couldn't be better."

"Tirol...? What happened to you? Your face..."

"Th-the holy mark upon her brow!"

Someone was even more shocked than Pawoo at Tirol's appearance. Some sort of big, fluffy, cotton wool ball sprang from its chair and kneeled in front of the screen.

"H-High Priest Ochagama?!"

"The Founder!" the cotton wool ball pleaded. "Long have we faithful servants awaited your return! We at Banryouji Temple have meticulously studied your scriptures and preserved your teachings for generations! Please lend us your guidance once more!"

Until that point, the high priest of Banryouji Temple had not said so much as a word, so when he suddenly began groveling before the screen, it threw the boardroom into an uproar all over again.

"...Miss Tirol, the Founder of Banryouji?" asked Amli. "But that cannot be."

"Perhaps it can," Raskeni cautioned. "That cube-shaped mark on her forehead appeared in Kelshinha's scripts as well, denoting the most supreme of all the gods. High Priest Ochagama hasn't *completely* lost his marbles just yet, Amli."

"I didn't say he had, Mother! Hmph!"

Meanwhile, on the screen, Tirol seemed to smile at the head priest with some degree of reminiscence.

"Ochagama, my old friend! I can't believe you're still at that place! How old must you be by now? Ahhh, you don't know how happy I am to see you again. How are things on your end?"

"Well, many of Japan's most prominent prefectures have come under attack by armies of White Apollos. The invaders are using the City Maker program to urbanize the entire country. The situation is extremely troubling... However, the fact that Apollo has resorted to this tactic must mean that his attempts at restoring all of Japan simultaneously must have been unsuccessful."

“Indeed. There is no way that three hundred years ago Apollo could have foreseen the evolution of these spores that counteract his efforts. Subsequently, the Rust was not able to restore the cities as he had planned. While Apollo attempts to debug, we must strike first against Tokyo before he can destroy us.”

“However, Founder...we have not the means to attack Tokyo. It is all we can do to keep the White Apollos at bay. We stand no chance against the man himself.”

At the high priest’s words, Tirol gave a roguish smirk.

“Ochagama, old friend. Mankind has an ace up its sleeve. I watched these two pierce Apollo with my own eyes.”

“What?!”

“Bisco! Get over here! Bring Milo as well! ...Here, in front of the TV!”

“B-Bisco? And...Milo?!”

Until now, Pawoo had been dumbfounded by the strange course of events, but when she heard her brother’s name, she reeled in shock. After a few moments, a single jade-green eye appeared as Bisco peered into whatever receiving device was on the other side, filling the screen with his wild features. Next, the fair-faced doctor boy grabbed him by the hair and tugged him back so that both their upper halves were visible.

“Look, I can see Jabi!” said Bisco’s image. *“What is this, a video?”*

“Oh! Pawoo! Oh, and Amli’s there, too! Tirol, can they see us as well?”

Tirol squeezed her way between the boys, emerging in the center of the screen.

“These two are miraculous hybrids of mushroom and man. The spores coursing through their veins have tremendous power, enough to devour the Rust...that is, the Apollo Particles.” She blinked a couple times with her bright-red eyes and continued. *“Now that Apollo has shed his mortal flesh and become one with the particles, they are the only ones who can hurt him. I am bringing them back to Imihama as fast as I can, so please hold out just a little longer.”*

“As you command!” Ochagama replied.

“Hey, Tirol, outta the way. If Imihama’s really on the other end, then there’s somethin’ I gotta say.”

Bisco grabbed Tirol’s head and yanked it aside before filling the screen with his own.

“Pawoo! You there? You’re seein’ this, right? Tirol’s gone mad! She keeps askin’ about Tokyo, sayin’ Japan’s been destroyed! She ain’t makin’ no sense! I think she’s possessed!”

“P-possessed?”

“Yeah! And Milo’s no good with curses and stuff... You got all sorts of witch doctors and medicine men in Imihama, don’t you? Send one over! A good one!”

“Bisco! Now is not the time!” protested Tirol’s image. *“We must return to Imihama at once!”*

“It’s for your sake we’re doin’ this! Milo! Give her some toffee to chew on or somethin’!”

Watching the chaos unfold on the other side of the screen, the boardroom began to murmur once more. High Priest Ochagama scratched his head nervously and muttered, “You’re bringing Akaboshi here? I wonder if he will be willing, Founder...?”

But when Amli heard the priest’s words, her violet eyes twinkled.

“You want Mr. Bisco to come here? Is that it?”

“Wha—?”

Suddenly, Amli stood up from her seat and yelled toward the screen, “Big brother! I can take care of Tirol for you! If there’s an evil spirit possessing her, my mantras will suck it out! We healers are adept at that sort of thing!”

“Amli! That’s great! Then get over here to Shikoku as fast as you can!”

“I’m afraid I cannot leave Imihama at the moment! I am currently...erm...er... I am...busy banishing an evil spirit from Pawoo!”

“Wha—? From me?!” cried Pawoo in surprise. Amli turned and winked at her, whereupon Pawoo finally realized her game and kept quiet.

“Pawoo’s possessed, too? Well, I guess that makes sense... She is a pretty sinful woman, after all. What kind of evil spirit is it?”

“It’s...ummm...the spirit of the previous governor, Kurokawa! It makes her shirk her duties and read manga all day! She only eats junk food as well; it’s just awful!”

Bisco burst into laughter, and while Amli wondered if he bought the lie, Pawoo stood trembling with indignation.

Watch what you say, brat, even if it’s just an act...!

“S-so you see, you simply must come here, Mr. Bisco, sir! If we delay Tirol’s treatment for even a moment, it could have dire consequences!”

“I see. Guess I’d better haul ass back to Imihama, then.”

“We’ve got no choice,” said Milo. *“Tirol keeps slapping herself, and I hate to see her like this. We need to get her cured as quickly as possible.”*

As the two boys conferred, Tirol winked at Amli as if to say, “Thank you!” Then she said, *“That’s all from me, then! I’ll head over as soon as I can. I think the satellite is about to cut out, so...”*

“F-Founder! I have one request!”

“Sure, but hurry! I’ve only got a minute left!”

“W-well...Founder... It’s about the body you are currently inhabiting...” The fluffy priest glanced upward nervously at the screen before continuing. “...It happens to be the body of my great-great-granddaughter. She may be an unbeliever, but she is a kindhearted and loving girl. All I ask is that...you be considerate while you are in her body.”

“Yes, I know. You needn’t worry, Ochagama, old friend. She will make a fine successor for you. She has an incredible will, able to escape even my control for a time— Ow!” Another huge slap across Tirol’s cheek interrupted her words, and she frowned. *“Even if she is sometimes a little stubborn. Ah, looks like my time is up. Pawoo! I’ll leave the rest to—”*

Then the image cut out to static one last time. The boardroom was filled with voices again, with everyone giving their own opinions on what they had just

seen.

“...What do you think, Master Jabi?” asked Pawoo.

“I ain’t sure I like what I heard, but Bisco’s the strongest livin’ thing in the country, that’s for sure! Holdin’ out till he arrives might not be a bad idea.” Jabi gazed at the static on the screen and stroked his beard with glee. “The problem is how to convince those ruffians outside to leave us alone... Hyo-ho-ho! I’ve a feelin’ these ol’ bones are gonna take quite a beatin’!”

“She’ll leave the rest to me, huh? Seriously...? Easy for her to say.”

Pawoo tossed one of Kurokawa’s old headache tablets into her mouth as she thought about how she was going to deal with the hubbub now filling the boardroom. For the first time, she felt she understood the previous governor’s pain just a little.

Once upon a time, when the Mushroom Keepers were fleeing persecution at the hands of the government, they had destroyed all the bridges that connected Shikoku to the mainland. If one tried to reach the island by boat, they wouldn't last five minutes before the redfins lurking in the waves used their sharp fangs to tear the ship apart. The only way to make the crossing, then, was to ride on steelcrabs, whose tough hides the redfins failed to pierce, and so the channel formed a natural line of defense for the Mushroom Keepers who lived on the island.

"I gotta swim again?! When do I get to sleep? This is bullshit!"

"It's not bullshit, Bisco. We've been playing rock-paper-scissors. It's totally fair."

"If it's totally fair, then how come you keep winning?!"

"Because you're not very good at it, Bisco."

As the two boys bickered, Tirol, whom Milo was carrying on his back, spoke up. "Now, hold on a moment, boys," she said, smiling and pointing over in the distance. "I believe we may be able to give poor Bisco a rest. And Actagawa, too, for that matter."

The boys had found it difficult to continue referring to the red-eyed Tirol as Tirol, given her condition, so after no lengthy deliberation, they had agreed on simply calling her "Red Tirol." What Red Tirol was pointing at was an enormous bridge, painted and pristine, that definitely hadn't been there three days ago when the group first arrived. While the far end of the bridge was shrouded in mist, it seemed clear from its direction that it must lead to the mainland.

"Wh-what the hell is that?!"

"It is a bridge, my dear Bisco," replied Red Tirol. "People use them to cross bodies of water."

“You wanna lose some teeth?”

“But why?!” asked Milo in disbelief. “There wasn’t a bridge when we came here before! There wasn’t anything at all!”

“I would presume that Apollo constructed it in order to carry out his assault,” Red Tirol replied. Then she chuckled. “...However, this is the Gojo Bridge. I suppose recreating the Great Seto Bridge was beyond him. It seems Apollo is still far from being able to command the Rust as he pleases.”

Bisco and Milo hadn’t the slightest idea what Red Tirol was talking about, but they were used to this by now, and so let her do her thing.

“I don’t care what bridge it is; it’s good news for us,” said Bisco, steering Actagawa toward it. “We’ll reach the mainland in no time if we ain’t gotta swim all the way.”

“It’s a shame we won’t get to play rock-paper-scissors anymore,” said Milo.

“Shaddup!”

Still arguing, Bisco spurred Actagawa out of the water and onto the bridge, where he set off toward the mainland. The giant crab found he could run much faster on the well-maintained asphalt road.

“But Apollo didn’t bring that many robots, so why’s the bridge so massive?” asked Bisco. “Pretty inefficient, if you ask me.”

“Back in our day, we needed bridges this size to deal with the large amounts of traffic,” Red Tirol answered.

“*Back in our day?*” repeated Milo. “But, Tirol, you’re not that much older than us.”

“I see. In that case, please ignore what I just said... Hold on a second. Do you boys feel something shaking...?”

“An earthquake?” Bisco suggested. “A big one, too.”

“It’s not an earthquake,” said Milo. “Something’s coming from down below!”

The shaking intensified until eventually, the bridge itself began cracking apart as if something were pushing against it from beneath. The bumping shook

Actagawa up and down.

“What’s goin’ on?” asked Bisco.

“Hold on, Tirol!” cried Milo. “Actagawa, get us out of here!”

Snatching the reins from Bisco, Milo gave them a shake, and the giant crab rolled up and allowed himself to be launched upward like a football. Seconds later, something terrifyingly huge burst through the surface of the bridge, with a splash of sea spray and a bellow that shook the air.

“What the hell is that?!” asked Bisco.

At first glance, it looked somewhat like a hammerhead shark, only far larger. Besides its freakish size, however, the other thing unusual about its appearance was the row of office buildings that lined its back. It opened its terrifying jaws wide, lined with rows of ferocious teeth, and there in its throat was a pair of grinders shaped like rolling pins, ready to smash up any steel beams that entered the beast’s mouth. Across the wide protrusion on its head was an electronic billboard that flashed a message saying HIGH ACCIDENT ZONE AHEAD. PLEASE DRIVE SAFELY.

“It’s an animal!” Milo cried. “Is it one of Apollo’s lackeys?!”

“No,” replied Red Tirol. “It is a municipal life-form created by rampant urbanization. It doesn’t even have a name. Let’s see... It appears to eat bridges, so how about ‘Bridge-Eater’?”

“We ain’t got time to chat!” yelled Bisco. “It’s comin’ this way!”

Just as Bisco said, the “Bridge-Eater” was racing toward Actagawa with incredible speed, its jaws open wide. As it went, the bridge disappeared into its gullet with a horrible metallic creaking sound as the grinders pulverized it to dust.

“Bisco! That thing’s made to eat. It’ll swallow us in one bite if we’re not careful!”

“Then I’ll just have to bite back!”

Golden sparks danced on Bisco’s breath as he pulled the string of his bow. Looking back at the Bridge-Eater, he fired, and a crimson streak disappeared

down the creature's throat and right out the other side.

Boom! Boom! Gaboom!

The explosive force of the Rust-Eater mushrooms beat the Bridge-Eater back. Letting out a wail, it slowed in speed.

"Wow, amazing!" said Red Tirol in admiration. "So this is the power of the Rust-Eater arrows!"

"It's still going, Bisco! It's not dead!"

"Tsk."

Bisco frowned. While he had scored a hit, the rolling grinders in the shark's throat quickly made short work of the Rust-Eaters before they could grow. It seemed the mycelium was slow to take root in the creature's urbanized body.

"Doesn't matter! I'll fire as many shots as it takes!"

"Not so fast, my fearsome friend! It appears we have company!"

Bisco looked out toward where Red Tirol was pointing, at the miniature city on the shark's back. There he could see several small vehicles driving along the creature's spine toward him.

"What the hell?! Cars? ...And...they've got fins!"

Along with one on each side, the cars sported a dorsal fin on their roofs, and their hoods opened and closed like mouths, revealing rows and rows of sharp teeth underneath.

"Fascinating!" said Red Tirol. "These are municipal life-forms as well! Perhaps we should call them 'carfish'? But are they even living creatures at all?"

"Tirol, watch out!"

Milo's arrow shot one of the carfish out of the sky as it leaped off the highway toward her, its hood-mouth open wide. A second and third followed, but Actagawa swung his greatclaw, dashing them to the rapidly receding floor, where they fell into the Bridge-Eater's open mouth and were crunched up by its grinders.

Meanwhile, Bisco had been keeping the enormous hammerhead at bay with

his arrows, but the thing just wouldn't die. Having never fought against a municipal life-form before, he hadn't the slightest idea how such a creature might be finished off for good. As he cowed under the pressure, the beast slowly gained on Actagawa. As for Milo, he was focused on fending off the carfish and couldn't spare the time to sit at the reins.

PLEASE OBSERVE THE SPEED LIMIT flashed the electronic sign on the shark's head as it smashed through the bridge, sending a large chunk of debris raining down on the fleeing group. Milo rushed to the reins just in time to steer Actagawa away, but the giant crab stumbled and nearly fell while doing so.

"We ain't gonna be able to ride our way outta this one!" said Bisco. "Milo! Anything we can do?"

"Hmm... Bridge-Eater..."

Milo stared at the shark behind Bisco and at the bridge parts crushed in between the grinders in its jaw, and suddenly an idea flashed through his mind like a bolt of lightning.

"Bisco! Fire your sand velvet arrow with me!"

"Gotcha... Wait—sand velvet?"

"At the bridge! Let's go!"

Before Milo even finished speaking, the two of them had drawn their bows and loosed several arrows behind Actagawa, into the road of the bridge. Bisco's sand velvet blossomed with a *Boom! Boom! Boom!* kicking up yellow clouds of dust, while Milo's arrows turned into something black and sticky.

Meanwhile, the Bridge-Eater, now freed from Bisco's barrage, slowly picked up the pace, closing in on Actagawa until it was even swallowing up the very carfish it had fired at them in the first place. Actagawa, deprived of his riders when they started firing arrows, was unable by himself to avoid the debris thrown into the road by the Bridge-Eater, and so crashed into a pile of rubble head-on, casting the three standing atop him to the ground.

Milo just barely managed to break Red Tirol's fall as she looked up at the humongous jaws of the Bridge-Eater, ready to close around them. "Oh dear, it's all over!" she cried, squeezing her eyes shut in terror. Then, when she failed to

die at the appointed time, she became puzzled. "...? Hmm? Huh?"

Then she heard Bisco's calm voice. "Nice one. Good thinking. It can't eat us if its mouth don't work."

"I'm just glad my idea worked," said Milo. "I just figured because it's a machine, we might be able to throw a wrench into the works, so to speak. A mixture of sand velvet and tarmush should clog up any mechanism."

Red Tirol slowly opened her eyes and looked up at the Bridge-Eater. The large rolling pin grinders at the back of its throat were coated in a thick, black substance and emitted a screaming metallic *Creak!* as they struggled to move.

"Wow! You used a sticky mushroom to stop it!"

"It's still tryin' to hit us with its fins! Come on, Actagawa!"

With its greatest weapon out of action, the Bridge-Eater raised its enormous lateral fins in defiance and swung them down on the three people and one crab. Everyone narrowly managed to leap atop Actagawa and dodge the blow before the surface of the bridge was smashed into rubble.

Pchew!

Bisco's and Milo's flameshroom arrows were perfectly in sync with each other. They sank into the Bridge-Eater's flesh before blossoming into flame-wreathed mushrooms, which then ignited the tarmush, setting off a fiery explosion that engulfed the Bridge-Eater whole.

"Gruuuuh!"

The Bridge-Eater thrashed in the throes of death, the billboard on its head flashing ROAD AHEAD CLOSED. The carfish, also scorched by the flames, wriggled about and leaped off the bridge, one after the other.

"Bisco! Milo! The fire was too strong! This bridge is going to collapse!"

"Whoops."

"It's a little late for that, Bisco!" Milo retorted. "You really don't know how to hold back, do you?"

As Actagawa made a hasty escape, the bridge behind them fell away,

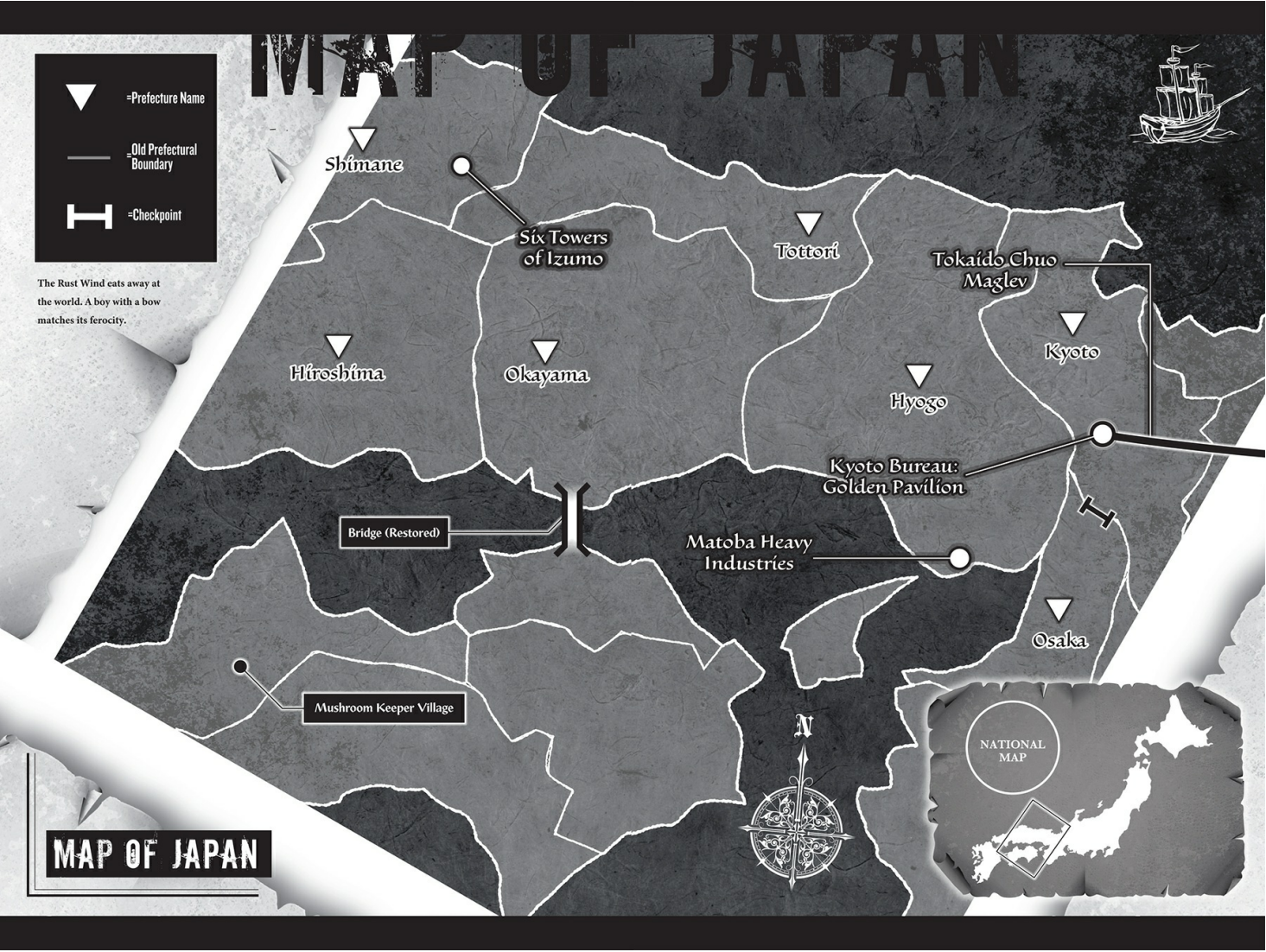
dropping the Bridge-Eater's carcass into the sea with a mighty splash.

"My, my, Bisco. That was magnificent! With your quick thinking, you brought down that terrifying beast like it was nothing! You really are humanity's most powerful warrior... No, humanity's very future!"

"...You know, Tirol, you ain't quite been the same since you were possessed... But keep talking."

"What are you grinning for, Bisco? You know it was *me* who came up with that plan!" Milo protested, while Actagawa swished his hefty claws in the air. "Whoa! S-sorry, Actagawa, it was you who did all the running, wasn't it?"

Already the boisterous group had put their unprecedented encounter behind them and set their sights on the city of Imihama.



The prefecture of Hyogo was considered by many to be the heart of Japanese industry, particularly in defense, as its proximity to Kyoto allowed it to play an active role in defending the nation's capital. It was also home to Matoba Heavy Industries, the company that pioneered animal weaponry and now supplied the entire nation.

People said that the prefecture was full of a bunch of money-grubbing thugs, acting under borrowed authority, but with the government at their backs, nobody wanted to mess with them, and so Hyogo managed to coast by without opposition, all the while raking in the dough hand over fist.

...Or so they had been until now, it seemed.

Because what the boys now gazed upon was a city quite unlike the factory-filled streets they had passed through earlier.

"I don't remember Hyogo bein' like this," said Bisco.

"It wasn't!" replied Milo. "When we came, there was so much smoke, and the streets were all metal and...you know, pipy!"

The unglamorous city of Hyogo the boys remembered was a far cry from the futuristic scene laid out before them now. It was still clearly industrial, but the buildings were sleek and chrome instead of the angular monstrosities that blighted the landscape before, and the surfaces were pristine, unmarred by the black, soot-filled smoke that used to belch forth from every chimney.

"It seems as if Hyogo has been almost completely restored," muttered Red Tirol, poking her face between the two boys. "I suppose Matoba's deep-seated crusade against mushrooms is what has led to the Rust taking effect here so quickly. There weren't any spores to stop it."

"I wonder if there are any people left," said Milo.

“I very much doubt it,” said Red Tirol. “This area around Kobe Port Island was entirely governed by androids. It wasn’t suitable for human life.”

“Ain’t no point in us stayin’ here, then,” said Bisco before sniffing the air, a sour look on his face, and spurring Actagawa on. Bisco, a child of nature, was finding it hard to stomach the acrid smell of chemicals that permeated the whole town. Milo could see in his eyes that Bisco missed the dirt roads and plant life of the countryside already. “Let’s just get outta here. Actagawa’s not likin’ it, neither.”

“Wait, Bisco, look at that!” Milo pointed as Actagawa ran through the city on see-through pipes. Bisco looked to see a large and impressive factory, flying a brilliant red flag. “It’s a signal flag. Somebody needs rescuing!”

“Really? Is anyone even still here?”

“I see. That is where the headquarters of Matoba Heavy Industries was.” Red Tirol gazed at the building before turning to the others. “The restoration there is not yet complete. Look, it still retains a trace of its previous form. It is possible that Matoba employees could still be inside. However, from the looks of things, the piping has constricted the building quite a bit. Mayhap the people inside are simply unable to leave?”

Bisco looked reluctant, but Milo snatched the reins from him and steered Actagawa toward the building. The giant crab leaped skillfully across the clear tubes, approaching the pipe-wrapped building.

“Hey! What’s wrong with leavin’ a couple of Matoba employees to die? They’re the ones turnin’ animals into weapons!”

“Well, you turn mushrooms into weapons. How is that better?”

“Because I’m a Mushroom Keeper!”

“That doesn’t make it okay!” Milo’s strong voice rang out over his partner’s. “If people are in trouble, we save them. If they turn out to be bad guys, we can deal with that afterward.”

Crash! Crash! Actagawa swung his claws like a sledgehammer, tearing through the pipes and smashing a hole in the wall beyond. Out of the broken pipes spurted blasts of hot gas, covering everyone in soot.

“Cough! Cough! Goddammit, what the hell is this?!”

“This place is huge. This way, Actagawa!”

The boys quickly entered through the hole and began exploring the strange factory. As they stepped onto a catwalk, they heard the steady *Clunk! Clunk!* of running machinery and looked down to see bizarre contraptions and enormous forges. They seemed to be making something here.

“It may be lacking in beauty, but this is how we engineered technology in the old days. At least in terms of the interior, it seems the restoration has been compl— B-bleghh!”

“T-Tirol? What’s the matter? What happened?”

Red Tirol had just turned to see a diagram hanging on the wall when she began heaving uncontrollably. Milo rushed over to her side. *“Did you inhale some of that gas? We have to do something!”*

“N-no, not at all. It simply appears that Tirol harbors some unpleasant memories of this place. When I saw the ‘payment due’ part of this blueprint, I just felt— Bleeeghh!”

Suddenly Bisco, who had been scouting ahead by himself, called back to them, a strangely excitable look in his eyes. *“Hey, get over here, you two,”* he said. *“They’re buildin’ some kinda robot in here!”*

He pointed to a room where several large machines spat out different parts, which combined in the center to form a humanoid figure. The completed robot was carried away on a conveyor belt, which at the same time brought in a fresh batch of scattered parts.

“Is that...Tetsujin?” asked Bisco. *“It looks just like it, ’cept a lot cleaner!”*

“Ah. That is a miniaturized version of Tetsujin, called Mokujin. It looks similar, but it is mainly used for security and deployed with police forces and the like.”

“You say miniature, but that thing’s still, like, eight feet tall.”

The three of them stared at the process for a while before a loud voice from above cried out over the rumbling machinery.

“Helloooo! Up here! Wow, somebody finally came!”

They looked up in the direction of the voice to see a man descending and ascending a complicated mess of staircases before finally arriving in front of them, breathless.

“Thank the heavens. *Cough!* We hadn’t heard anything. I didn’t think anyone was coming.”

“You’re okay now. We’re here! Are you injured?” Milo asked the man.

“Wow, how very proactive of you!” he replied. “Very well, you’re hired! Welcome to the company. We’ll put you to work as soon as possible.”

“...Huh?”

The man had long hair and an unshaven beard, and he cheerfully handed over a business card that read, “Kobe Namari, Section Chief, Matoba R&D.” He spoke so fast that it was often hard to discern precisely what he was saying.

“We’ll have to hurry through—*Cough!*—the explanation of Mokujin here, our latest invention. There’s so much to do and not enough hands. I-I’d prefer to have you all work on your interests, of course, but right now that’s not possible, so for the time being, you will work as my assistants and...”

“W-w-wait a minute! We came here because we saw the SOS flag on the roof! Aren’t you trapped in here?”

“T-trapped? What are you talking about? *Cough!* Why would I ever want to leave such a wondrous facility?” replied the man, coughing through the smoke, with such emotion it was clear he wasn’t lying. “It’s simply— *Cough!* ...It’s simply unthinkable. This new, urbanized industrial complex is everything I’ve ever— *Cough!* ...Everything I’ve ever dreamed of! There’s so much productivity here, if only I had the manpower to unlock it! *That’s* why I flew the distress signal! I need more people to work the machines!”

“What? Because you needed more workers?” asked Milo, stupefied. “That flag’s supposed to be for emergencies! I thought this was a matter of life and death!!”

“It *is* a matter of life and death!” replied Chief Namari, readjusting his thick spectacles. “We are *scientists*! If we don’t create the perfect weapons, we’ll get the sack, and then we’ll starve!”

“Mokujin #7, annihilate!” Chief Namari yelled into the observation booth mic, looking down into the testing chamber. One of the Mokujin lined up there stepped forward with graceless movements and raised its arm toward the papier-mâché target at the far end of the room.

“Good... Good, good, good. *Cough!* Very good. Now, fire!”

The short and squat arm of Mokujin #7 transformed into a fearsome weapon...which, for some reason, it put to the side of its temple and fired. With a *Boom!* the robot’s head flew from its shoulders, ricocheting off and leaving a large crack in the tempered glass window of the observation room.

“Wh-whaaahhh?!”

Chief Namari completely fell off his chair in shock, and as Red Tirol kindly helped him back to his feet, she looked down at the man with a look of exasperation in her eyes. But there was still hope in the man’s gaunt face, and he gave a sigh before getting back up.

“Hmm, another failure. Why do they keep self-destructing, I wonder?”

“Chief Namari. From the looks of it, I’d say you haven’t slept in quite a while. Don’t you think you ought to take a rest?”

“Don’t be absurd. A mere week without sleep won’t kill me. Oh dear... Akaboshi! Nekoyanagi! We’ve had another breakage in the test chamber!”

“I got it already,” grumbled Bisco from down below as his supervisor’s voice rang out over the speakers. He scooped up the head in his hands as Milo scraped together the robots’ scattered and dismembered bodies. “Grrr... Why are we stuck cleanin’? That’s what the robots should be for! Milo! How long are we gonna play this guy’s game?!”

“He promised us he’d evacuate once the experiments were done, so we have to. Besides...” Milo gazed at the assorted parts in his hands before continuing. “According to Tirol, this Mokujin thing is similar to what attacked us in Shikoku. Maybe we can work out its weakness while we’re at it. That would help out Pawoo, as well.”

While the two boys rushed to and fro picking up pieces, Red Tirol wandered around the control room, staring fixedly at the machines on display. Then she

crossed her arms and sighed, a mixture of admiration and disbelief.

“I see. I did wonder how Mokujin was able to operate without a program, but it appears to be basing its movements on the behavioral patterns of biological organisms. What an astonishing twist. Something only the mankind of today could dream up...”

“...Oh! Ochagama! You understand how the biological program works?”

Red Tirol turned to see Chief Namari rushing over, an energy drink in his hand.

“Ah, Chief. You know, Mokujin is a humanoid robot. Load it up with the behavioral patterns of bears or crabs, and it won’t even know what to do with its arms and legs. I believe that in such a case the CPU will overheat, and the robot will self-destruct in a fashion very similar to what we’re seeing here.”

“Ahhh, I see. It’s a very *particular* machine, is it not?”

“I would say that machines nowadays are simply not particular enough...”

Red Tirol scratched her chin in thought before nodding and calling down to the boys, “Bisco, Milo, come up here, please.” Then she turned to Chief Namari again. “If you want this biological program to work, you’ll need a *human’s* behavioral patterns. That should get Mokujin functioning correctly.”

“B-but, my friend, using a human as the basis for the biological program has never been attempted, much less perfected. Would not a sapient creature simply fall to the despair of being turned into a weapon, and then self-destruct in much the same way?”

“Ordinarily, yes,” said Red Tirol. “But that simply means we need the behavioral patterns of a human with overwhelming determination.”

She beckoned to the grumpy-looking duo who had just walked in and brought them into her arms when they came over. Then she flashed the section chief a brilliant smile.

“And what do we have right here but three of the best? Chief Namari, you may extract the information you require from us.”

“Okay, Mokujin: Tirol-One! Activate!”

Chief Namari prodded one of the many buttons on the control panel before him, and steam began billowing out of a pink Mokujin down below. Slowly, it rose to its feet.

“Tirol-One. Systems ready!”

““““Ohhh!””””

Bisco, Milo, and the chief all cooed in admiration. The “Tirol Program” extracted from Tirol’s blood seemed to be working perfectly. Only Red Tirol still looked skeptical.

“It’s a little early for celebration,” she said. “Chief, try giving it a command.”

“R-right! Tirol-One, annihilate!”

“Order acknowledged,” said the robot, turning its flashlight eyes onto the target at the end of the range.

“Synthetic target detected. Altitude Grade: Six. Difficulty: B.”

“Wow, magnificent! It even analyzes the target’s position and structural makeup!” said the chief excitedly.

“Calculations complete.”

“Wonderful! Now, Tirol-One! Blast it to smithereens!”

“Please submit two hundred sols to proceed.”

“...What?”

Upon completing its analysis, Tirol-One turned with clunking steps and held out its hand toward the control room.

“Rate for this task equals two hundred sols.”

Chief Namari just stared in silent amazement, while Red Tirol’s face twitched. Behind them, Bisco was rolling about on the floor, laughing his ass off, while Milo did his best to contain his amusement.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! I ain’t never heard of a robot demandin’ payment for a task! That thing’s got Tirol’s blood, all right!”

“...Let’s just pay it and see what happens.” Chief Namari sighed. He pressed a

few more buttons, and a mechanical arm deposited precisely two hundred sols into the robot's palm. Tirol-One popped the coins into its mouth and immediately turned and fired its arm cannon at the target. With a *Boom!* the papier-mâché target was blown to pieces. Still, despite the robot's performance, Chief Namari still looked unconvinced.

"Why the long face, Chief?" asked Red Tirol. "Your experiment was a success."

"Mmm. The results are indeed impressive...b-but we can't market a robot that asks to be paid per shot. I hate to say it, but we'll have to shelve this one."

"Please submit twenty sols to cover ammunition costs."

"Okay, okay! C-come back to the storeroom and you'll get your money!"

"Milo Prime, ready for action."

The next Mokujin, colored sky-blue from head to toe, stood up smartly and turned to the control room. This time, Chief Namari looked far more pleased.

"I hope to be of service. Your orders, sir?"

"Wow, see how intelligently it speaks?! Now *this* is a perfect Mokujin!"

Chief Namari did a little dance at the reassuring quality of the robot's voice. Milo seemed a little excited, too, until Bisco butted in.

"Hold yer horses, Chief. Try givin' it an order first."

"V-very well. Milo Prime, annihilate!"

"Understoo—"

Milo Prime turned to face the target, then stopped.

"Wh-what's wrong, Milo Prime?"

"I cannot complete the request."

"Wh-why not?"

"It is cruel."

"Cr...?"

Bisco lost his head once again, while Milo's face lit up in embarrassment. It couldn't have been more obvious that the robot had inherited *all* of the gentle

doctor's personality.

"C-cruel? But, Milo Prime, your target is just scrap metal."

"Well, I am also made of metal."

"B-but..."

"How would you feel if I asked you to defile a human corpse? That scrap metal was once one of my brothers. My ethical code will not allow me to destroy it. Please order me to do anything else, but not that."

Chief Namari was at a loss for words. He simply heaved a big sigh. Milo took the mic and announced, "Good work, Milo Prime. You may return to your position," and the robot complied, falling in line with the rest of the Mokujin.

"What a shame. The rest of its performance seemed so promising, as well..."

"I thought he was quite agreeable," said Milo.

"We can't program a robot weapon to have—*Cough!*—feelings! They'll just get in the way of its purpose!"

"Well, why does he have to be a weapon anyway?"

Just as Milo was starting to get emotional against the section chief, Red Tirol stepped in to smooth things over.

"Let's not lose our heads just yet, chaps. We've saved the best for last," she said, casting a glance over at Bisco, who was leaning against the wall, arms folded. "And whether you like it or not, you *did* agree the next one would be the last. Once we see robot Bisco's performance, you will evacuate the building, won't you, Chief?"

"I-indeed. I made a promise, and I intend to keep it."

"Hey! Why you soundin' so disappointed already? My robot's gonna kick ass, you'll see!" said Bisco, rudely marching over and plonking himself in the adjacent seat. "Don't you worry, Captain Namari. While these asshats were stumblin' around, I drew up the most badass robot ever!"

"I-it's *Chief* Namari, actually... A-and, Akaboshi...? I didn't know you could draw schematics!"

“See for yourself.”

Bisco unfurled the paper in his hands, revealing the most unique style of painting Chief Namari had ever seen. The robot took up the large majority of the page, with the words “Akaboshi Mark I” written proudly above its head.

“It can shoot green beams from its eyes,” Bisco explained, dead serious. “Its left arm’s a drill, and its right is a hammer. Acid blasts come out of its knees, and it can breathe fire up to a trillion degrees.”

“I—I see. And what does this scarf around its neck do?”

“It looks cool, obviously! What kinda question is that?”

An awkward mood descended over the room. Chief Namari chose his next words carefully.

“It’s certainly an...interesting design, Akaboshi. However, f-first we must ensure your blood is compatible with the original. We can make these... modifications later.”

“Huh? Well, you’re the boss.”

It seemed, thankfully, that Bisco was convinced by Chief Namari’s diplomatic words, and he approached the viewing window and peered down into the test chamber.

“Then let’s get on with it. I ain’t gonna fail any of your tests.”

H-how is he so confident...?

Milo and Red Tirol looked at the oddly cooperative Bisco, at the glimmering optimism in his eyes, and then at each other.

“Look at you getting all starry-eyed. You’re like a kid in a candy store, Bisco!”

“Shut up. You’re about to see scientific progress at work!”

“Just don’t get mad at us if it fails, okay?”

“Piss off! My robot’s gonna be better than yours, just you wait and see!”

“O-okay! Bring in the next Mokujin!”

At Chief Namari’s words, the conveyor belt sprang into action, bringing a third

robot, its body gleaming crimson, into the center of the test chamber.

“Let’s see what you’ve got, Akaboshi Mark I. Activate!”

Chief Namari’s voice rang out over the speaker, and seconds passed...four...five. By the count of ten, the robot still showed no sign of responding.

“Failed. Told you,” said Milo.

“Wait, that ain’t right!” yelled Bisco in protest. “Give it another go, Chief!”

Bisco shook the man’s shoulders, and just then there was a *Vwm!* as the robot stirred to life and its jade-green eyes flickered on.

“Ahhh! It worked!”

“What?!” Bisco seemed surprised himself. “Well, how about that?! C’mon, Chief, try giving it an order!”

“W-wait a second. It’s already acting on its own!”

Akaboshi Mark I wandered curiously around the test chamber, turning its flashlight eyes upon anything and everything it could find. At last, it spotted a stack of black insulating sheets in a corner of the room and marched over, picking one up and ripping off a piece that it tied around its neck, a perfect imitation of the Mushroom Keeper’s signature cloak.

“Ahhh! Those are expensive! Akaboshi Mark I, refrain from touching things!”

“Uh-oh,” Milo muttered to himself after studying the robot’s actions. “If this robot really has inherited Bisco’s personality, then that means...!”

“Return to your designated position, Akaboshi Mark I!”

“Chief, no! Don’t—!”

“Akaboshi Mark I! *Do not disobey my commands!*”

As soon as it heard those words, Akaboshi Mark I got a funny look in its eyes. It turned toward the control room, its eyes lit up like floodlights.

“*Now it’s mad! Bisco!*”

“Don’t be stupid. How could a robot based on me have such a short temper?”

“Look in the mirror sometime! For now, grab the chief. We have to get out of

here!”

The two Mushroom Keepers grabbed the others and fled from the control room, just as a heavy steel girder punched straight through the reinforced glass window. The robot had clearly inherited Bisco’s fearsome strength, too.

“We should have known, Bisco!” said Milo. “There’s no way a robot based on you is ever going to follow orders!”

“Dammit...! You protect the chief!”

Perhaps feeling guilty for this in some way, Bisco handed over the chief, who had fainted, and leaped into the test chamber to put a stop to the rampaging robot.

“If you’re gonna be representin’ my bloodline, you oughtta show a little respect!” he yelled, slipping past the fists of Akaboshi Mark I and somersaulting high overhead before bringing his bow down hard on the robot’s skull casing. The shock split it wide open, and broken wires sprang out like a head of colorful hair.

However, Akaboshi Mark I was not to be disabled so easily. It delivered a spinning kick to Bisco’s stomach, its thick leg like a steel log. Though he barely managed to catch the blow on his bow, Bisco was still sent flying backward, and he skimmed along the floor of the test chamber.

“Bisco!” Milo yelled.

“I’m fine! Stay out of it!” Bisco shouted back. As he watched Akaboshi Mark I fly toward him, cape fluttering, Bisco drew his lizard-claw knife and coughed, a little blood from the previous attack spilling from his lips. The Rust-Eater blood fell onto his knife, causing the blade to shine golden, like the sun.

“Now...!”

Dodging the robot’s oncoming fist, Bisco got up close and jammed the knife into the joint at the base of its spine. Then, using the blade as a lever, he pried Akaboshi Mark I apart. As he strained, brilliant spores traveled along the blade, until with a *Boom! Boom!* a largish Rust-Eater mushroom tore through his foe’s steel armor plating.

“Gruh hh!”

The robot howled, and with all the strength it could muster, it snatched up Bisco and hurled him in Milo’s direction. However, soon after, it became clear that the damage to Akaboshi Mark I far outclassed the robot’s ability to continue, and, staggering, it collapsed against the nearest wall.

“Bisco!”

“I know!”

Bisco drew his bow tight. At the other end of the arrow were the jade-green flashlight eyes of Akaboshi Mark I, gazing helplessly at its own imminent destruction.

“...”

Fwp! Gaboom!

The Rust-Eater arrow tore through the thick walls of the test chamber, flooding the dingy room with the light of the outside world. Looking out at the clear blue sky beyond, Akaboshi Mark I suddenly let out a yell of renewed vigor before leaping across the mushroom caps to freedom.

“Aaah! Bisco?! What are you doing?”

“I missed.”

“Whaaat?!”

“My hand slipped.”

There wasn’t much more Milo could say to that. He knew, of course, that Bisco’s words were a lie, but felt it uncouth to pry any further into his partner’s motivations, and so he remained silent.

“U...urgh... I’m doomed... Someone, please...carry on my research...”

“Chief Namari, you’ll be fine. I’ll just—”

While Milo fished his medical instruments from his pocket, there was a *Clank! Clank!* noise as the sky-blue body of one of the other Mokujin jogged over and stood above the chief’s fallen body.

“This is bad. I will patch you up immediately. Do not worry. Everything will be

okay.”

“M-Milo Prime?!”

As the others watched on in amazement, Milo Prime retrieved its tools one by one from inside its mouth and treated the chief’s wounds with astonishing efficiency. In no time at all, the robot was already finishing off the stitches.

“Is it still painful?”

“N-no...,” the chief replied. “Not at all. Thank you, Milo Prime!”

“It is my pleasure to serve. I only did what was expected of me.”

The sky-blue robot turned its lumbering frame around and returned to its position. Milo and the others watched it go, mouths agape.

“It took my job. That thing is amazing!”

But Red Tirol sighed. “Unfortunately, Chief, it seems this experiment was another—”

“Success! The experiment was a success!” the chief cried, overjoyed. He ran over to Milo and shook his hand up and down as hard as he could before embracing the bewildered boy in a hug. “There’s never *been* a robot with that kind of medical prowess, even in the old days! I thank you from the bottom of my heart, Dr. Nekoyanagi! This invention is going to change the world!”

“Erkkk! Chief! Please...that’s too tight...! And you reek of sweat!”

“Still, are you really fine with that, Chief? That robot don’t even got the balls to take out a target dummy. You really gonna sell that as a weapon?”

“O-of course, my dear boy! M-medical technology sells well in times of peace *or* war! *Cough!* In fact, don’t you think there’s something magical about a robot that can do more than simply destroy?”

Just then, Chief Namari seemed to remember something, and he started fishing around in a pouch at his waist before picking out a large bundle of sols and pushing them into Milo’s pockets.

“I’m afraid two million is all I have on me,” he said. “B-but I’ll give you five percent of the monthly take once it goes on sale! Now, I have to gather the rest

of the team and begin production at once. Busy, busy, so busy... But we've just made a giant leap into the future of mankind!"

"So, in the end, they all stayed there...", said Milo, sighing as Actagawa took them away from the factory along one of the see-through pipes. "I'm a little disappointed... We went there to get them out, but only ended up convincing them to stay even longer."

"Meh...? Who cares?" replied Bisco. "This freakish city must just seem like heaven to them, I guess."

"I believe Bisco has the right idea. This is probably their kind of place. Besides, they are helping humanity, in their own way. Imagine the lives that Milo robot could save if it caught on!"

"I guess... I don't know..."

Still not quite convinced, Milo left the reins to his partner and looked out over the horizon. There, his eyes fell upon a pair of jade-green flashlights.

"...Ahhh! It's Akaboshi Mark I!"

Atop a pipe stretching far above the ground stood the red-bodied Mokujin, observing the group, his black cape fluttering majestically in the wind. The cables sprouting from his head stood tall and proud, just like the hair of the man himself.

"Bisco, look! Are you sure you want to let him go?"

"I ain't seen a goddamn thing."

"Oh, Bisco! You like him, don't you? Who knew the Man-Eating Redcap could be so kind?"

"Oh, go chew on some bamboo, asshole!"

The floodlight eyes of Akaboshi Mark I followed the crab until it was out of sight, at which point the robot swished its cloak and took off to wherever its fancy led.

Kyoto. The glittering diamond at the heart of Japan. Boasting overwhelming military and political force, this prefecture allowed its citizens an elegant lifestyle that was the envy of others nationwide.

Or until now, that is. Even Kyoto's prefectural bureau, the Golden Pavilion, could not hold out against the sustained attempts at urbanization. In just a day it fell, its brilliant golden walls consumed by brutal gray architecture. The people in command, lacking any sense of honor or responsibility, fled the city out of fear for their lives, and one by one, anyone who would take the blame in their stead simply vanished, vacating the city like fleeing rats. In the end, the city was left devoid of even the lowliest citizen.

"When the going gets tough, the weak piss their pants," muttered Bisco, standing before the grand Kyoto checkpoint, as he tore off his disguise. Its massive gates stood utterly unmanned.

"I guess there wasn't much point in dressing up as Flamebound pilgrims, then," said Milo.

"I ain't too surprised... Still, least it saves us some time."

"I'll go get the others!"

Milo rushed off the way he came, while Bisco eyed the Wanted posters lined up on the wall. When he found the ones of him and his partner, he tore them off, gazed at them wistfully, and stuffed his own into his pocket.

"Bisco! Let's head to Arashiyama first. We can give Actagawa a break and pick up some food for ourselves, too."

"Sure," Bisco said and jumped atop the crab, handing the other rolled-up piece of paper to Milo.

"Hmm? What's this?"

“It’s your Wanted poster,” Bisco replied, yawning. “But now that Kyoto’s gone under, there ain’t nobody left to pay out. Might as well keep them for ourselves.”

“Huh? What am I going to do with a Man-Eating Panda?”

“You could put it up in the clinic.”

“And scare away my patients?!”

“What’s all this, boys?” asked Red Tirol, popping a glance over Milo’s shoulder at the poster in his hands. “Ahhh! Milo’s famous Wanted poster. Still, the photo seems to be quite old. You are looking far more manly and rugged these days.”

“Wow! Really, Tirol? That’s so nice of you to say. Thank you!”

“Still looks like the same old panda to me,” said Bisco. “C’mon, Actagawa, let’s get moving.”

“And what about yours, Bisco?” asked Red Tirol. “I’d love to see the poster of the Man-Eating Redcap.”

“We don’t need to do that. Look, just hold on tight.”

“Why not? It’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“We just don’t!”

“Oh, I have one, Tirol! Here!”

“My, such a ferocious look. They’ve sure made a monster out of you, Bisco. You’re far more charming and innocent in real life.”

“Shut the fuck up! Put that thing away!”

Actagawa gave one last push, hopping through Kyoto’s empty streets in search of the Arashiyama Valley, where his tired legs would at last find respite.

Nestled in the greenery, amid chirping birds and the rush of the waterfall, was a small pool. In it, a familiar orange carapace bobbed gently, from time to time rolling over in the water and allowing the cool stream to wash over its white belly.

Suddenly, Milo’s head broke the water’s surface. “Phah! Bet that feels good, huh, Actagawa?” he said, giving the crab a broad smile. “You must be tired after

all that walking!”

The more motivated Actagawa was, the faster he ran, and so the boys decided their crustaceous companion should be allowed to indulge wherever possible.

As for Milo himself, he found the cool water of the pool to be a welcome relief to his tired bones, and he sighed as he enjoyed his first bath in recent memory. Compared to his life until now, spent cooped up in Imihama, Milo’s life on the run was making his musculature ever so slightly more defined (though nowhere near the level of his sister’s), and now suffused with his natural beauty was the subtle strength of a Mushroom Keeper.

“Bisco! Aren’t you coming in? The water’s lovely!” he called out to his partner, but Bisco was sitting by the edge of the pool, his attention consumed by the small cauldron simmering over the fire before him. Their journey so far had depleted many of the Mushroom Keepers’ all-important arrows, and so Bisco had hoped to take the opportunity to replenish their stock.

“Are you still using that old thing, Bisco? Just use the medicine machine. It’s much safer.”

“Like hell, dumbass. That thing ain’t right, I tell ya. If I’m gonna be usin’ these mushrooms for myself, then I oughtta be prepared to put my life on the line makin’ ’em. That’s just payin’ the mushrooms the proper respect.”

“You know, you have a very outdated way of thinking, Bisco.”

“Piss off.”

Rebuked by his partner, Milo sighed and pulled himself out of the water, drying himself off before putting on his Mushroom Keeper tunic and pants. Suddenly, he felt someone’s gaze on him, and when he turned to look...

“Milo! Milo, over here...!”

“Tirol?”

...hiding behind a boulder and beckoning Milo over was Red Tirol, stark naked, her face flushed bright red.

“Listen, Tirol. I appreciate the effort, but it’s not going to work on me

anymore. I see you as a friend...”

“No! That’s not it, Milo...! Look, just get over here! I don’t understand any of this!”

The usual impish quality that lurked in Tirol’s voice was nowhere to be heard this time. She sounded frantic, and so Milo walked over to her, mouth agape in astonishment.

“What’s the matter, Tirol? Did something happen?”

“W-well, it’s...” As she poked only her head out from behind the boulder, Red Tirol’s words came out muddled. “The fact is, Tirol was so tired, she’s gone to sleep already...and I don’t know how to put her underwear back on! I—I know you’re a guy, too, but I need someone to help, and it’s better than asking Bisco!”

“WHAAAT?!”

“Shhh! Don’t let him hear you! Please, Milo! You have to tell me how these things work!”

This was too crude a joke, even for Tirol, so Milo quickly approached and calmed her down before swiftly fastening her bra.

“Erm... How does that...? Oh, I see. Quite ingenious. Thank you!”

“Just stay turned around. I’ll do your hair as well.”

“My thanks. I am sorry. I have simply never...” Red Tirol glanced back over her shoulder as Milo braided her long pink hair. “B-by the way, Milo. You seem quite used to this. Is that because of your medical work?”

“That’s part of it,” Milo replied. “But also, Pawoo’s comes off all the time, and she always makes me do it back up. She makes me fix up her hair, too...like when she has a date and stuff.”

“Oh-ho, Pawoo’s been on dates? She *is* a beauty, that’s for sure. I daresay she must be quite popular with the gentlemen!”

“She usually is, at first,” said Milo with a resigned smile. “But she can be a bit...clingy, in multiple ways. She considers it cheating if a guy so much as looks at another girl, for example. And you should have seen what I had to deal with

patching up her exes...”



“...Mmm, well...Pawoo is a formidable lady, indeed. It must be difficult to find someone who can serve as her equal.”

Fully dressed, and with her hair tied up in her trademark four long braids at last, Red Tirol spun around and eagerly shook Milo’s hand.

“Thank you so much, Milo. You’ve literally saved my life!”

“You’re welcome... But I’d like to ask just one question, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Of course, my dear friend. Ask me anything your heart desires!”

“Who *are* you?”

Milo lowered his voice. His silent eyes glittered like the ocean.

“If you don’t want to answer, I won’t pry, because from the way you’ve looked after Tirol, I don’t think you’re out to hurt us.”

“M-Milo...? Well...”

“But. I could be wrong. It’s possible your scheme is just one step ahead of me. So if you make any sort of move on Bisco...!”

Milo’s tone of voice was quite unlike him. Red Tirol found herself sweating under his discerning glare. After a few moments of silence, Milo brightened as though nothing had happened and patted Red Tirol on the shoulder before draping his cloak over her petite frame.

“I’m sorry. Forget I said that. Let’s have some tasty fish!”

“Milo... Milo, wait!”

As Milo turned to leave, Red Tirol called out to him. Milo turned to see her hopping over the rocks toward him, a look of resolve in her eyes.

“If I told you who I was...,” she shouted before Milo shushed her, and she continued in a furtive whisper, “...I am sure you would not believe the things I had to say. I had thought it better to keep my mouth shut and have you simply think me an evil spirit, than to tell such tall tales and remove all doubt. That is why...”

“It’s okay, really. There’s no way you’d take such good care of Tirol’s body if you were evil. And the thought of putting a bra on wouldn’t even occur to you.

Not with her chest anyway.” Milo looked into her eyes and smiled. “But I think we should keep this to ourselves. Bisco doesn’t need to know.”

“Y-yes, quite right. He won’t be so quick to trust, will he?”

“That’s not why,” said Milo, casting a sidelong glance at his partner, still tending to the cauldron. Though he appeared distracted, Milo still leaned over and whispered into Red Tirol’s ear, just in case. “Thinking about things is my job. It’s a lot easier on Bisco if we just let him believe what he wants for now.”

“I—I see. But, Milo, are you sure you want to hear me out? I’m telling you, this story might be too much, even for you.”

“Hey now, just try me. I’m a lot smarter than Bisco, you know.” At the sound of his name, Bisco pricked up his freakishly keen ears, and he glared over in Milo’s direction. Milo waved his hands as if to say nothing was wrong before leaning over to Red Tirol even closer and whispering:

“I’ll be fine. I did go to school, after all.”

“Bisco. Over here. Take a look at this satellite photo I took.”

“Hmm? Man-Eating Panda. Eight hundred thousand sols. Height—”

“No, turn it over, Bisco.”

At Milo’s suggestion, Bisco flipped the poster Red Tirol had handed him and peered at it while munching on the grilled shrikefish Milo had cooked.

“Ah, that was the only paper I had, I’m afraid. The photo is on the back. Anyway, this is an enlarged aerial shot of Kyoto Prefecture. Can you see that facility atop the bureau? It appears to be some kind of railroad station.”

“...What’s a satellite? Wait... Did you fly to take these? When?!”

“Just listen to me!”

“Look, Bisco, don’t worry about that,” said Milo, as if reassuring a small child. “The point is, we might be able to get to Gunma a lot faster by train. I think it’s worth taking a detour and going to check it out.”

So surprised was Bisco at his partner’s intervention that he spilled some of the fish he had been munching on, resulting in a burn.

“Ow! Milo, are you insane?! She’s possessed! We can’t trust her!”

“She’s just changed the way she talks, that’s all. Don’t you remember how Tirol helped us out in Shimobuki with the trains?”

“Wait, you’re serious...?”

Bisco looked once more at the photo in his hands, but no matter how hard he stared, the situation didn’t make itself any clearer to him, and eventually he got fed up and thrust it back toward Red Tirol.

“Well, if Milo’s convinced, then so am I. Fine, we’ll go check it out.”

“Bisco!” cried Red Tirol, her voice full of emotion.

“Yeah, yeah, just eat somethin’ already. Leave your food out and Actagawa’ll take it.”

“O-okay! I see... So this is how you eat freshwater fish...”

“No, you moron. You have to take the beak off. Slice it open first, like this...”

Red Tirol’s scarlet eyes glittered with curiosity as Bisco sliced up the fish. For Milo, it was an oddly heartwarming scene, considering their hectic travels so far, and he smiled as he watched and listened to Bisco’s lesson.

“Wow, Bisco! Look at that!”

“That’s this place’s bureau? That thing’s ugly as all hell.”

“Well, not everyone liked the Golden Pavilion, either. Some say it was far too gaudy,” said Red Tirol, peeking over Milo’s shoulder at the soaring tower ahead of them. “But faced with this monstrosity, I will admit that even I find myself pining for the former construction. At least it had style.”

The building before them was a veritable skyscraper, an enormous steel-clad spire that penetrated even the clouds above. There was absolutely no trace of the gold-leafed temple that had stood there before.

This tower was far taller than any the boys had seen before, and yet it showed no signs of buckling or collapsing under its own weight. It was an architectural marvel of the days of old, the likes of which even the finest engineers of today could never hope to match.

“There it is. That’s the Chuo Maglev, the superfast railway.”

“Hmm?”

From where the jellyfish girl was pointing, up at the highest level of the tower, there was indeed a see-through pipe extending away from the building and far off toward the east. Bisco could easily imagine a train riding along it.

“Just need to get all the way up there, then, do we? Right, Actagawa?” he said, spurring the crab on toward the building.

“Bisco, be careful. I feel like...we’re not alone,” said Milo.

Bisco could feel it, too. From somewhere among the abandoned buildings, it felt like someone was watching them.

“I can smell gunpowder,” Milo said. “He’s got a gun.”

“So can I,” replied Bisco. “But I don’t sense any hostility. Don’t draw your bow unless you need to.”

As the two boys whispered to each other, they spotted a relatively large man with a heavy pack trudging the other way. When he spotted Bisco, he gave a broad wave, as if asking the boys to pull over.

“It’s just the badgers.” Bisco sighed with some measure of relief, and he slowed Actagawa’s pace. “I guess they’ve come to loot the place, now that everyone’s gone.”

“Milo?” asked Red Tirol. “What does he mean, ‘the badgers’?”

“Illegal scavengers,” Milo replied. “They’re a rowdy bunch, though. You should hide.”

Doing as Milo said, Red Tirol hid herself beneath the luggage on Actagawa’s back, while the crab stopped before the man and Milo and Bisco dismounted.

The man was covered in steel armor, with a flamethrower tank on his back, and goggles and a mask on his face. He began talking incomprehensibly to the pair with wild gestures.

“Khhhhhh. Khhhh. Khhhhh.”

“What? I can’t hear a word you’re sayin’ over all that static.”

“Kh hh... Sorry, had the darn thing on a private frequency. Well, if it ain’t the Man-Eating Redcap himself! Ah thought ah recognized that spiky-haired red fella screamin’ toward me, but ah just had to see for mahself! Yer a lot younger than ah thought, ya know? ’Bout the same age as mah kid!”

“You guys ain’t above collectin’ bounties neither, are you? You after mine?”

“Sure ain’t. Ain’t nobody left to pay ’em now. Else ah woulda taken the shot as soon as ah seen ya.”

The badger paused before both he and Bisco erupted into hearty laughter, clapping each other on the shoulders. Seeing this, Milo also offered a tentative chuckle.

“Mah son’s a real fan o’ yers, kid. Could ya sign...? Ah, shoot, ah ain’t got a pen.”

“Did you come to scavenge the gold leaf off the bureau? Must be a shame to see it turned into that thing,” said Milo.

“Sure did. At first me and the boys figured we wasted our time comin’ here,” said the badger, casting a glance at the towering skyscraper, before rustling around in his pockets. He pulled out several small boxes and began undoing the beautiful wrapping paper on one of them. A fragrant scent wafted out from within.

“Wh-what is that?”

“Try one.”

Bisco was extremely good at sniffing out poison, so once he popped one into his mouth, Milo threw aside his trepidation and followed suit. Instantly, his eyes widened as the sweetest taste he had ever experienced filled his mouth.

“...!! Th-this is delicious! What is it?!”

“*Yatsushashi*, so they’re called,” replied the badger. “Least, that’s what it says on the box.” Seeing the reactions of the two boys, he went on. “And that ain’t all. There’s sweet stuff, spicy stuff, food, drinks, all stuffed into little glass boxes all over the place. It’s like a treasure trove. ’Bout the only thing ya can’t find in there’s a weapon.”

“B-but... Isn’t that bad? This is a valuable resource! What if people start fighting over it?”

Even as he said this, Milo instinctively reached out for another...only to find the box completely empty. In a matter of seconds, nearly the entire batch of *yatsunashi* had found its way into his partner’s stomach, and the final one was on its way, held between Bisco’s fingers.

“Well, that’s the darndest thing. It never runs out! The inside o’ that building keeps changin’ around, almost like it’s alive.” The badger looked up once more at the bureau as the two boys quarreled over the last *yatsunashi*. “That means it’s pretty dangerous in there, ah tell ya. Ah was just in there with mah partner when one o’ the walls straight-up swallowed him. Ah wasn’t crazy enough to stay in there on mah own, so ah came outside.”

“What?”

Those words came as a shock to Bisco, who turned back to the badger with an apologetic look. (As for the fight, it seemed that Milo had come out on top this time.)

“Dude, I’m real sorry ’bout that. And we’ve just been stuffing our faces with this stuff.”

“Sorry ’bout what? Way ah see it, ah been real lucky today!”

The badger laughed a burst of static before gathering up his things and waving good-bye to the two boys.

“Right now, ain’t nobody gonna object if ya go in there an’ take a look around. Just make sure ya go no higher than the second floor. Place gets more lively the higher ya go. An’ don’t even think about usin’ the elevator. Guy went up to the tenth floor and got turned into mincemeat. Ya shoulda seen the inside of that thing when it came back down.”

“Got it. Thanks for the info!”

As Bisco waved good-bye to the badger, Red Tirol quietly slipped back out of her hiding place and crawled over to him.

“Going by what that man said, I’d say that the inside is not nearly as fully

restored as the outside. Perhaps the system is caught in an update loop as new bugs are introduced. It would behoove us to refrain from passing through if we wish to reach the top alive.”

“Milo. Translate.”

“He said we shouldn’t go inside because it’s too dangerous,” Milo answered.

“Yeah, I agree. Those badgers are pros. If that place killed one of them, it’s gonna do a lot worse to us.”

“I—I am sorry. I thought it would be a shortcut, but we ended up wasting precious time...”

“No we didn’t,” Bisco said, leaping back atop Actagawa and pulling up Red Tirol. “We’re still gonna go. We gotta ride that mag-whatchamacallit.”

“Hmm? But...I just said we can’t go inside...”

“Then we won’t.” Bisco took out a box of *yatsushashi* he had been hiding in his pocket and tossed them before Actagawa while stuffing one in Red Tirol’s mouth. “Actagawa can’t fit inside the building anyway. We’ll just climb up the wall instead.”

“Hlimb uh the hall?”

“Don’t speak with your mouth full!”

“Actagawa can easily scale soft, flat surfaces like that,” said Milo with a smile, clapping Red Tirol on the back before she choked to death. “Don’t worry, Tirol. It’ll be okay. The inside might be dangerous, but there’s nothing to stop us out here!”

“Just strap yourself into the luggage so you don’t fall out. Actagawa, we’re off!”

Actagawa scuttled ahead through the ruined streets, eager to attempt his first mountain-climbing challenge in a while. The boys pulled out their bows, and with a *Gaboom!* their King Trumpet mushrooms launched him full-force toward the wall of the skyscraper.

Far off in the distance, something orange and shiny could clearly be seen glinting in the sunlight as it scaled the vertical walls of the towering prefectural

bureau.

“What is *that*?!”

“Wha-ha-ha! They’re only climbin’ the damn tower!”

“Ah can never know what these Mushroom Keepers are thinking!”

“Maw, come and take a look at this! Ah ain’t never seen nothin’ like it!”

“That’s the spirit, boys! Keep it up!”

All the badgers lurking in the surrounding area came out of their hidey-holes to gaze at the remarkable sight. After giving a wave to all below, Milo turned and looked back at Actagawa’s destination: the clear blue sky ahead.

“We’re so high up!” he cried. “What floor do you think we’re at now?”

“Still gonna be a while until we reach the top, though. Still, the King Trumpets saved us a lot of time.”

Actagawa’s eight legs drove in and out of the concrete wall like pile drivers, and he transported his riders upward with exceptional stability. Red Tirol poked her head from the luggage and looked down at the incredible distance below. Bisco and Milo must have done this many times, for they sat in the crab’s saddles with nary a lifeline to save them if they fell.

“A-Actagawa, this is amazing! Carrying three people up a vertical cliff...”

“We ain’t there just yet. Pop your head back down until we arrive.”

“Oka—”

Red Tirol was cut off as a nearby window exploded with a *Crash!* Some sort of mechanical beast crawled out onto the building exterior and, as quickly as a skink, dashed across the wall toward Actagawa, its many legs plunging into the concrete as it went.

“...!! Bisco!”

“Not again! What is it this time?!”

As the creature opened its mouth wide, a series of arrows landed in the flashing red, green, and blue lights on what appeared to be its head. After a single cry of “*Beeeeep!*” the mushroom arrows exploded, knocking it off the

surface of the prefectural office building and sending it plummeting far below, where it crashed into the roof of a nearby building and smashed to pieces.

“What was that, Tirol?!”

“That was another municipal life-form! It appeared to have been based on a spider...so perhaps a name like ‘city spider’ would be appropriate?”

“Based on a spider...? Goddammit. C’mon, Actagawa, let’s hurry!”

Bisco frowned at Red Tirol’s words before spurring the crab on. Just as he did, the windows on all four sides of the building shattered simultaneously, and out came more city spiders in a veritable swarm.

“H-how many of these things *are* there?!”

“They must be mutated crowspiders,” explained Bisco. “They like to flock together and roost in high places. We gotta get to the top before they surround us!”

Firing arrows left and right, the two Mushroom Keepers fended off the pursuing city spider swarm with their bows. But for every one they felled, two more seemed to spring up elsewhere, until the surface of the building looked like a carpet of black tarnished with a single orange blot.

“You bastards!”

Bisco took a deep breath, summoning up the Rust-Eater spores all over his body, and he drew a deadly final shot. His solar arrow pierced the swarm and building alike, growing glittering golden mushrooms all across its surface and pushing the swarm back toward the ground.

“How d’ya like *that*?!”

“Bisco, look out!”

Hearing his partner’s voice, Bisco immediately jerked the reins, just as a huge chunk of rubble fell down from above. After Actagawa dodged the rock, it collided with the city spider swarm and knocked a bunch of them off the building. The skyscraper was beginning to shake. Bisco’s Rust-Eater arrows had eaten into it, making it unstable, and now Actagawa was finding it much harder to scale the unsteady wall.

“Bisco, you can’t fire your Rust-Eater arrows here! They’re too strong; they’re going to destroy the whole building!”

“Then what the hell am I supposed to do?!”

“Just leave it to me!”

Milo fired an anchor arrow, leaving Actagawa behind and fixing himself to the side of the tower. There, he closed his eyes and began to focus his mind.

“Bisco!” shouted Red Tirol. “Milo’s in danger!”

“He’s not in danger! You are! What’d I say? Get back down!”

“Right you are, Bisco. So he has a plan, then?”

“Who knows? I guess he must, right?”

“Y-you don’t even know?!”

As the three of them climbed higher, Milo stood fast, the floating cube spinning faster and faster in his palm. The swarm pounced at him, their metal fangs just inches from his fair skin, when Milo swung the cube with all his might down into the concrete at his feet.

“Won/shamdarever/valuler/snew! (Impale surrounding area with Rust!)”

The surface of the building Milo was standing on seemed to shimmer for a moment before countless emerald spears burst from the wall, skewering the city spiders around him. The spears spread outward from Milo, cleverly avoiding Actagawa while eliminating the entire swarm in the blink of an eye.

“Wow! So this is Milo’s mantra power! I never would have thought a human body could control the Rust so effectively!”

“So how come *his* attack ain’t makin’ the building collapse?”

“Unlike your mushrooms, whose roots extend into the concrete, Milo’s mantra simply crystallizes the Rust that appears along its surface. The building itself is effectively unharmed.”

After Milo was reeled back into his seat, he looked exhausted, but still he shone a brilliant smile and pointed at the city spiders flailing in the air below.

“Look at that! I did that! Aren’t I amazing?”

“You shoulda done that from the start.”

“Would it kill you to be nice?!”

“Hold on, boys! Something’s not right!”

At Red Tirol’s words, the other two looked down to see the scattered city spiders doing something strange. At first, they began forming together into a black blob, a writhing mass of machinery. Then *Chunk! Chunk!* One by one, eight legs extended from the main section, forming the shape of one enormous spider, and with a *Ker-lunk!* it stuck its legs into the wall of the prefectural bureau.

“Huh. That’s another thing those crowspiders do. When huntin’ prey, they group together and make one big version,” said Bisco.

“I see,” replied Red Tirol, equally fascinated. “It sounds like they group together to make themselves appear larger and more threatening.”

“Sure... ’Cept in this case, it ain’t just a threat.”

“This isn’t the time to be bird-watching!” shouted Milo. “Actagawa, we need to get out of here!”

The large spider advanced up the building with frightening speed. Despite its enormous size, it was clearly faster than the giant crab on which the party rode. As it closed the gap, the boys fired arrow after arrow, tearing chunks out of its legs, but the conglomerate nature of the beast meant that it could repair such damage almost instantly.

“Dammit! One Rust-Eater arrow would make quick work of this...!”

“...! Bisco! It’s spitting something up!”

The colossal city spider opened its mouth wide and fired a flurry of black thread up at them. The boys whipped out their lizard-claw knives, but they could not hope to protect all of Actagawa, and soon his swift legs were tangled up in tar-black webbing.

“Oh no! They got Actagawa! This is bad!”

“...Bisco. These threads...”

Red Tirol didn't even get to finish her line before the surface beneath their feet shook. The threads suddenly flashed with a bright white light, and there was a distinct burning smell as Actagawa was sent into violent and uncontrollable spasms.

"They're electric cables! Bisco, he's shocking Actagawa!"

"The fuck? That bastard!"

Electricity was one of the few weaknesses of the steelcrab, pinnacle of evolution as it was. Its carapace was formed of a sort of organic metal that lent the creature its name, and though it offered excellent protection against heat and cold, electricity passed straight through it. Even the mighty steelcrab would be rendered helpless if its muscles were paralyzed, and although Actagawa was the mightiest of them all, even he was no exception.

"Ahhh! No! Actagawaaa!"

With his partner's horrified screams ringing in his ears, Bisco knew what he had to do. His face slowly took on a look of pure wrath as he pulled his bowstring tight, and the spores flowed forth in an ever greater number, burning like sparks.

"Bisco, no!" yelled Red Tirol. "You'll kill us all!" But Bisco was deaf to her protests. Just as she jumped for cover in advance of the inevitable explosion...

Whoosh... Boom!

A different blast rocked the beast's body. As the giant city spider turned to look back at its attacker, its ensnaring cables came loose, and Actagawa was free of the electric net, barely managing to dig his claws into the building.

"What the hell was that? A rocket?!"

"Bisco, look!"

As he did, another missile arced toward the foe, a plume of smoke erupting from its rear. It was a Matoba-made Salamander Rocket. As the patented Salamander warhead found its target and exploded into the giant spider's side, many of the smaller spiders broke off and fell toward the ground.

"Yee-haw! That's what ah call a direct hit!"

“That’s... That’s that old badger we just met!”

“Gah-ha-ha-ha! Ah can’t be sittin’ back, cuttin’ slack when the scallywags are tryin’ their darndest!” yelled the badger from far below as he loaded another Salamander Rocket into his man-portable launcher. “We’ll give ya all the coverin’ fire ya need. Just find a way to take that thing down!”

The fiery heat of the rocket’s explosions stirred the giant city spider into a rage, and it rushed recklessly for Actagawa, but just then, one of the missiles hit it in the head, and it reared up, revealing its underbelly to Bisco and Milo.

“Bisco! Now!”

“Got it!”

Bisco drew the Rust-Eater spores back into himself and swiftly nocked a King Trumpet arrow, firing it directly beneath the heart of the city spider. Then, just as the spider regained control of itself and settled back on the wall with all eight legs...

Gaboom!

...the mushroom erupted directly into the core of the beast, pushing it clean off the building and flinging it helplessly below.

“That was a hard fight! Sorry, spiders, I underestimated you!”

“That’s very honest of you, Bisco.”

Bisco’s eyes twinkled as he drew his bow one last time, sending a final shot down to meet the falling spider. The blazing arrow pierced the creature, and with a *Gaboom! Gaboom! Gaboom!* the Rust-Eaters tore its body apart, eradicating the swarm before it even hit the ground.

“Mighty fine work, lads,” said the badger, looking on in admiration.

“It’s like a mushroom firework!”

“Keep it up, Akaboshi!”

After making sure that the spider was well and truly defeated, Milo waved to the cheering badgers down below. Meanwhile, Bisco clambered back into his seat and peered over at Actagawa’s face.

“Sorry about that, pal. Did it hurt?”

The crab released only a burnt-smelling bubble in response, and Bisco rubbed his shell.

“...I shouldn’t have let you get hurt. That was my fault. I was too focused on tryin’ to beat it. It won’t happen again, Actagawa. I promise.”

It’s been a while since I’ve seen Bisco so meditative, thought Milo, as his partner’s rarely seen kinder side came to the fore. Pretending he hadn’t seen anything, he instead turned to Red Tirol, who had just poked her head out from the luggage once more to see what was going on.

“...Does it seem strange to you...,” he asked her, “that Bisco acts like this?”

“Not at all. I think it’s lovely,” said Red Tirol, gazing at Milo’s partner with a gentle smile. “And it’s not just me. Tirol finds it quite endearing as well— Ow!”

“Listen, we’re about to reach the top. Hold on tight,” said Bisco, and Red Tirol rubbed her stinging cheek before retreating back into the luggage. Milo found it hard to stifle a chuckle at the scene, and then, with a *Ker-thunk!* Actagawa at last clambered over the roof of the building and, exhausted by the long climb, sat himself down to rest.

“...Wow! *This* is the train?!”

“Indeed. This is the Tokaido Chuo Maglev. In our day, this was the fastest means of transport available.”

Inside the enormous station that stood atop the prefectural bureau, enshrined upon its rails within a clear pipe, was a burning crimson and extremely futuristic-looking train. To Bisco and Milo, it looked as if they’d wandered into a sci-fi world.

“It’s a strange bug indeed for this to be all the way up here,” said Red Tirol, “but that’s good news for us. I mean, this line isn’t even supposed to pass through Kyoto at all.”

“Look how freakin’ shiny it is,” said Bisco. “This ain’t nothin’ like those freight trains over in Shimobuki. How does it even work?”

“Leave it to me!” said Red Tirol proudly. “I alone have access to the maglev

system. You two rest along with Actagawa. I'll let you know when we're ready to go!"

Then the girl trotted off excitedly in the direction of the train, her pink braids bobbing up and down as she went. After watching her go, the two boys sat down with Actagawa and sighed.

"Geez, what a trip. Everywhere we go, there's weird shit waitin' for us."

"You seem awfully calm, Bisco, all things considered," said Milo, pulling out and chewing on a strip of frog jerky.

"Well, it's actually kinda fun," Bisco replied enthusiastically. "I didn't like what those white boxes were doin', but there's so much freaky shit on this journey I ain't never seen before. Just when things were startin' to get borin'."

"You're a tough cookie, Bisco. I wish I could be like that. Here, want another bit of frog?"

"Sure. Got any red sesame? That'll spice it up a bit."

"Sorry, Bisco, I already put it away."

"Damn. Go get it for me."

"Get it yourself! ...Fine. We'll rock-paper-scissors for it."

Suddenly, a pair of white headlights flashed on, and the crimson frame of the bullet train emitted a high-pitched whistle as it began to move.

"Milo! Bisco! I'm sorry! Hurry up and get on!"

"Wh-what the—?! You said you would call us when you were ready!"

"I know! I'm sorry! I made a mistake!" shouted Red Tirol from the driver's seat, fiddling with buttons and levers, to no avail. "Just hurry up, or you'll be left behind!"

"That dumbass. Easy for her to say."

"Actagawa, we've got to go! Get on, Bisco!"

With his two masters on his back, the crab began sprinting toward the train as it rapidly built up speed. Unfortunately, old Japan's ultimate mode of transport was no joke. Before Actagawa could reach it, the bright-red carriage had

already left the rooftop.

“Bisco! We’ll have to use the King Trumpets!”

“Why can’t we just sit down for one second?!”

Gaboom!

The boys’ arrows catapulted Actagawa toward the train like a pinball, barely allowing the giant crab to latch on to the rear of the vehicle with his claw. Behind them, the force of the growing mushrooms proved to be the last straw for the prefectural bureau. A large crack sliced the building diagonally in two, and then the whole thing simply collapsed.

“Nice to see you made it, boys!” came Red Tirol’s voice over the train’s PA system. *“You had me going for a moment there!”*

“And whose fault do you think that is, asshole?!”

“Sorry, but I don’t know how to get the doors open. You’ll have to use Actagawa to tear your way in. He should be able to fit inside, too, if he crouches down a bit.”

Eventually, the boys were able to do as she suggested and tumbled at last into the carriage’s interior, gasping and wheezing for breath.

“You boys had better hold on to something; we’re going full steam ahead! Next stop, Imihama!”

In a vast, dark room, red lights ran between geometric floor tiles, casting a dim light at distant shadows. From the center of the room's dome-shaped roof hung an enormous screen that flickered with white light.

Clack. Clack. Clack.

The sound of footsteps approached. Where leather boots fell, the floor tiles lit up, casting a glow on their wearer. Hair and eyes of burning crimson. The mycelium of the Rust-Eater spread across half his face like a battle scar, and he wore an expression of intense wrath that creased his handsome features.

“...”

He glared at the screen. On it, he observed the invasion of Imihama, watching his pure-white robots blast the city with blue particle weapons. He watched the gallant forces of Japan ride against them.

“Apollo!”

Clack-Clack-Clack. A faster pace of footfalls rang out on the tiles as a single figure approached him.

“Have the mushrooms cleared up? I was worried about you! Whah...? You look scary! Are you okay?”

“Joy! Be considerate! Apollo has only just woken up!”

A third person appeared, clutching the one called Joy by his hair and tugging him back. Joy turned and screamed at him, upset.

“Why do you keep pulling my hair?! You’re so rough, Rage! Don’t you know how to be gentle?!”

“It’s you who’s too soft. A little roughhousing’ll toughen you up.”

“Listen, you!”

“Silence.”

The two jumped and froze as Apollo’s deep, booming voice turned the room to ice. He spun and shot them a glare with his mushroom-infected eye, which couldn’t quite blink all the way, before continuing.

“I thought I told you it was bad manners to argue in public. You are *my* avatars, so why is it you still cannot understand?”

Joy looked down at his feet meekly, while Rage stood up straight, almost at attention. As Apollo had said, these two were his avatars, and thus they looked to be almost exactly his equal in all respects. They had his trademark red hair and red eyes, and although mechanical seams were visible running across the skin of their faces, they appeared far more convincingly human than the rest of Apollo’s army. The two of them were far from identical, however. Joy’s face lit up with the innocence of youth, while Rage always seemed unable to conceal his displeasure.

“...Whatever. Etiquette also dictates that I must forgive your transgressions. Now... Give your reports.”

“See for yourself, Apollo!” shouted Joy gleefully, pointing at the screen, as if he had already forgotten he was being scolded. It showed a real-time account of the united Japan forces fighting a losing battle against Apollo’s army. Right now, the prefectural bureau of Imihama was in the midst of being converted into a multistory apartment complex.

“We struggled against the mushrooms at first,” he explained, “but the antidote you created worked wonders once we applied it to the White! Look at that building! We made it out of all their dead bodies!”

“Hmph! What do we gain from taking this city? Old Japan had no prefecture named Imihama. It’s a waste of memory that’s only going to be washed away in the end.”

“You’re just angry because I’m the one who beat them, aren’t you, Rage?”

“You little...!”

But Apollo scowled at him, and Rage froze. Folding his arms, Apollo gave a satisfied nod and spoke.

“There’s no need to chase down those who flee. These fools only become more stubborn the closer they are to death... I’ll cut down on the White and divert all excess memory to the restoration.”

“It’s finally time to begin, is it?!”

“Now that we’ve confirmed the efficacy of the antidote program, yes. Good work, Joy.”

“Anything for you, Apollo...!”

Joy seemed ecstatic to hear Apollo’s words of praise. Rage tutted under his breath and interjected.

“Apollo, there’s something else I wanted to mention.”

When Apollo nodded, Rage changed the channel on the screen. Now it presented an aerial view of the entire area around the Kyoto prefectural bureau.

“I thought we were done with Kansai.”

“Look here,” Rage said, enlarging a portion of the image and revealing the bullet train speeding from the station atop the bureau roof.

“The Tokaido Chuo Maglev?” asked Apollo. “Why is it online?”

“The trains of old Japan are beyond the means of modern monkeys to operate,” Rage explained. “They lack the authority, and more importantly, the identification to do so.”

“And yet it moves, Rage?” Joy interjected.

“That’s why I reported it!”

As the other two argued, Apollo simply gazed at the image, thinking. Then, with a flash of realization, his eyes went wide, and he muttered a single line.

“It’s Hope.”

““...Hope?!”” the other two exclaimed in unison.

“It’s the only possibility,” said Apollo, still staring at the image. “Only four people have access to the Tokaido Chuo Maglev: Me, the two of you...and him.”

“But he’s dead!” bellowed Rage, lost in confusion. “He betrayed you and stood with those monkeys...and you killed him! I saw it!”

“Yeah! We both did! We watched you smash him to pieces!”

“Not exactly. I simply returned him to the particles whence he came.” Apollo scratched his lip with his thumbnail, showing not a shred of emotion. “But what if he could somehow preserve his consciousness, even as a stream of particles...?”

“Whaaat?!”

“Something always seemed wrong. Why was it we faced resistance at every turn? While we slept, could it be that he has been guiding this land’s evolution, infesting it with spores that consume the Apollo Particles...all so he could stand against me this day?”

Whether he was asking himself or telling himself was not quite clear. Apollo’s two clones simply stood speechless as he muttered under his breath.

“In that case...perhaps that strange command language they call mantra is his doing as well...”

Apollo weighed the facts carefully before pivoting on his heel and walking away.

“A-Apollo!”

“Rage. Put up a level-four barrier around all of Tokyo. Use my memory if you have to.”

“A barrier? B-but, Apollo, Joy already defeated the Japanese army...”

“Hope is our enemy now. And we know not what he is planning. Knowing him, he likely has an ace up his sleeve. We must exercise the utmost caution, or he will ruin all we have worked for.”

“An ace, you say...?”

Apollo’s right eye shot open, revealing the fungal filaments across its surface. After he turned to inspect the look of understanding on the faces of Joy and Rage, the square-shaped panel beneath his feet sank into the ground, becoming a high-speed elevator that transported him to the lower levels.

“...You think he’s nervous?” muttered Joy, after he was sure Apollo was long gone. “He looked even scarier than usual...”

“Unlikely. I doubt Apollo can even *feel* that emotion,” answered Rage, his eyes as fixed as Joy’s on the spot where Apollo had just stood. “Don’t forget: He off-loaded all of his negative emotions onto us, his avatars. All we must do is follow his commands. Apollo’s only weakness is his obsession with etiquette. If that obsession threatens to obstruct his plans, then...”

“...I know. It’s my job to twist that etiquette so that it serves our needs. Is that what you wanted to say?” Joy seemed a little miffed as he replied. Still, he stared uneasily at the square-shaped hole in the ground.

I’ll bring it all back.

No matter how long it takes. Ten years, a hundred years...

I will bring it all back from the ashes.

I promise.

And then, I’ll see you at last.

Apollo watched the fragmentary thoughts flit across the back of his eyelids as if they were no concern of his, then opened his eyes with resolution.

“I will see this through to the end... No matter who stands in my way,” he muttered, and put whatever he was thinking about out of his mind. His scarlet hair bobbed ever so slightly as the elevator descended at breakneck speed.

Klanggg!

In a whirl of raven hair and a glint of metal, the staff ripped clean through two of the white robots. The third, barely dodging the blow, fired a blue cube in retaliation, but the staff's return stroke deflected it away.

"Rrrrraaaargh!"

The storm of black continued, its steel ripping sonic booms as it sliced a cross in the air. The attack did not even connect with its intended target, and yet the sheer force opened an X-shaped crack in the robot's skin before it simply split open.

Landing on the ground once more, she stood up straight and allowed the blast wave to flutter her long, sleek black hair. She was the warrior woman Pawoo, beautiful and brave, and, with the Rust vanquished, she possessed once more her former terrifying skill.

"Hyo-ho-ho!" came a voice. "Hell of a reach you've got there, lass! They don't teach *that* in self-defense class!"

"That's what happens when I swing to kill," replied Pawoo. "Master Jabi, was that the last of them?"

"I do believe so. A whole bunch of 'em scampered off somewhere... Good thing, too, because they did a real number on these ol' bones!"

Jabi turned and looked over his shoulder at the battle camp positioned on the driftweed plains, where wounded and exhausted soldiers groaned in pain.

The First Army stationed at Imihama had gotten off to a good start against the invaders, and at first they appeared to be winning. However, all of a sudden, the enemy developed a resistance to mushroom arrows, and the Mushroom Keepers suffered heavy losses as a result. Thus, Pawoo had made the difficult

decision to abandon Imihama and fall back to the secondary field base in the north, where the Second Army was already garrisoned.

“I’ll go rally the Mushroom Keepers, lassie. I’ll leave the vigilantes to you.”

“Thank you, Jabi... And I’m sorry. If only I were stronger.”

“Hyo-ho-ho! I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that!”

Pawoo watched Jabi turn and totter off toward the Mushroom Keeper camp, then replaced her skullcap and made her way toward where the Vigilante Corps were stationed. There, she found soldiers with bodies eaten away by urbanization, groaning weakly.

“N-Nuts! Nuts! Don’t die! Please don’t die!”

“C’mon, Nuts! We were supposed to stay together forever, the three of us! You can’t... You can’t say good-bye now!”

Hearing familiar voices from within, Pawoo entered one of the tents. Inside, she found the body of the turban shell boy, Nuts, urbanized flesh stretching all the way up his arm to his chest. Kousuke and Plum knelt over him, weeping.

“P-Pawoo!”

“Ma’am! He threw himself in front of them for me! We need a cure or he’ll die! We can’t wait any longer. We just can’t!”

“You’re so loud... *Cough*. You gotta be more polite to the governor.”

“Nuts!”

With half-lidded eyes, Nuts slowly sat up, leaning on his father’s harpoon for support.

“Governor,” he said, cracking a wry grin. “Ten of those things are dead now ’cause of me. On the brink of total annihilation, it was me who held the line and allowed the steelcrab cavalry to escape with their lives.”

“We’re proud of you, Nuts,” said Pawoo. “You’re the pride of the Imihama Vigilante Corps.”

“I’m sayin’ you owe me one, ma’am. I’ve helped you, so now you gotta help me. Look after this crybaby Kousuke and this pushover Plum. When you get

Imihama back...pay 'em a big wage...and give 'em a huge house to live in..."

"You don't need to say any more, Nuts; it is done. But first, you must live, because far more than money or prestige, these two need *you*."

"...I killed ten of 'em. I ain't afraid to face my daddy now..."

Nuts slurred his words before at last he fell unconscious into the silent arms of his two friends. The powerlessness was too much for Pawoo to bear, and she bit her lip as she watched them sob at his side.

Just then, a voice rang out.

"We're under attack! New enemy approaching by air, from the southwest!"

"It-it's a snake! A giant robot snake!"

Pawoo exited the tent and looked to the sky. There, she could see something long, narrow, and flat stretching out toward the camp.

"Ma'am! Permission to open fire! Our hippo artillery will knock it out of the sky!"

"No, wait... Something's not right..." As Pawoo studied the ribbon-shaped object, a feeling in her gut stayed her order. "Wait, don't fire! It's friendly!"

The army was perplexed by her words. Meanwhile, a bright-red train came into view, riding along the object at exhilarating speed. It curved in the sky and shot directly overhead before the tracks beneath its wheels ran out at last and the carriage followed its ballistic trajectory to a clump of driftweed, where it crashed and exploded in a ball of flame.

As the members of the Vigilante Corps watched in shock, there was a *Thud!* as an enormous steelcrab landed directly beside Pawoo and raised its pincers in triumph. There, on his back, was the Mushroom Keeper with hair of burning fire; the breathless, terrified jellyfish girl; and, of course, Pawoo's dearest brother, Milo Nekoyanagi, dripping with sweat.

"That's the last time I do that! Making a railway out of mantra is just too much!"

"My fault, my friend. I never expected the other end would not yet have been restored. But look! Here we are! All's well that ends well, don't you think?"

“Easy for *you* to say!”

“Milo!!”

Milo turned toward the overjoyed voice of his dear sister. When he saw her, his face lit up, and he jumped down from Actagawa to embrace her.

“Pawoo! Thank goodness, you’re okay... Hey! You’re not wearing your bra again!”

“I’m glad to see you, too, Milo. What an entrance that was. We very nearly shot you out of the sky!”

“Heh. But that was all part of the plan as well. Look!”

Milo pointed to Actagawa, who pranced atop a small hill and raised his greatclaw high. Atop his back, arms folded, his cloak fluttering in the wind, was the dashing figure of the Man-Eating Redcap, the Mushroom Keeper who became a god.

“A-Akaboshi!”

“The Man-Eating Redcap?!”

“The Mushroom Keeper has descended to Earth like a falling star!”

Seeing him standing there in all his glittering glory sent the allied forces into an uproar. The most fervent voices among them came from the Shimane detachment. The priests of the Wizened sect, led by High Priest Kandori.

“Lord Kusabira’s incarnation is here! Lord Akaboshiii!”

“Ha-ha!”

At Kandori’s command, the entire platoon kneeled before their god. The soldiers, demoralized by their losses and the exhaustion of combat, felt their spirits returning, and they erupted into cheers at the legendary hero’s flashy entrance.

Red Tirol pointed at the sight and laughed, hopping up and down in excitement.

“Look, Milo! The plan worked! They’re absolutely captivated by him, and all he has to do is stand there! ...I’m sure the man himself is not enjoying it, but

Bisco will just have to bear with it.”

“T-Tirol!” shouted Pawoo in surprise. “There *is* something strange about you. I knew it!”

“Pawoo, it’s hard to explain. Basically, she’s not Tirol, but...”

“We can worry about that later, Milo,” Red Tirol said. “It seems there are many wounded here. We need to reverse the urbanization.”

“You know a way to do that?!” asked Pawoo. “Even Milo’s medicine has no effect.”

“There are only four people in the world who can erase the City Maker. And the only one of them who will help you...is me.” At Red Tirol’s indomitable smile, the red mark on her forehead began to glow. “The White Apollos are simple assembly-line products. They don’t possess *my* clearance level. I can reverse their changes with no more than a touch.”

True to her word, the red-eyed Tirol visited every tent in the camp, and with a single touch, brought hope back to those who had given up on life. Always leaving with the words, “May Lord Akaboshi’s protection be with you,” she gave the impression it was *his* divine power that saved them, and soon the camp’s morale was at an all-time high, bristling at the miraculous work of their Mushroom Keeper savior.

“It worked! Thanks to Bisco’s charisma, everyone’s feeling happy again!”

“I wonder if we overdid it, though. I feel sorry for Bisco. He doesn’t like being worshiped.”

At that moment, the man himself stepped into the tent where Milo and Red Tirol were chatting. He yelled, “I’m gonna freakin’ kill you, Tirol!” Clinging to his legs were several elderly priests, each begging for Bisco’s divine favor. After managing to shoo them away, Bisco grabbed Red Tirol by the throat and dragged her into the center of camp.

“Whoa, Bisco! She’s just a girl. Don’t be so rough!”

“Shaddup. She’s been spreadin’ her lies all over the camp! People have been tryin’ to stroke me, throw money at me... It’s pissin’ me off! I think it’s ‘bout

time we got Amli to send this spirit packin'!"

"Ow! Ow! Please don't tug on my braids!"

With Red Tirol still in his grasp, Bisco strode over to the Kusabira sect's area of the camp and entered the largest tent.

"Hey, Amli! I brought you the patient— Hmm?"

"Brother dearest! You're just in time! The rest of us are here."

Sitting inside the tent were Amli, Raskeni, Pawoo, Jabi, and High Priest Ochagama. It was quite a colorful cast.

"Ah, everybody's here," said Milo as he caught up. "Hope, why don't you sit at the front?"

"Okay. Thank you."

Red Tirol took her seat, while Milo went over to Bisco, still in shock, and tugged on his sleeve, sitting the two of them down beside her.

"Hope. This is everyone."

"Thank you very much. I'll take it from here."

"It's thanks to you that we've been able to regain our strength. However, our weapons..."

"Hold on! Hold on! Hold on!" yelled Bisco, leaping from his seat as the conversation threatened to leave him utterly lost. "What the hell's going on?! What's with this 'Hope' thing?"

Everyone turned to him and stared with blank expressions. Then they turned back to Red Tirol.

"Hope, have you not explained anything to Bisco yet?" asked Amli.

"I wanted to, but... No, you're right. I can't keep lying to him," said Red Tirol, admonishing herself under her breath. She mopped her brow before turning to face Bisco with newfound determination.

"Bisco," she said. "I'm afraid I must apologize for deceiving you all this time. You see... I am not Tirol."

“Whaddaya talkin’ about? If you ain’t Tirol, then how come you look exactly like her?!”

“My name is Hope. I took over Tirol’s body in order to lead you and Milo here. To defeat Apollo and save Japan from the threat of Tokyo.”

“ ... ”

“This may be Tirol’s body, but her consciousness is dormant. Right now, the permissions to her physical form are under my control.”

“That...that’s disgusting! You sicko! Just ‘cause she’s asleep...!”

“No, Bisco! You’ve got it all wrong!”

“Get the hell out of her body, you freak!”

Bisco’s hair flared with rage like an inferno as he grabbed Hope by the collar. Raskeni and Pawoo had to work together to hold him back, and even those two powerful women could barely restrain his monstrous strength.

“Mr. Bisco, sir! Please calm down! Hope is our friend!”

“The Founder has watched over our evolution since ancient times,” added Ochagama. “It is because of him that we are able to strike back against Tokyo!”

But while Amli’s and Ochagama’s protests only seemed to agitate Bisco further, Milo walked over to Bisco and clapped him on the shoulders, as if calming a mad horse.

“Stop!” he said. “You have to explain things simply, in two sentences or less, if you want Bisco to understand!”

“Milo!” Bisco roared. “You’re sidin’ with this psycho as well?”

“Listen to me, Bisco. You need to understand two things. One, Hope is the soul of one of our ancestors; he’s here to teach us how to defeat Apollo.”

“ ... ”

“Two, Hope went into Tirol’s body to cure her after she was shot by Apollo. Right now, Tirol can’t speak to us, but she’s okay, I promise.”

“...The soul of one of our ancestors? Hmmm? You mean, like, a guardian spirit?” As Bisco considered Milo’s words, his hair settled down, and he gently

lowered Hope to the ground. “So what you’re tryin’ to say is... Apollo shot Tirol, and to stop her from becomin’ a city, this guy possessed her...?”

“That’s right, Bisco! You’re so smart!”

“Right...”

Bisco appeared to think some more, chin in his hands, staring at nothing. Then at last he nodded, convinced, and without a shred of the anger he had just displayed, sat himself down on the floor once more next to Hope.

“Sorry about that. You said you took over her body, so I just made assumptions. If you’re an ancestral spirit protectin’ your descendants, then that’s a whole ‘nother story.” Bisco helped Hope sit down and flattened out the creases in his clothes apologetically. “You shoulda said somethin’ earlier. If I’d known you were an ancestral spirit, I’d have treated you kinder.”

“W-well... I wasn’t quite sure you would trust me, you see...?”

“You didn’t think I’d understand two simple sentences? Heh. I’m smarter than you think, Hope!”

Bisco laughed uproariously while Amli looked on at the scene in shock. Beside her, Raskeni was trying her hardest to keep her chuckles to herself. Pawoo sighed, her head in her hands, and turned to Jabi.

“Master Jabi, are all Mushroom Keepers such...faithful believers in souls and spirits and the like?”

“We ain’t all as cracked as Bisco, if that’s what ya mean!”

“Hey, you two! What’re you mutterin’ about over there?!” yelled Bisco, his arm around Hope’s shoulders, as though they had been the best of friends all along. “You wanna know how to beat those robots, right? Well then, listen to Hope, ‘cause he’s got a plan!”

This time it was Milo’s sister who seemed about to blow over, and Milo diplomatically sat between them to try to calm her down. Now, everyone’s personal feelings aside, the war council was ready to begin. They only awaited Hope’s word.

“...And for all those reasons, we don’t have much time left. I hate to overexert the troops, but we must recapture Imihama and move on Tokyo *tomorrow*.”

Hope stood before the council like a college lecturer, scribbling arcane diagrams on the blackboard. He finished by drawing a large cross through a circle labeled “Tokyo” before stepping back and wiping the sweat from his forehead. Everyone else in the tent stared speechless in shock, stricken dumb by the astonishing magnitude of what Hope had just revealed. The only two who still seemed to be listening were Ochagama and Jabi, the latter of whom didn’t seem to be very interested in the story to begin with.

“...To think all this has been in motion for so long...!” said the high priest.

Jabi stroked his beard. “You say this Apollo fellow can turn the world back to normal? It’s a little hard to believe...”

But as people started digesting the information, the tent soon was abuzz with discussion. Milo leaned over to his partner and whispered, “Bisco. That Apollo guy is from the olden days! He’s like a god! I’m surprised your mushrooms affected him at all!”

“Zzz...”

“You’re asleep! I knew it!! Wake up, you idiot!”

“Ow!”

Milo slapped him hard on the back of his head, knocking his goggles loose. Readjusting them, Bisco yelled back, “Well, I can’t help it! I get that we gotta beat Tokyo to save Japan, but everything after that was way too hard for me to follow!”

“Very well,” said Hope. “Then I shall explain it so that even Bisco understands.”

Hope waved his hand over the blackboard, and everything he had written simply vanished, as if blown away by the wind. Ignoring everyone's astonished gasps, he took up his chalk once more and summarized his argument.

"Point one:" Hope wrote on the blackboard. *"Our enemy is Apollo, the man who created the Rust."*

"He *made* the Rust?" roared Bisco. "Then he's a goddamn madman! Why the hell did he do that?!"

"Well, to oversimplify a tad, he had a good reason for doing so, but his plan failed."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Moving on."

"Point two: Apollo is trying to revert all of Japan to the year 2028 AD."

"And this would be the year they say Tetsujin destroyed Tokyo, would it not?" asked Amli.

"That is correct," Hope replied with a nod. "The legends are more or less accurate in establishing that Tetsujin was responsible for the downfall of Japan. It was the Apollo Engine that drove Tetsujin, or to be more accurate, the Apollo Particles that— Well, I suppose there's no need to go into that much detail."

"So that bridge and that tower we came across... They were all from the year 2028, too?"

"Hmm. That's a good enough level of understanding, Bisco," replied Milo.

"I'm not sure I like the way you said that..."

"Well, I mean, for you it's actually quite impressive!"

"Oh yeah? And I suppose you understand it completely, eh?"

"Well, I did go to school."

Hope ignored the fight brewing between the two boys and turned back to the blackboard, where he wrote down one final point.

"Point three: Apollo is made out of one hundred percent pure Rust. Only Bisco can defeat him."

“Well, this one seems simple enough... Wait. What? Only me?”

Hope lowered his voice and spoke slowly, placing paramount importance on every word.

“Bisco. In all likelihood, Apollo has already devised a countermeasure against the spores. Normal mushrooms will not be enough to take him down.”

The whole tent went dead silent. Only Milo smiled a fearless grin and quipped, “Well then, how about abnormal ones?”

“Exactly,” replied Hope, prodding his finger toward Milo before locking eyes once more with Bisco. “The Rust-Eater grows more powerfully than any other mushroom in existence. It’s the only mushroom strong enough to stand firm against his attacks and the only means of dealing him a killing blow. Bisco, Milo...your arrows are the only ones that can do this.”

“Hrm.” Bisco cracked his neck. Thinking back to his previous fight with Apollo, he grinned, revealing his canines. “That suits me just fine. I been meanin’ to settle the score after our tie the other day. As vengeance for all the fallen, maybe I’ll blow a hole in his stomach this time.”

“The only problem is, how we are going to get these two into Tokyo?” asked the fluffy cotton wool ball Ochagama, leaning forward in his seat. “Apollo has already strengthened the White with his antibody program. Now, with no means left to oppose them, we stand no chance of pushing through his armies.”

“...He’s already distributed the program to the White? That changes things. I thought that with his wounds, he might not be able to act so quickly...”

Hope folded his arms and pondered.

“Hope, does Apollo not have any weaknesses?” asked Raskeni. “For example, a soft ego or a short temper?”

“If he has a spot for women, may I suggest we try to seduce him?” suggested Amli, cheerily wrapping her arms around her mother. “We would be quite good at that. We have four women here, each with her own unique charms.”

“Are you including yourself in that count, Amli?” asked Raskeni with a sly grin.

“Mother?! Are you saying I shouldn’t?!”

"I'm afraid it's quite difficult to find any holes in Apollo's mental state," explained Hope. "For you see, he has cut out his emotions and stored them in clones, of which I am one. He cares for nothing now, other than his mission."

"He cut out his emotions...?" asked Amli, eyes wide with shock. Then she puffed out her cheeks. "This Apollo fellow sounds like a most tedious man indeed. Does he not react in the slightest when a beautiful woman crosses his path? How rude!"

Suddenly, there was a flicker of an idea in Hope's deep-red eyes.

"Amli! What did you just say?"

"H-hmm? Why...I believe it was...he doesn't react in the face of a beautiful woman?"

"You said it was *rude*," said Hope, now quite agitated. "That's it! *That* is his Achilles' heel!"

"What do you mean, Hope? Is there some way to get the better of him?"

"There is. Allow me to explain. That man lives by certain rules he cannot break. His *etiquette*." Tirol's braids were getting in Hope's face as he spoke, so he went to knot them all together before swiftly slapping himself across the face. "This etiquette is embedded so deeply in his code that it takes precedence over everything else."

"But why would he do that? Making himself beholden to such a program...?"

"It's a long story, but in any case, that is what we must capitalize upon. Now, by what means? Hmm...?"

The tent fell silent once more as Hope began to think. It was only the noises emanating from Bisco, somewhere between snores and sleep-talk, that broke the silence.

"Why is it, I wonder, that such a fearsome man looks so much like an innocent child when he sleeps?" asked Pawoo. When Milo turned to her, he saw on her face not the picture of wrath she usually displayed, but a gentle, motherly smile.

"...Hope," he said at last. "I suppose it depends on what, precisely, Apollo's

etiquette consists of, but how about something like this?”

Milo walked up to Hope and whispered something into his ear. Hope’s eyes went wide as he heard Milo’s plan, and he nodded several times in agreement. Then, at last, he turned to face him.

“Why, Milo...that’s the most outrageous plan I’ve ever heard in my life... But it just might work! Indeed, Apollo’s etiquette *does* stipulate against such things!”

“It’s a good idea, isn’t it? I’m sure it’ll work!”

“However... Hmm...”

Hope looked to Pawoo, and to the sleeping Bisco, before whispering to Milo, “How are we going to get them to agree to it? I can’t see Bisco going along with this plan at all...”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” replied Milo with a smile. “Bisco still owes Pawoo a favor.”

Noon, the following day.

Spurred on by the divine might of their god, the Rust-Eater Bisco and the allied forces, now renamed the Arrows of Kusabira, charged into Imihama to reclaim the prefectural bureau. Their mushroom arrows now ineffective, the Mushroom Keepers switched tactics, and their crabs sported large artillery cannons provided by Matoba Heavy Industries. The white robots fell one after the other to the combined might of the Mushroom Keepers and Imihama's iguana cavalry, backed up by hippo soldiers from Gunma, warrior monks from the various sects, and heavy artillery from Matoba. In just two hours, the city was back under allied control.

"Well fought, everyone!" bellowed Pawoo, glittering with sweat, as she addressed the victorious troops. "Excellent teamwork! However, it won't be long before Tokyo regroups their forces for a counterattack. Any weapons that cannot be stationed in the city, please stand by to the south, in the Saitama Desert, and await further orders. And one more thing..." Pawoo turned and grabbed Bisco, who sported a particularly displeased frown, and brought him forward to the podium. "The incarnation of Lord Kusabira himself, Bisco Akaboshi, has something to say to you all in return for your hard-won efforts! Isn't that right, Akaboshi?"

"..."

The army awaited his next word with rapt attention. Suddenly plucked from his element and placed before a large crowd, Bisco was quite unsure of what to say. Thus, all he did was raise his bow toward a nearby office building and fire off a single arrow.

Gaboom! Gaboom! Gaboom!

The eyesore collapsed under the strain of the Rust-Eater mushrooms. Then

Bisco stepped off the platform, to resounding cheers.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! You sure have a way with words, Akaboshi!”

“Shaddup! I’m never doin’ that again!”

“It’s hard to see your tattoo when your face is so red! Ha-ha-ha! It’s a joke, Akaboshi! No need to get mad!”

Pawoo gave a cheery wave and left, while Bisco watched her go with a sour look on his face.

“Let it go, laddie,” came a voice. “It’s just this once, after all.”

“Jabi!” As he saw the familiar sight of his master, Bisco breathed a sigh of relief at last. “It ain’t funny, you know. I’ll take bein’ a fugitive over standin’ up there any day.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll get your chance when this war is over. Before that, though, I know it’s a pain in the butt, but we gotta do another ceremony.”

“Again? What now?”

“You mighta got the allied armies to trust ya, but the Mushroom Keepers aren’t gonna go so easylike. They each got their elders they wanna follow, and if we just let ‘em act on their own, it’ll be chaos out there. We’ve been able to get by for now, but sooner or later, we’ll need a Grand Elder. Someone to unite the tribes.”

“Hrm. Who’ll that be, then? You? Elder Gifune, maybe?”

Jabi took the pipe from his mouth and bonked Bisco on the head. When Bisco crouched in pain, Jabi puffed a cloud of smoke in his face.

“Have some sense, boy! The other elders aren’t going to listen to us! But what about you? You know everything there is to know about mushrooms! Hell, you nearly *are* one! You’re like a god, Bisco...”

“I ain’t no god! Do I have to hear that from you, too, old man?”

“For the Mushroom Keepers to unite under one banner, you gotta become one. I ain’t sayin’ you gotta *do* anythin’. You just gotta sit there lookin’ all godly while we perform a ceremony.”

The discomfort at the idea was plain to see on Bisco's face. More than any other Mushroom Keeper, he was one who yearned to always be free. But even he could not turn down such an earnest request from the man who had taken him in as his own son.

"...Fine, I'll do it. But just this once. And all I gotta do is sit there, right?!"

"...W-was there a blindfold involved?" Bisco asked.

"Gifune insisted we do it Tottori style. C'mon. This way." Taking his hand, Jabi led Bisco before the candlelit altar, and Bisco's long, mushroom-encrusted cloak trailed behind. Even with his eyes covered, Bisco could feel dozens of people staring at him. He gulped.

"H-hey, Jabi. This isn't quite what I was imaginin'. Are you sure...?"

"Shhh! Keep yer trap shut, boy. You gotta be silent to preserve the sanctity of the... Hmm? Huh, I guess you're the god here, so maybe you can say what you want. Whatever. Just keep it down!"

Bisco wanted nothing more than to run away from that place as soon as possible. The solemn atmosphere was almost as suffocating as the heavy costume he was forced to wear. However, Bisco was more worried than anyone else of disrupting the ritual and bringing down divine punishment, not to mention what the clan would think of him if he started a scene.

As he sat down, a large gong rang out, and Bisco heard the graceful footfalls of two people approaching from behind. The person walking in front gave off the familiar scent of his partner, Milo, no doubt about it, but what about the other? Bisco could tell it was a woman, but nothing more than that.

A priestess, maybe? I don't remember there being one in this ceremony...

His partner whispered something into the heavily perfumed woman's ear, and she hugged him before walking over and taking her seat behind Bisco.

"Erm... Now that we are all convened, let us begin the ritual of succession."

Bisco heard a noise as the entire crowd prostrated themselves at once. Bisco hurried to do the same, when the woman beside him spoke. "You do not need to follow them," she whispered.

“Our Grand Elder, Bisco Akaboshi, has already been imbued with divinity,” Jabi’s voice continued. “With his arrows, he erects the holy mushrooms of the Rust-Eater. There can be no question of his divinity. Therefore, we shall omit steps one through thirty-two. If there be any objections among the elders, let them now be heard.”

“None here.”

“No objections.”

“Ho ohechions.”

The elders voiced their approvals. Just as one younger man stood up to protest, Jabi shot him in the neck with a blowgun dart, whereupon he crumpled to the floor, snoring soundly.

“In that case, let us proceed straight to step thirty-three: the vows. Warriors of the Mushroom Keepers, do you swear to be our Grand Elder’s bow, and to smite down our foes in his name?”

““““We swear to be Bisco Akaboshi’s bow, and to smite down our foes in his name!””””

“Do you swear to be his mushroom, and to protect his life with yours?”

““““We swear to be his mushroom, and to protect his life with ours!””””

“Hyo-ho-ho. Excellent.”

Jabi chuckled to himself contentedly. Bisco, however, was struggling to sit still. All he wanted was a carefree life of travel with his two partners. How was he supposed to reciprocate the expectations being placed upon him? Just as he finally opened his mouth to speak, Jabi continued.

“In that case, we shall proceed to step thirty-four. Bisco Akaboshi. Is there anything thine arrows cannot pierce?”

“Wh-what?!” Bisco floundered at the unexpected question.

“He asked if there’s anything your arrows can’t pierce,” the woman beside him whispered. Bisco sat up straight and, in a loud, booming voice, declared:

“There’s nothing my arrows can’t pierce!”

“Is there any wall your mushrooms cannot break?”

“There’s nowhere my mushrooms can’t take root...no mushroom that won’t bloom when fired from my bow!”

A murmur of admiration swept through the crowd. Bisco’s words were not what he was supposed to say, but coming from the hot-blooded young Mushroom Keeper, they stoked courage in the people’s hearts all the same.

“Splendid! Well, then. Do you swear, Bisco Akaboshi, that you will carry the bow forever, that you will take the woman seated beside you as your wife, and that you will use the mushrooms to protect your family until death takes you at last?”

“Damn right! I swear that— Wait. What?”

“And, you. Do you swear to use your gifts of purity and strength to protect your husband and your children?”

“I do. I will devote everything I have.”

“Then please present your rings...”

“Hoooold it! Hold on a second! What’s going on? Somethin’ ain’t right!”

Bisco shot to his feet, and a slender hand undid his blindfold. The cloth fell away to reveal a beautiful, tall, white-clad, and yet very familiar woman standing before him.

“...Uh...ah...!”

The snow-white dress used for Mushroom Keeper weddings was designed with their skinnier figures in mind. On Pawoo’s curvaceous body, it looked almost obscene, and yet the beauty of her radiant, Rust-free skin was undeniable. She wrapped her long arms and sleek black hair around him and smiled.

“Till death do us part...my love.”

“Waaargh! What the hell is goin’ on?!”

Bisco looked frantically around for any kind of assistance, but there was none. The crowd clasped their hands in admiration, Jabi was doubled over with

laughter, and even Milo only looked on with tears in his eyes, nodding repeatedly.

“Hyo-ho-ho-ha-ha! Phew! I suppose that’s a no on the rings, then!” Jabi howled with delight.

“Y-you tricked me! All of you! I ain’t...!”

“...You want a wife with less muscle, is that it...?” whispered Pawoo. At the sad sound of her voice, Bisco turned around.

“Akaboshi...I was serious, you know...”

Her eyelids fluttered softly, and she looked back up at him.

“I didn’t want to die without letting you know how I feel. Even if it’s just for tonight...just until this war is over...could you...be my husband...?”

“Ah...uh...I can’t...”

“Am I not good enough for you...?”

“Nnn...nnn...!”

As her steely gaze fell in line with his, cold beads of sweat appeared on Bisco’s brow. Her eyes tugged him in and held him there.

“N-no, that’s not what I..... Oh, fine.”

“...Thank you! My body and soul belong to you now, Bisco...”

Her face lit up. Pawoo quickly shoved something onto Bisco’s finger before throwing her arms around his shoulders.

“Sorry about that, Reverend. Please complete the ceremony.”

Pawoo showed Bisco’s left hand to the eager onlookers, and they burst into joyous applause. When Bisco spotted the gleaming silver ring, he made a displeased grunt.

“Geh. That’s the same as Milo’s.”

“Is that a problem?”

“This one got a tracking device as well?”

“Of course. How else am I supposed to protect my family?”

“How 'bout you show some trust, for one?!”

Bisco's new wife dragged him away from the altar and led him down a red carpet flanked by the armies of each province, all cheering in unison. In front of them stood Actagawa, all painted up gaudily in the makeup of a divine beast, the fanciest saddle Bisco had ever seen atop his back.

“Come this way, groom! Watch your step!”

“Milo! You planned this, didn't you?!”

“Oh, I've been planning this a long time! Ever since we met!”

Milo's response was lighthearted, but the boy looked moved to tears. Bisco couldn't find it in his heart to say anything in response.

“Everyone's waiting for you! Go! Go!”

As Bisco seated himself in the saddle alongside Pawoo, the people cheered and tossed white cactus flowers.

“Congratulations, you two!” shouted Raskeni, with Amli riding on her shoulders.

“This isn't fair! The one sitting next to Mr. Bisco should be me!”

“Lord Akaboshi has taken a queen!” yelled Kandori, red-faced, to his subordinates. “Rewrite the scriptures to permit marriage at once!”

Then from immediately in front of Actagawa came two voices. Going for a low-angle shot of the newly married couple were the two border guards, Ota and Inoshige.

“Look this way, please!”

“Get outta the way, you idiot! They'll run you over!”

“...”

Bisco rode Actagawa in silence, while Pawoo leaned against his shoulder. There was a peaceful, satisfied...yet somewhat lonely smile on her face, and the gentle wind fluttered her eyelashes. She brushed the flowers from her hair and whispered so that only Bisco could hear.

“Please forgive me. This is all part of our war strategy...as well as my own act

of selfishness.”

“...”

“I thought it might be the last chance to show you how I felt. I suppose it was more grandiose than it needed to be, but at least now I can die without regrets.”

“Pawoo, you...”

“This is enough. Thank you, Bisco. I mean, Akaboshi...”

At the end of the red carpet stood Nuts and Plum, along with the rest of the iguana cavalry. Behind them, silently awaiting its rider, was Pawoo’s brilliant white motorcycle. Pawoo placed her hand on Bisco’s cheek and brought her face close...but instead of kissing him, she simply bumped her forehead against his. Then she leaped off the crab and caught the coat thrown to her, pulling it on. Straddling her prized vehicle, she lifted her trademark staff overhead.

“I have vanquished the chains that bind me!” she cried. “Can you all say the same? Say farewell to your husbands, your wives, your children...your dogs, if that’s all you have!” A cheer mixed with chuckles erupted from the crowd. “For now, we march on Tokyo, to protect our future! Count your blessings, and for each one our foe seeks to take from us, we shall repay them tenfold!”

““““Victory to Pawoo!””””

““““The goddess of war, Pawoo!””””

“Now, ride, my people! Tokyo will fall by *our* hand this day!”

Then the white-clad warrior princess took off with her entourage like a bolt of lightning, through the southern gate and into the Saitama Iron Desert beyond. The large army stationed outside the city fell in line with her as she passed, and soon the entire force was moving in the direction of Tokyo.

“Now it’s our turn, Bisco!” said Milo, hopping atop Actagawa. “Let’s go!”

“Whaaat?! We gotta attack Tokyo right now?!”

“Indeed,” said Hope, joining them. “This was Milo’s plan, to take down the enemy and make you two happy at the same time.”

Bisco lashed the reins, and Actagawa began marching forward.

“Won/ribi/magdo/snew! (Create a path ahead!)”

“Launch:Road:Maker!”

At Milo’s and Hope’s magic, the red carpet on which Actagawa walked shot out in front, winding southward, toward distant Tokyo.

“Hey, can’t you make somethin’ else? Runnin’ on carpet’s gonna be a pain in the ass for Actagawa!”

“Bisco, we are not done with the wedding yet!” cried Hope over Actagawa’s heavy footfalls. “This is all part of the ceremony!”

“What the hell are you talkin’ about?!”

“No one must obstruct the bride and groom as they leave the church!” He focused again on his spell, and the red carpet stretched out even farther. “That is simply proper etiquette, Bisco! You would do well to remember that!”

SABIKU BISCO

Tokyo, the Municipal Life-Form
3

The Rain Wind runs away at
the world. A boy with a bow
watches the beauty.

Illustration by **K Akagishi**
World Concept-Art by **mocha (@mocha708)**



“Apollo! Apollooooo!”

At Joy’s shrill voice in his earpiece, Apollo rose to his feet. He stood before a cylindrical tank, inside which an enormous green cube spun slowly, constantly shifting.

“...Apologies, Domino. I will be right back...”

Apollo turned away from the illuminating emerald glow and hopped onto an ascending elevator panel. The panel took him all the way to the upper dome, where Joy was looking panicked, staring at a bright screen.

“What’s the matter, Joy?”

“Apollo! It’s the apes! We’ve been hacked!” Joy tapped frantically on the holographic keyboard in front of him. “They’re coming for us, and the White aren’t doing anything to stop them! ...But I don’t detect any abnormalities in the code! What’s going on?!”

“The White Apollos aren’t attacking?”

Apollo shifted his attention to the screen. There, he saw the Saitama Iron Desert, and the allied forces riding at full tilt atop a magnificent red carpet. The white androids charged with protecting Tokyo, however, simply watched on in silence, rejecting the command to attack.

“...My...”

Apollo peered closer at the vanguard and spotted a black-haired woman in a wedding dress leading the charge.

“I see. Well, in that case, there’s nothing we can do.”

“Apollo?! What do you mean?”

“You can stop trying to fix it, Joy. Why, we haven’t been hacked at all.”

“Wh-what?! But...!”

“The White are behaving normally. They are simply observing proper etiquette: that of not disrupting the bride and groom as they walk down the aisle.”

“E-etiquette?!” cried Joy. Apollo’s face did not lighten, even for a second. “B-but the enemy is drawing closer! How can you care about etiquette at a time like this?!”

“How many times will you make me repeat myself? Etiquette takes precedence over all things. Why, even if two apes decide to get married and hold a ceremony, then that makes it a wedding, does it not? ...I must give the happy couple my regards.”

Apollo’s red eyes blazed open, and he began muttering a command to the screen. The White Apollos, idly watching the encroaching army, suddenly started to move, the effects of Apollo’s order rippling through them like a shock wave. One after the other, they raised their arm cannons, and blue particles began to build up.

“Y-you fixed them! Well done, Apollo!”

“Fire.”

The White Apollos all fired in unison...and colorful clouds of petals burst from their guns, showering the army in confetti. Atop Actagawa, Milo gazed in wonder at the sight, while Bisco picked out bits that had gotten inside his clothes.

“That should do it,” Apollo said, staring emotionlessly at the screen. “Next should be the bouquet toss, but seeing as how we don’t have any women here, I suppose we shall have to give it a miss.”

This is all Hope’s doing! thought Joy, grinding his teeth in anger. The rules of etiquette that Apollo followed as though they were the Ten Commandments themselves had always been a thorn in the sides of his avatars Joy and Rage; and Hope, the third of them, was the only other one who knew about that weakness of his. There could be no doubt now that Hope was assisting the enemy.

“We can begin the attack as soon as they leave the carpet... But how curious. It seems they are extending it indefinitely, using their mantra. A very strange wedding indeed, this is...”

I’ve got to find some way to convince him! He needs to put his etiquette aside!

Out of Apollo’s sight, Joy began trawling through the records of old Tokyo, pulling all the information he could find regarding weddings from the sea of electrons, until he stopped on one line of text. Excited, he ran over to Apollo.

“Apollo! Look at this!”

“That’s quite enough, Joy. I’ll leave the rest here to you. I must go watch over the server...”

“That thing’s not a wedding aisle!”

Perplexed by the intensity of Joy’s protest, Apollo watched as his avatar brought up an image of a magazine with a white-clad bride on the front cover and a passage of text highlighted in red.

“In a Christian wedding, the wedding aisle is the path that leads from the church entrance to the altar. Traditionally, it is laid with a red or white carpet, but did you know there are many variations available? Inside, find the hottest tips on making your wedding a day to remember!”

“Hmm? I’m not really interested in the hottest wedding tips.”

“Not that part. *This!* It says, ‘*The wedding aisle leads from the church entrance to the altar*’! Those guys aren’t on the wedding aisle; it’s just a regular red carpet!” Joy grabbed Apollo by the torso and shook him back and forth. “In fact, *they’re* the rude ones for trying to make their wedding ceremony last forever! We *have* to attack them! It’s not a breach of etiquette; it’s entirely justified!”

“...”

Apollo seemed disturbed by Joy’s words, and he began to think. Eventually, he nodded and started editing a program in the air before him.

“Append the information we just learned to point five of the etiquette manual. Reboot all White and instruct them to eradicate the invaders outside Tokyo.”

“Apollo...!”

“My work here is done. I shall be in the server room. Do not disturb me for anything below a level-three emergency. Am I clear?”

“Yes, sir! I can take it from here!”

Joy watched Apollo descend the elevator panel once more before turning back to the screen. The White had now begun their attack and were embroiled in combat with the allied forces.

“Hope, you coward... Taking advantage of Apollo’s etiquette...!” Joy muttered, his lips trembling in anger. “Just you monkeys wait. I’ll wipe you all out!”

“We made it past the blockade!” shouted Milo. “And look, they even held a party for us!”

“From here on out it’s a straight shot to Tokyo!” said Pawoo.

The red carpet stretched southward across the Saitama Iron Desert. At its head rode Pawoo in her wedding dress. Behind her was Actagawa, and behind him were the army’s most elite fighters. Thanks to Hope’s plan, they had made it through Apollo’s robots with little more than a light scattering of flower petals to show for it.

“Can I take this thing off yet?” yelled Bisco. “This kimono’s heavy as shit!”

“Come on, Bisco, Pawoo’s still wearing hers,” Milo replied. “By the way, I didn’t know Mushroom Keeper bridal gowns were so revealing. Are they all like that?”

“That’s Pawoo’s fault. Most Mushroom Keepers ain’t usually so big.”

“Big? In what way, exactly?”

“Her height!”

“Bisco! Get it together, lad!” came Jabi’s voice from the rear, riding atop the venerable champion steelcrab, Ogai. “Those robots have come down on us! The rear guard’s fightin’ ’em off as we speak, but they ain’t gonna last long!”

“He reactivated the White?!” asked Hope. “Dammit! Joy must have modified the code of etiquette!” He looked back to the rear of the formation, where he saw the blue light of the urbanization guns blasting away. “It’s no use. Tokyo is still some distance farther. We’ll never reach it before they catch up with us...”

“Founder, if I may.”

Ochagama showed his fluffy head, riding over on a chariot pulled by a two-headed hippo, before leaping across to Actagawa’s saddle and kneeling in front

of Hope.

“Please leave this to me, Your Godliness. As the high priest of Banryouji, I have safeguarded your teachings for one hundred years, never straying for a second.”

“My friend, what are you saying? You cannot possibly go. It is suicide!”

“Yes, it is.” Within the cotton wool ball of his hair, two big round eyes gleamed. “But I should be dead already. It was my fate to die in battle with Kelshinha, but that man, Akaboshi, robbed me of that duty. Now, let me join the rear guard, lest my life go to waste!”

“...You are prepared, aren’t you?” Hope’s red eyes went wide at the old man’s noble wish. “You would lay down your life for the good of humanki—?”

Just then, something strange happened. Midway through his sentence, Hope’s eyes suddenly welled with tears.

“Founder...?”

“Don’t...go... Don’t leave me behind, Grandpappy!”

“““Tirol!””” they all shouted, hearing the voice that came from Hope’s mouth. His two red eyes flickered before reverting to the brilliant golden color of the jellyfish girl’s.

“If you go, Grandpappy...I’ll be all alone! I don’t want that...! Please don’t go. I’ll come back to the temple! I’ll be a good girl this time!”

Perhaps it was her weak consciousness fighting for control, but Tirol was acting almost like a little girl. She wrapped her arms around her grandfather with such force that she nearly knocked them both off the crab. Bisco and Milo were about to jump in to catch them, but the cotton wool priest possessed an uncanny sense of balance and managed to retain both his and Tirol’s footing. He gently stroked his granddaughter’s head as she cried, and closed both his eyes, thinking back on the memories her warm skin evoked.

“My dear Tirol, it is not safe to come out so recklessly. Stay within the Founder.”

“I don’t wanna! Grandpappy, you’re gonna...!”

“When have I ever said I’m going to die and then actually gone through with it? Have a little faith, my dear... Come now, Tirol, look at me.”

Ochagama took Tirol’s tearstained face in his hand and smiled.

“You’ve grown up nicely, young lady. The thorns on your heart are all gone. You’ve made yourself some friends.”

“...Yeah.”

“Make sure you stay friends, okay? When you are hurt in battle, seek them out. When they are hurt in battle, let them take solace in you.”

“...Yeah...!”

“Good girl. Now, go back to sleep. You don’t know how much you mean to me, Tirol...”

“Grandpappy...”

Ochagama stroked her back, and then once he saw she had fallen asleep at last, he sprang to his feet and bowed to Bisco and Milo.

“Akaboshi. Dr. Panda. You had better take good care of my Tirol, or else.”

“No worries, you got— Wait. What?! Would it kill ya to ask nicely?!”

“It’s time for me to go. I’ll leave the rest to you, boys!”

Then the fluffy-headed high priest hopped back over to his hippo-drawn chariot and veered away, heading toward the rear of the convoy.

“Bisco, shouldn’t we stop him?! He’ll die out there!”

“...”

Bisco looked back in pain, when a slender arm grabbed him and pulled him forward again.

“Tirol!”

“Let’s go.”

Her irises were bright red once more. It was Hope now. Wiping the tears from his eyes, he looked ahead, his face grim and resolute, and pointed to their destination.

“Tirol is telling us to go as well. We can’t let her grandfather’s sacrifice be for naught. We have no time. We must enter Tokyo and defeat Apollo as soon as possible!”

“...All right! You got it!”

In Bisco’s jade-green eyes, there was a flicker of determination. He lashed Actagawa’s reins, quickening his pace, and led by Pawoo’s white motorcycle, humanity’s last hope rode on to Tokyo.

“Hyo-ho! Look how many of them there are!”

Ochagama hopped up and down on his two-headed hippo, swinging his arms in anticipation of the upcoming fight.

“How long has it been? Ten years? Fifty?”

“Ochagama!”

“Hyo-ho?”

The head priest turned to see an Escargot Plane flying directly overhead, and several warrior monks from the Kusabira sect dropped out, taking up a defensive formation around Ochagama’s chariot. Then the little girl with the glass eye hopped across their shoulders and landed beside him.

“I admire your valor, Mr. Ochagama, sir, but I fear your recklessness will lead you to ruin! The Kusabira sect shall assist you in this matter!”

“’Tis not recklessness, my dear. You should focus your efforts on protecting the Founder.”

“I’m afraid it is he who has ordered us to be here. He said that keeping Apollo’s forces occupied would use up his...memory, I think it was? Some sort of spiritual power, at any rate.”

“The Founder said that?”

“High Priest Ochagamaaa!”

From the other side came a second shout, and a glittering, sweat-drenched Kandori showed up, alongside a troop of similarly muscular monks from the Wizenect sect.

“By the orders of our Lord Akaboshi, we have come to assist! Men, keep High Priest Ochagama safe at all costs!”

Kandori’s followers gave a sharp yell in confirmation and surrounded the monks from the Kusabira sect, creating yet another protective layer. Then the three sects rode out to meet the armies of Tokyo.

“Ochagama,” said Raskeni. “Once Akaboshi defeats Apollo, his robots should power down. We have to hold them off until then!”

Ochagama looked down, his expression unreadable behind his long whiskers. *And here I was looking forward to testing my skills once more*, he thought. Then he pulled out a wooden staff from somewhere and held it high overhead.

“So be it!” he said. “Do you children know how to create a barrier?”

“I think you’ll find our arts at least as capable as anything they teach at Banryouji,” Raskeni replied.

“Well said! Then, with me!”

“Men! Perform the Mantra of Protection!” yelled Kandori, and his monks issued a single cry in response. All together, they sat down on the sand and began to chant. The robots flying overhead found their targets and lined up a barrage of blue particles.

What a tiresome man he was. And yet, as much as it pains me, I require the mantra he taught me.

Amli’s violet eye twinkled, and she spoke the words.

“Father, lend me your strength!”

“Here they come! Hold it steady now!”

The robots fired. The hail of blue cubes raced toward the army. And then...

“Won/shandaliba/syed/snew!!”

“Lawnych-woll-proteict!!”

...the two holy words of the two sects gave rise to twin hemispherical barriers, violet and pink, that expanded to cover the area. The wall of light reflected the attackers’ shots back at them, knocking some of them out of the sky and into

the barrier itself, where they were smashed to bits.

Seeing the barrier, the robots increased the intensity of their assault, the blue cubes now raining down like meteors. Each time one crashed against the wall, the monks' eyes and noses ran red with blood, and one by one, the monks passed out from exhaustion.

"Let's see who can hold out longer—us or them!" shouted Ochagama.

"You think such a measly assault...will make me fall?" Blood dripped from around Amli's glass eye, but she pushed on with her mantra, funneling even more power into the defensive shield. "I will not allow you to get in my brother's way...even if it kills me! Even if all I am is a ghost, my spirit shall not let a single one of you pass!"

"There it is! That's Tokyo!" Pawoo yelled from atop her motorcycle. Across the Iron Desert, where previously there had been nothing more than a huge hole in the ground, now stood an enormous city. While Bisco, Milo, and Hope had originally been backed up by the most elite soldiers the allied army had to offer, one by one, they had broken off to deal with Apollo's robots, and now it was only Pawoo and Jabi remaining.

"Finally!" said Bisco, relieved. "Now all we gotta do is get in there and beat Apollo to a pulp, right?!"

"That's right... No, wait!" Hope noticed a strange glimmer in the air before them and frowned. "...He's set up a force field around the entire city! I wasn't expecting this..."

"A force field?"

"It works on a similar principle to your mantra barriers, Milo," Hope explained. "But Apollo's are far stronger. I'll have to hack the system and find the shutdown codes."

"We ain't got time for all that!" yelled Bisco, lashing Actagawa's reins. The crab, understanding his master's motive, began to charge the wall. "Pawoo, Jabi! Hop on! Actagawa'll tear this thing down!"

"Okay!"

“Good work, Ogai! Now go back to Kousuke, you hear?”

Pawoo leaped off her motorcycle, and Jabi off his crab, and the two of them landed atop Actagawa alongside Hope.

“H-he will?! B-Bisco, that’s impossible!”

“Yeah? Well, fine by me. I do the impossible every day!”

“No, you don’t understand! Apollo’s barrier is harder than diamond! No living thing can break it!”

“You’ve got it all backward, Hope. It’s this artificial crap that’s never gonna measure up to Actagawa here!”

“Bisco...!”

Hope was stunned. What Bisco was saying sounded foolish, and yet the way he said it came from a place of such utter conviction, he had no choice but to believe it. Milo, Jabi, Pawoo. None of them had doubted Bisco’s words for a second. They stood by his side, looking straight ahead, eager to face down whatever came next.

“Bisco, my boy, how about usin’ that old technique again?”

“The Rashomon Split?! Heh, sure. You better hang on to your hat, old man!”

“Hyo-ho-ho! Don’t you worry about me, boy. Now let’s do it!”

“Yeah!”

Jabi and Milo drew their bows together and fired King Trumpet arrows into the soil in front. At Bisco’s command, Actagawa leaped on top of them.

Gaboom!

In a cloud of sand, the mushrooms sprouted to full height, catapulting Actagawa and his passengers high into the air.

“Now it’s our turn, Actagawa! *Won/shad/viviki/snew! (Grant target desired weapon!)*”

Milo’s mantra transformed Actagawa’s claw, covering it in a shimmering emerald casing, a marked contrast against his orange shell. As he flew over the central part of the city, he gleamed in the sunlight.

“My word...it’s a mantra claw!”

“Hang on, Pawoo!”

Actagawa spun around, building up centrifugal force. The Tornado Throw, a technique he used to fling his masters, was actually just another application of this, Actagawa’s secret technique—an all-or-nothing strike that put even the rider’s life at risk.

“““Go, Actagawa!””” the three Mushroom Keepers yelled out in unison.

Actagawa whirled with such speed that those on his back were nearly ripped from their saddles. He whipped around his emerald greatclaw and brought it down like a sledgehammer on the force field around the city. *Ker-rash!* The impact nearly made their teeth fall out. Actagawa’s mighty blow opened up a crack in the barrier...but it was only that, a crack, and the city beyond still seemed far from their grasp.

Crack. Crack.

The emerald coating on Actagawa’s claw lost out to the hardness of the barrier, and piece by piece it fell away, becoming nothing more than rust on the wind.

“Aaah! We were so close, too!”

“Dumbass. Look.”

“...Whaaat?!”

After a second, Actagawa’s claw glimmered in the sunlight. Then an earth-shaking rumble rang out over the city. One by one, even larger cracks formed in the invincible barrier, then large pieces of it fell away before at last the entire thing collapsed around them.

“See that? That’s the Rashomon Split. Tore this city wide open!”

“Now’s not the time to show off, Akaboshi! We’re falling!”

“Damn right we’re fallin’! We’re gonna fall right on top of them!”

Then the five people and one crab tore through the sky, plunging deep into the unplumbed valleys of those soaring skyscrapers, their weapons

underpinning the determination in their hearts.

“U...urgh...”

Hope rubbed his head, and his vision cleared, revealing the worried face of Milo standing over him.

“Hope! Thank goodness, you woke up!”

“M-Milo. Apologies. I think Actagawa’s g-forces were too much for my ear canals to keep up with...” He shook his head to clear the last of the nausea before rising to his feet. “What about the others? Are they okay? We didn’t lose anyone, did we?”

“Nope! Everyone’s safe. They just went off to look around while you recovered.”

“Look around? It is dangerous here...”

As Hope spoke, he took in his surroundings once more. After shattering the barrier, Actagawa seemed to have landed right through the red-brick roof of Tokyo Station. The evening light filtered in through the hole in the ceiling high above, illuminating the surrounding ruins.

I’m back...to 2028...

Hope looked in wonder at the rows of boutiques and restaurants, just as pristine as they had been before the fall of civilization, and he felt a little homesickness in the pit of his stomach.

Just then, he heard the squeal of tires and turned to see a large black motorcycle bearing down on him. It stopped before the pair, causing Hope’s braids to flutter, and Pawoo stepped off it.

“Hope!” she said. “You’re awake!”

“Pawoo! Wh-where did you get that?”

“I found a store selling them not far from here. There was no one there to pay, though, so I borrowed one.”

It seemed Pawoo had changed out of her wedding dress at some point and was now back in her familiar black bodysuit and silver skullcap. She grinned, stroking the vehicle’s dark leather seats.

“I have to say,” she continued, “this old Japan craftsmanship is something else. This bike feels like a second skin.”

“...A second skin? It’s a vehicle, not clothes...,” said Milo.

“Pawoo, where are Actagawa and the other two? We have to—*Cough! Cough!*—We have to hurry. By now, Apollo will have figured out we’re here.”

Pawoo patted Hope on the back, then she whacked a nearby vending machine with her staff, and out popped a canned drink, which she tossed to Hope.

“Drink this,” she said. “We know. We’re in the lion’s den now.”

“Th-thanks... Ow! It’s soup! ...And it’s still hot!”

“They *are* running rather late, though. Knowing these Mushroom Keepers, they likely got distracted by a shiny pebble or something. Perhaps I should head out and see what they’re up to...”

Pawoo scratched her chin and considered it, when suddenly Milo heard a strange clattering noise coming from the ground at her feet. The noise moved toward them, passing between him and Hope, and in its wake appeared some sort of steel lattice.

“...Hey, Hope. Isn’t this...?”

“...A railway?”

“...! Milo, get down! Something’s coming!”

Just as Pawoo shouted her warning, a loud foghorn noise filled the station. Pawoo quickly grabbed the other two, pulling them onto her motorcycle and twisting the accelerator, just as an enormous train barreled through where they had been standing, smashing through the nearby boutique and continuing on through the coffee shop opposite.

“What was that?! Is it after us?!”

“It’s the Yamanote Line,” yelled Hope from Pawoo’s arms. “It’s creating its own rails and trying to run us over!”

“Hold on tight, you two!”

The railway line came around and advanced on Pawoo’s motorcycle with even greater speed, as if the first attack had been only a test of their strength. The Yamanote train leaped forward on the track, smashing through all obstacles in pursuit of the fleeing vehicle. Pawoo was a formidable rider and was able to swerve and avoid its attacks, but the rain of shattered glass and twisted metal as the train demolished yet another installation was terrifying to behold.

“Pawoo! This thing’s unstoppable! We need to get to open ground!”

“I know!”

Pawoo steered toward a part of the wall smashed open by the train and leaped through into the dark streets of Tokyo outside. It seemed the Yamanote Line was not restricted to the station, however, and it continued its assault into the city. So long as the train continued to telegraph its attacks, it would be possible to dodge, but its charge was so relentless that even the iron-willed Pawoo was feeling the pressure, and large beads of sweat appeared on her brow.

“Grrr... It just doesn’t give up! Will this never end?”

“Whoever’s creating the railway track must be nearby. If we take them out...”

“Pawoo, look out!”

At Milo’s voice, Pawoo slammed on the brakes, just as the train dashed out in front, curving around like a steel snake. Pawoo looked around for an escape route, but...

“...Dammit! We’re trapped!”

The rails had come together into a circular track, around which the train raced at incredible speed, leaving not even a single gap through which to escape. Gradually, the track spiraled inward, leaving the trio with no choice but to wait for their inevitable deaths.

“Milo! Use my staff to vault out of here! Take Hope with you!”

“No, Pawoo! I won’t leave you behind!”

Pawoo looked up into the evening sky. Just then, something came into view.

“It’s them!”

“Hyo-ho-ho! Have at ’em, Actagawa!”

Ker-ranggg!

Actagawa’s giant claw smashed through the roof of the train, crushing the carriage flat.

“Jabi!”

“Sorry I’m late! Bisco found a bookshop, and it took some fightin’ to get him to come out!”

“You old fart! It was you readin’ *Kobo, the Li’l Rascal* the whole time!”

Actagawa picked up the fiery wreckage of the Yamanote train and hurled it into the air, where Bisco shot it with a mushroom arrow. All four carriages became host to a mountain of Rust-Eaters that glittered in the evening glow, while Actagawa landed beside the motorcycle and raised his claws protectively.

“Bisco! Jabi! You saved us! We must hurry! We need to reach Apollo before it’s too—!”

“Wait. Hope. We’re not alone.”

Bisco, too, had long since cast off his bulky wedding outfit and was back in his usual Mushroom Keeper getup. Hopping off Actagawa, he stared at a fixed point in the sky. Standing atop the wreckage of the railway station so damaged by the Yamanote Line’s rampage was a red-haired man. He glared down at the group with murder in his eyes and shouted out to them:

“A crab destroying a train? Sounds like the plot of some third-rate disaster movie.”

“Rage!”

At Hope’s cry, everyone turned to look at the figure. The man had Hope’s same bright-red eyes, shining in the night.

“As we suspected. You’ve been helping them, Hope. Look at you. You’ve even become an ape yourself. Do you truly detest Apollo that much?”

“I don’t hate Apollo! I hate his twisted ego that seeks to wipe out humanity just so he can go back to the way things were! The old Apollo would never have done something like that!”

“We don’t seek to wipe out humanity. Only apes.”

“Rage...! I can’t believe you...!”

“Launch:City:Maker!”

His desire for conversation apparently over, Rage raised his arms, and at Hope’s feet another railway track began forming.

“C’mon, Actagawa!”

The giant steelcrab took the full force of the approaching metal python head-on, and though it pushed him back several meters, eventually he lifted the train above his head and flung it far behind him.

“Actagawa and I’ll hold off that rotten red-haired rascal, Hope,” shouted Jabi. “You guys get a move on!”

“Jabi! Thank you, I won’t forget this!”

“Are you goin’ senile already, you old coot?” yelled Bisco. “It’ll take all six of us to beat that guy!”

“Think about it, boy. If he’s sendin’ his goons after us, he must be buyin’ time still! We all stay here to fight him, we’re givin’ him exactly what he wants! Lass! I’ll leave Bisco to you.”

Pawoo nodded, and while Hope muttered a spell to conjure a pink sidecar for the motorbike, Pawoo grabbed Bisco by the scruff and threw him into it.

“You really serious about this, old man?”

“Bisco. Have you forgotten who I am?”

“...!”

“Hyo-ho-ho. Got it? Then go!”

“Milo, Hope, we’re off!” shouted Pawoo. “...Actagawa, Master Jabi... Stay safe.”

Then she twisted the throttle and sped off through the streets, following Hope’s directions. Just as she did, Bisco tossed his dagger to Jabi.

“Jabi, use this!” Its blade shone gold with the light of the Rust-Eater, and the old man caught it in his other hand. “You better kick his ass!”

“Oh, I will.”

“...Fools. You think I’ll let you escape?”

Rage turned toward the fleeing motorcycle and began constructing the rails, sending the Yamanote Line on its heels. However, Jabi reacted with a balloonsroom arrow that knocked the train clean off the track.

“...Stay out of my way, you decrepit old fool.”

“Hyo-ho-ho! Actagawa! Looks like it’s our time to shine. Let’s give it all we got!”

Actagawa swung his claws in response, and they gleamed in the orange glow of the setting sun. Jabi, hero of the Mushroom Keepers, drew his bow tight, eager to be heading into battle once more.

“Launch:City:Maker!”

The Yamanote Line continued to hunt down Jabi and Actagawa, but between the crab’s hefty claws and the master’s skillful bow, the pair were making short work of the trains.

“...Damn it all. It’s just a crab. How can it maneuver so swiftly?!”

Rage gnawed on his fingernails as he watched the smooth interplay between the duo. Then a broad smile appeared on his face. He raised his arms again, and blue particles swarmed his entire body.

“...In that case, I shall have to deprive the horse of its rider,” he muttered before launching himself off the rooftop and toward Actagawa, just as he was dodging one of the trains. Rage spun in the air, delivering a mighty roundhouse kick toward the old man in the saddle.

“...! Nrgh!”

Jabi quickly blocked the attack with his bow, but the kick had the weight of a steel mallet and launched him backward onto the roof of the moving train. Rage landed a short distance away, boasting a triumphant sneer.

“Now, that crab will no doubt soon be flattened, but I am loath to leave anything to chance. Once I take care of him, I’m coming for you, old man.”

“Hyo-ho-ho-ho... Still looking down on me, boy?” said Jabi with blood pooling at his lips. “You should think about your excuse while you can...your excuse for losing to an old man.”

“Insolence!”

Rage plunged his arm into the roof of the train beneath his feet, and he tore up steel, forging in his hands what appeared to be a war hammer modeled after the carriage itself. Jabi leaped to a safe distance and fired a volley of arrows, all

of which sank into Rage's body, but the old man's prized balloonsrooms showed no signs of sprouting.

"It's no use, old man!" he bellowed. "Apollo's mushroom antidote program is already working against your spores!" Then he rushed forward with impressive speed, swinging the hammer overhead. The force of the swing drove Jabi down through the steel roof and into the carriage below, where he collided with the floor, shattering his bones and sending blood spilling from his mouth. Rage looked down through the hole in the ceiling and laughed.

"Oh? Still alive, are we? It must be so very painful."

Jabi returned a bloodstained smile.

"Painful? Hyo-ho... I think you knocked my spine back into shape!"

"...Always with the jokes. Fine. Then this time, I'll break you in half, old man!"

My arrows ain't workin'... Well, this is a bit of a pickle... What am I gonna do?

In the dim light of the carriage, Jabi sharpened his senses, consulting his vast combat experience in search of the single golden thread that would lead him to victory.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Deprived of his rider, Actagawa fought on with the combat strategies he knew by heart. As train after train came down the Yamanote Line toward him, he fended each of them off with his massive claws. All around him was the flaming wreckage of the carriages he had tossed aside or smashed apart.

With the trains slowing their assault somewhat, Actagawa seized the opportunity and scuttled off in the direction of his master, when...

...Ka-bam! A huge fist landed in his path, blocking the way and casting a shadow over even the considerably sized steelcrab himself. Actagawa turned to see the remaining trains coming together, forming into a humanoid shape. This bipedal weapon then began drawing the destroyed wrecks onto it, growing even larger.

A robotic voice rang out, and blue particles began floating around the giant bipedal train-formed weapons platform.

“Launch:Apollo:Train. Commencing extermination.”

The robot, identifying itself as Apollo Train, smashed an arm into Actagawa. The crab blocked it with his claws, but a swing from its other arm sent him flying across the ground. There was a sickening *Crack!* as a split appeared in Actagawa’s prized shell.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Apollo Train swung its fists relentlessly, knocking Actagawa from side to side and into a nearby building. As the concrete came crashing down around him, Actagawa struggled to his feet, only to be kicked mercilessly upward by the giant, and then immediately met by a fist and beaten down into the ground once more. Bathed in the light of the Apollo Particles, the Yamanote Line was more powerful now than ever before. Even Actagawa’s peerless shell was tragically riddled with cracks, and now a few small buildings and telegraph poles had taken root. With each attack, the urbanization would be broken off, only to grow back, each time spreading farther across his body.

Yet even the prospect of his death did not dampen the force of Actagawa’s claws. He continued to parry Apollo Train’s enormous fists, waiting for his chance, before slipping around the back and launching himself at the titan’s knees. With one snip of his claw, he cleaved right through the steel leg supporting his foe. The entire upper portion pitched forward, but Actagawa did not stop there. Aiming at the head this time, he leaped up, swinging his claw for a final blow, when...

...Clamp! One of the robot’s enormous hands closed around him, squeezing with tremendous strength. Actagawa’s shell began cracking apart, and he wriggled in pain. Apollo Train righted itself onto one knee and brought Actagawa’s struggling form up to its face, as if enjoying watching him squirm.

With what little strength he had remaining, Actagawa managed to break free of the hand and swung his claw, striking at the train carriage that served as the robot’s wrist. The force shattered his shell, tearing off his own pincer, but also succeeded in breaking off the hand that held him, and the whole thing crashed to the ground. There, however, he stopped. His legs were broken. He could not even rise to his feet, let alone escape. Yet even now, stripped of his weapons

and his means of locomotion, and with the urbanization eating away at his shell—even now, when the mere fact he still lived was a miracle in itself—even now, he spurred his body forward, in utter defiance of his foe.

Apollo Train, regarding the minuscule object before it, saw that it possessed a mysterious and fearsome strength, and so opted to finish it off from long range. Huge plates in its chest parted, revealing a wave-motion cannon that began charging up blue particles.

“Launch:City:Blaster. Charge levels at twenty percent.”

The robotic voice rang out again, and the mechanism in the giant’s chest began revolving at high speed. It fixed its aim on Actagawa, and with his legs completely broken, the crab had no means to avoid the blast. Even so, he pulled himself closer, single-mindedly focused on his goal.

“Charge levels at sixty percent.”

The azure vortex shone even brighter, bathing Actagawa in blue.

“Charge complete.”

Just as Apollo Train was about to fire, Actagawa focused all his remaining strength into his broken legs and launched himself up like a rocket. Spinning his body like a drill, he stuck out his other smaller claw, and it plunged deep into the unarmored machinery of the cannon, coming clean out the other side. Now gripped in his humble pincer was the red cube that served as the metal golem’s core. He crushed it, and sparks flew all over the Yamanote Line. The colossus of steel shook.

“City:Blaster activation failed.”

Consecutive blasts rocked the titan’s frame, and jets of black smoke erupted from the cracks before one final explosion engulfed Apollo Train entirely.

Then Actagawa, blown far above by the bomb blast, landed amid the flaming wreckage.

Kerrang! Kerrang! Kerrang! Kerrang!

Jabi leaped and rolled to dodge the sharp pantograph spears that Rage drove through the roof of the train carriage. Metal grinding against metal tossed out a

spray of sparks that singed the old man's cloak.

Kerrang!

"Ugh! Guh..."

"Oh, did I get you there? Ha-ha-ha! Now, watch, as the city consumes you!"

Blood dripping from his collar, Jabi scrambled to his feet and dashed past the rest of Rage's attacks, making his way toward the front of the train.

"Run away, old man! Not that there's anywhere left for you to flee!"

That man...so full of himself... Oops, looks like a dead end.

Running into the frontmost car, Jabi stopped and slipped on a puddle of his own blood, tumbling head over heels and colliding with the wall of the driver's cabin.

"End of the line, old man!"

Fwsh!

Rage thrust his pantograph spear through the roof once more, but Jabi's bow was quicker. The legendary hero's balloonsroom arrow hit the sharpened tip head-on and expanded into white mushrooms, tearing the weapon apart.

"Heh. What's the matter, whippersnapper? Not gonna finish me off?"

Jabi raised his bow toward the pinhole in the ceiling, but there was no response.

...? Where did he...? Nrh?!

Klak-klak-klak-klak-klak! A railroad track materialized down the middle of the carriage, leading all the way up to Jabi's feet. Then, from the other end of the train, he heard Rage's mad laughter.

"Ha-ha-ha! You foolish ape! I've been leading you there this entire time! Our little game of tag is over!"

Geh! It can't be!

Klang! Klang! The sound of tearing metal worked its way down the train, until in burst Rage himself, his legs transformed into miniature Yamanote Line trains,

riding on the rails, a sadistic glimmer in his crimson eyes.

“Now, die, you old fool!”

“This was your plan...all along...”

The Rage Express raced down the track, swinging his hammer made of trains...
...but just before his blow connected...

“You really think I didn’t catch on?”

“...Wh-what?!”

The devious twinkle in the old man’s eye sent a chill down Rage’s spine. He slammed on the brakes, but he had built up such momentum that it was no use. His bloodlust spent, he saw at last the silver threads strung up in the carriage between the handrails.

“What is this...? Wires?!”

Across the web of steelspider silk shone the teeth of Jabi’s grin.

“Maybe if you’d paid more attention to this feeble old man, you woulda noticed it earlier.” He smirked.

“Y-you arrogant old fool!”

“Heh. Guess some kids never learn.”

And with that, Jabi sprang into the air, tugging the wire wrapped around his finger. Rage flew into the steelspider web and struggled to break free, but the more he jerked, the tighter those nigh unbreakable threads confined him.

“Grrr! Woooagh! I’ll get you for this!”

“Hyo-ho-ho!” laughed Jabi, hoisting the cocoon up to the ceiling. “Well, ain’t that put you in a bind?”

Rage bounced and wriggled, eventually managing to get one arm free. He pointed it at Jabi, and a blue cube materialized in his palm.

“You think you’ve won, fool? My body is made of Apollo Particles! Even if you tear off my limbs, I’ll grow them right back! I’m unkillable! Don’t you understand?”

“Hmm. I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

As Rage fired his urbanization cannon, Jabi leaped out of the way, drew his blade, and plunged it deep into Rage’s chest. However, Rage’s arm grabbed Jabi by the throat, his viselike grip squeezing the life from the old man, as blue particles swarmed and built up power in the City Maker.

“...Ha-ha! You truly are a fool, old man, to approach an immobilized foe! No matter how tricky you are, an ape will always be an ape. Now crumble to dust!”

Rage’s wicked smile returned as the city sprouted from Jabi’s skin. Then—*Gaboom!*—he felt a shooting pain in his back, and his eyes went wide.

“Gah! Wh-what...the...?!”

Gaboom! Gaboom!

From his shoulders to his sides, golden mushrooms shot from Rage’s body, tearing at his flesh. Rage couldn’t comprehend what was happening. Jabi simply pulled back on the dagger, revealing its shimmering golden edge.

“It’s the Rust-Eater blade. Made with Bisco’s blood. There ain’t nothin’ else like it.” Even as Rage’s finger wrapped around his neck, Jabi gave a fearless grin. “Looks like even your antidote can’t stop the god of mushrooms.”

“I-impossible... Apollo’s program is flawless! This is impossible!”

“Rest in peace, laddie.”

Jabi’s dagger sliced through Rage’s fist, freeing the old man from his grasp and leaving a golden trail. Then, displaying his otherworldly speed, he delivered an incredible flurry of slashes and carved the burning golden mark of Bonmeiten into Rage’s chest.

“Here’s your ticket to the afterlife. You deserve it.”

“...No. No... Apollo... APOLLO!!!”

Ga-boooooom!

The mycelium carved into Rage’s body took root immediately and sprouted, tearing him to shreds and ripping through the carriage roof, projecting a glorious Rust-Eater high into the night sky of Tokyo. Jabi, however, was already

too weak to escape the mushroom's tremendous blossoming power and was flung far away by the blast.

Slide... Slide...

Jabi awoke to the sensation of something dragging his own blood-soaked body across the floor.

Huh. Thought I was a goner for sure.

He yawned and reached into his pocket, pulling out his favorite pipe. From its bent shape, it was clear it had not survived the fall. Jabi gave a gleeful chuckle and put it away. Stretching his limbs, he at last turned around to the familiar sensation at his back.

"Howdy, Actagawa. Looks like another victory for us, eh?"

In response, Actagawa raised his claw in triumph... Or at least, he tried to, but it was completely missing, so instead, he released a small bubble from his mouth. Actagawa's shell was covered in so many fissures, it looked like a cracked wasteland, and steam still rose off it from the explosion. In addition to his claw, several of his legs had snapped off, too, and miniature buildings and telegraph poles sprouted from the cracks, draining the crab's vitality.

"My, look at how yours have grown! Must be because you're still a budding young crab. Mine ain't got that much life to suck on, y'see."

Jabi raised his stiffened arms to Actagawa and laughed. True enough, the buildings forming on his skin were smaller, and in fact even sported a more old-fashioned look.

"...I can't believe I let my pipe get smashed in like that. How am I supposed to enjoy one last puff now?"

As Jabi spoke, he felt his partner's heartbeat growing weak, and he knew that soon, both of them would surrender to the sweet embrace of death.

"...

"...

"Hyo-ho. Actagawa, look at that. A blazing red star..."

There in the night sky above them shone Antares, a brilliant and distant crimson.

“...My life...

“...was such a waste. All I did was shoot stuff with my bow.

“Until one day, that red star descended upon me, and made me whole again.

“He was such a scamp! Caused me no end o’ trouble...

“But...

“He saved me. Took the devil’s pitchfork right outta my hands.”

“Actagawa.

“Thanks for bein’ there for the young lad.

“Let’s pray for Bisco now.

“Pray that he’s never alone.

“Never ever, for the rest of his life...”

Actagawa gently wrapped his small claw around the old man, and so they stayed, each embracing the other with what little of their arms remained. In their slowing hearts, they thought of Bisco, and of the long journey he faced.

“I see it! There it is!”

Hope pointed out in front, gripping tightly to Pawoo’s back as she rode through the streets of Tokyo. Ahead of them was a strange sphere, floating in the night sky, looking down on the buildings and skyscrapers.

“What the hell is that?!” yelled Bisco from the sidecar.

“I believe it is the Imperial Palace,” said Hope in response. “The fact it is floating already means that Apollo is nearing the final stages of the restoration. We must hurry!”

“So that’s where we must go, then,” said Pawoo, revving the engine and speeding off in the direction of the palace.

“Pawoo! Hope!” yelled Milo. “Wait! Look at the city!”

“I’m afraid we don’t have time for sightseeing, Milo.”

“No, look! The city’s *rising up*!”

Looking ahead again, Pawoo was shocked by what she saw, and she brought the motorcycle around to a screeching halt. Just as Milo said, beyond the business district, the city itself rose into the air, like a piece of paper being folded over, until it formed a sheer vertical wall.

Bisco reacted swiftly. “Pawoo, watch out!” he shouted, and leaped off the motorcycle with her in tow, firing a King Trumpet arrow into the ground. Milo took Hope with him and joined Bisco, and the mushroom catapulted them all to safety, moments before a large square building shot from the wall and plowed through the motorcycle.



“What the hell?! Hope! What do we do?!” yelled Bisco.

“There’s only one person this flashy...!” Hope said.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! So it really was you, Hope!”

“Joy!”

Cackling laughter rang out over Tokyo, and the buildings on the wall began shifting, rearranging. The red ones moved up to form hair, the white ones became skin, and pretty soon a mosaiclike representation of a human head and upper body sprang forth from the city.

“We’re just about to apply the mushroom antidote program to the main server! You’re too late! But, you know, Hope, it’s not too late for you! Abandon those apes and return to us!”

“Never! I am a friend of humanity! If I am to return to Apollo, I’m taking these people with me!”

“Is that so? Then I suppose this is good-bye. You’re just more trash for the trash heap, Hope!”

Then several buildings stretched out of Joy, the City Wall, twisting in the air before descending on the group.

Fwish!

Fwsh!

The two Mushroom Keepers’ arrows struck the buildings head-on, and the resulting fungi tore them apart, but Joy simply shifted and rearranged the tower blocks of his urbanized body, repairing the damage immediately.

“Aaah-ha-ha-ha! Was that a flea bite? Hoo-boy, what an itch!”

“Dammit! A whole lotta nothin’! Where the hell are we supposed to shoot him?”

“Remain calm, Akaboshi,” said Pawoo, her eyes twinkling beneath her skullcap. “The flashier your opponent, the harder they’re trying to hide their weaknesses. Hope! The real one must be hiding somewhere within this wall, right? Any ideas?”

“You’re quite right. However, I’m afraid I haven’t the foggiest...” Hope went to wipe the sweat off his brow, but just as his hand touched his forehead, he had an idea. “Of course! She’s with the core! The one beneath the mark on all of our foreheads!”

“Beneath the mark?!” Milo looked back up, and sure enough, there among the urban sprawl that made up the white skin of Joy’s head, there was a single red building, positioned in the exact center of Hope’s mark.

“It’s that one!” he shouted. “Bisco, we’ll use the Mantra Bow!”

“Got it!”

The two took a deep breath in unison and leaped up on King Trumpets. In midair, they went back-to-back, and a cloud of gold and emerald spores surrounded them. Milo chanted, “*Won/shad/viviki/snew!*” and the spores coalesced, forming a shimmering longbow in Bisco’s hands.

“Get ’em, Bisco!”

“Take thiiiiis!”

Bisco fired his Mantra Bow, and the golden arrow obliterated the red building, leaving a great big Rust-Eater in the center of Joy’s forehead.

“W-waaah! Mushrooms! They’ve torn a hole in the shelter!”

Joy panicked, and for a moment he stopped his attack. He tried to move more buildings to cover up the damage, but the Rust-Eater had already taken root and prevented them from coming near.

The two Mushroom Keepers somersaulted back down onto the road. They were both panting, drenched in sweat.

“He’s in an underground shelter!” said Hope. “We’ve got to press the advantage before he regenerates!”

“And just how many of those things do you think I can fire off, huh?!”

“Milo! Akaboshi!”

The three turned to see Pawoo astride her motorcycle once more, barreling toward them at top speed, the glow of the streetlights glinting off her staff.

“I’ll finish him off! Give me a lift!”

“Pawoo!”

“C’mon, Milo, together!”

The two drew their bows and fired into the ground ahead of Pawoo. The mycelium dug deep into the asphalt road, and the earth began to shake in anticipation.

Vrooom!

Gaboom!

As she rode over, Pawoo struck the spot with her staff, and the force triggered the explosive King Trumpets beneath her wheels. The motorcycle was catapulted high up into the air, streaking through the night sky like a shooting star, as if guided toward that hole in Joy’s face, from where he had just managed to wrench the Rust-Eater free.

“...?! Wh-what is that?! No, stay back!”

Joy shrieked as the buildings making up his body started to collapse. Crumbling off the wall, they plummeted to the streets below.

“A-amazing! Pawoo’s in! She actually made it!”

“Get back, dumbass!”

Bisco pulled Hope back just as a cluster of buildings shattered against the ground. The pixel art making up Joy’s face disappeared entirely, and the whole wall gently fell back ninety degrees to its original position.

“Hope...look at that!” said Milo, pointing. Where everything else had fallen away, one long line of buildings remained, all stopped at different heights, like a staircase leading up to the floating sphere of the Imperial Palace. The palace glowed with an almost heavenly white light as it hung in the night sky, waiting.

“He wants us to come in.”

“Works for me,” said Bisco, cracking his neck. “We’ve come a long way to leave without givin’ Apollo a souvenir or two.”

“B-but shouldn’t we go help Pawoo first?” asked Hope. “She’s over in the

shelter, fighting the real Joy as we speak!”

“Ain’t you been payin’ attention? We ain’t got time for that. That’s why she had to distract that guy in the first place. Besides, she don’t want or need our help. If we show up, she’ll break *our* necks after she’s done with his.”

Bisco set off running toward the long staircase, and Milo grabbed Hope and followed.

“Aaah! Bisco! Milo, are you okay with this? That’s Bisco’s wife! Your sister!”

“No one can beat Pawoo one-on-one, indoors. Don’t worry.” Milo flashed a reassuring smile and hastened his feet in pursuit of his partner. “Jabi, Actagawa, and Pawoo...they all trust us to finish the job. They’re the bow that projects us forward. That’s why we have to hit the target, Hope. We’re their arrow...”

Hope was about to protest when he saw the fragile eyes hiding behind Milo’s smile. He looked ahead at Bisco. They both wanted to save her. Of course they did. But to do so would defy the love she shared with them. It was something beyond the expression of mere words, but Hope felt it. He felt the sorrow that mired their minds, even as they pressed on with determination on their faces. And Hope felt ashamed that he had not seen it and squeezed his eyes, as if to banish the careless words he had spoken. When he opened them again, they were free of anguish, clear and resolute.

“I understand. Then let us go! I will place my life in your hands as well!”

Smoke filled the underground shelter, and Pawoo's motorcycle lay embedded in the ground. Around the room lay the scattered remains of what was once rather intricate machinery, now battered into scrap by her staff.

Joy sat on his knees, gazing down at the broken wreckage of his control device.

"...My City Wall program..."

"An impressive magic trick, but with the source destroyed, you're nothing." Pawoo swung her staff menacingly, pointing it at Joy while casting him an unimpressed leer. "I don't want to have to strike down an unresisting foe. Stand and fight if you can."

"...How are you so full of yourself? You only broke one of my toys, that's all!"

Joy looked back up at Pawoo, and his bright-red eyes flared.

"Launch:City:Snake!"

He swung his right arm, and from his palm erupted a long chain of small buildings that he gripped in his hand like a whip, scattering blue particles as it coiled at his feet.

"I am Joy, Apollo's avatar! Do not think yourself my equal, monkey!"

...I don't think I'll be winning this one.

Though she didn't let it show, Pawoo could already see that her chances were slim. Even if she was more skilled and physically stronger than her opponent, it was going to be nigh impossible for her to damage Joy when he could reform his body at will.

Perhaps I can take advantage of his short temper...

"I'm going to flay that pretty little skin of yours off the bone," Joy taunted.

“Just like you did to my toy!”

“Ooh, tough words for someone who spent the entire battle hiding in his basement,” said Pawoo with a chuckle. “If you want to shut me up, you’ll have to tear out my throat.”

“Oh, I think I’ll do just that!”

Joy flew toward her, swinging his whip, and Pawoo intercepted it with her staff. Sparks flew as metal collided with metal, and for a few exchanges it looked as though the two were equal. However, the flexible nature of Joy’s weapon meant that it was capable of curling around Pawoo’s staff and raking deep scratches into her skin.

“...! Grhhh!”

“You moron. How are you gonna defend against the City Snake with that lousy stick of yours? C’mon, monkey, let me hear you scream! Ook! Ook!”

Joy’s weapon acted unlike anything Pawoo had ever faced. It bent as though it had a mind of its own, and though she fought back valiantly, soon she was coated in cuts, spraying blood with every strike.

“Come on! Scream for me! Beg for death!”

“Grh! Gwraah!”

“Take this!”

Finally, Joy’s whip of buildings struck a solid blow, leaving a deadly gash across her shoulder as deep as if it had been cut by a knife. However, even through the searing pain, Pawoo landed skillfully and got back to her feet, leaning on her staff for support. Her warm blood pooled at her feet, and in her wounds, small buildings had already begun to grow.

And yet, she clenched her teeth, took a deep breath, and shot Joy another murderous glare. The deep-blue light in her eyes had not faded, even for an instant.

“What the hell is wrong with you, lady?” Joy’s arm hung weakly by his side. He, too, had exhausted much of his energy in the fight, and his breathing was now heavy and labored. “You can’t turn off your pain receptors, and yet you

haven't given me one scream! You're so boring!"

Pawoo had taken dozens of blows so severe that the pain from just one would have killed an ordinary man in an instant. Joy was not only shocked but starting to feel genuine fear.

"Heh. Heh-heh-heh. Is pain the only way you know to make a woman scream?"

"...What?"

"...Joy. What a disappointing name." Pawoo smirked through bloodied lips. "The only one you're capable of bringing joy to is yourself. And I'm sure Apollo is no better."

"How dare you...? How dare you mock Apollo?!"

It seemed the slight against his creator spurred Joy to an even greater fury. The blue particles surged as he lashed his whip and flew toward his battered foe. Swinging his weapon high above his head, he was just about to finish Pawoo off, when...

...Now!

Time slowed to a crawl as Pawoo stared down the killing blow. At the most opportune moment, her indigo eyes flickered. She raised her staff to receive the blow and, once the whip wrapped around her staff, launched it like a javelin into the shelter's far wall. As Joy was dragged off-balance by his own weapon, Pawoo pulled something small and sharp from her pocket and tackled him with all her might, driving it into his chest.

Joy staggered back and fell on the staff, impaling himself.

"Ghblh!"

He let out a choked cry, and white particles spilled from his mouth like blood. Pawoo looked up at his face and grinned, leaping back while leaving the object she stabbed him with in place.

"So quick to anger. You should have just left me to rot."

"...You took me by surprise, that's all! This isn't over!" Joy's body creaked as he stepped forward, pulling himself off the staff. "You can't win! My body is

made of Apollo Particles! Unlike you monkeys, I won't die, no matter how many times you—"

Gaboom!

A golden mushroom, blazing like the sun, burst from Joy's neck, cutting him off. Joy was only able to gurgle a cry of surprise as he hurried to pluck it out.

"That's the Rust-Eater vaccine. The product of my brother's knowledge and hard work."

The object sticking out of Joy's chest was a syringe, filled with the medicine that Milo had created from Bisco's blood. The golden liquid flowed into Joy's body, gorging itself on the Apollo Particles.

"Careful. Pull it out too quickly and an even bigger one might spring up. Not that that won't happen anyway."

"N-no... I can't lose... Not to apes!"

"Heh. I guess we made a monkey out of you."

"Aaaaughhh! Shut up! Shut uuup!"

Mushrooms burst from his body one after the other, yet still Joy staggered forward, letting the staff clatter to the floor. He raised the City Snake whip in one hand, and...

...Splat!

The whip came down on Pawoo's skullcap. The half of her face once marred by the Rust was now slick with blood. But she didn't so much as blink as the whip tore at her flesh. She stared right back, with a determination that could kill.

"N-no...! That's impossible...!"

"Now it's my turn to make you cry."

Pawoo stepped down on the tip of her staff, flipping it into the air and catching it in her hands.

Fwoom! Fwoom!

A cross-shaped pair of slices tore Joy's body wide open. His insides leaked

golden radiance, bathing the room in a brilliant glow.

“Waaah! Aaah...! Aaaaaah—!”

Gaboom!

Joy’s body exploded with such violent force that it knocked the staff from Pawoo’s hands and sent her flying across the room. She collided with the far wall and crumpled.

“...Ha! Ha-ha...! Ha-ha-ha! Did you see that?! I won!”

Unable to so much as lift a finger, she just laughed with all the glee of a little girl. Before her, the Rust-Eater shook the very earth in anticipation of its monstrous growth. Pawoo looked at it, at the wounds all over her body, and at the city growing within them, and yet she smiled and gently closed her eyes.

I have...no regrets.

There’s nothing else I want.

Because I lived like the wind...

...and died for their sake.

Oh, but...

I suppose there is one thing.

When I die, I would like whatever god there is to turn me into a shield...

...and use me to protect those two.

Please...

...protect them both...!

Bagoom!

The Rust-Eater obliterated the cellar and rose into the night sky, glorious and golden, like a beacon guiding the two boys’ way.

“We made it! The server room should be just through here!”

“Through here, you say...?” asked Bisco dubiously. Having finally ascended the staircase of buildings, he, Milo, and Hope came face-to-face with the polished, lustrous surface of the spherical structure floating above Tokyo. There, they paused. “And how the hell are we meant to get inside?!”

“Milo, put me down. Both of you, step back!”

Hope approached the gently glowing surface of the sphere and placed his hand to it. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, and pink particles surrounded him, sending his braids aflutter.

“Erase:Wall:Protect!”

At Hope’s incantation, a pink crack opened up in the wall.

“Bisco!” he said.

“Right!” Bisco replied, and he fired an arrow into the crevice. With a *Gaboom!* the wall was blown apart, revealing the inky darkness within.

“Apollo should be in here somewhere...,” said Hope, peering inside, when suddenly, he was engulfed by a stream of deep-blue particles. “Wh-whah?!”

“Hope!”

What had appeared to be nothing but darkness was in fact thousands of tightly packed indigo particles, which now poured outward like an avalanche. Then, as if possessing a will of their own, the particles swallowed all three of them and dragged them into the sphere with a *Whoosh!*

Smack!

“Owww! Wh-what’s going on?”

“Bisco! You didn’t need to slap him! That’s Tirol’s face, you know!”

“I woke him up, didn’t I? No need to bust my balls over it.”

Bisco swiveled Hope around and pointed him forward. “This ain’t the time to be nappin’, Hope. Is that the thing we’re after? What’re we supposed to do with it?!”

“...! My...!”

They found themselves in a completely black, hemispherical room. Only an intermittent green light coming from the center of the room occasionally illuminated their surroundings. Floating there was an enormous green cube, suspended in a cylindrical glass tank, whose surface constantly shifted, and which emitted a strange buzzing noise, like flying mosquitoes.

“That’s it!” said Hope excitedly, squinting a little at the intense green light. “That’s the server! On there is a perfect backup of Japan, taken just before the fall, on April 9, 2028!” He turned to Bisco. “Leave it to me! You two locate Apollo, and—”

“But there’s something I want to show you.”

A voice from behind the tank froze the room. The three turned and took up combat positions, and there they saw a man with gleaming red eyes and billowing red hair, wearing a lab coat.

How long has he been standing there...?!

Bisco, we can’t let our guards down!

Apollo slowly stepped out of the darkness and toward the two boys. His voice was quiet, subdued.

“There’s no one left to show,” he said. “You destroyed them all...Rage...and Joy.”

“Yeah, sounds rough,” retorted Bisco as though it were none of his concern. “But no point puttin’ on a show if there ain’t nobody watchin’. Let’s just get this over with.”

“Oh, but there is somebody watching. You. That is why I brought you here.”

Apollo spoke without a shred of emotion, his voice like ice as he raised his arm in the green glow of the server room. As he did, the blackness that

surrounded them receded, as though it were little more than ink on the surface of a glass ball. Now the dome was completely transparent, and the four hung in Tokyo's dark night, looking down at the city below.

"Never in my wildest predictions did I foresee the spontaneous emergence of a new particle that would oppose the restoration." Apollo looked over at Hope, into the eyes of his own clone. "However, the antidote program is now complete, and as we speak, I am deploying it to the server. Very soon now, this...this false Japan will be wiped away and be replaced by a clean slate: the Japan of 2028."

"What...?!" yelled Bisco.

"I wanted to offer you a glimpse of what will be. Starting with poor old Tokyo here."

The boys' adventure so far had left the city of Tokyo completely devastated. Half of the city lay crushed beneath Joy's wall. Apollo waved his hand and whispered:

"Launch:City:Maker."

"...?! Whoa!"

The entire city rumbled and quaked, then disintegrated into tiny particles before their very eyes. Those particles rearranged themselves, re-forming into a brand-new Tokyo.

"H-he's recreating it all!" said Milo in amazement as he watched the run-down Tokyo Station become good as new, the buildings squashed flat by Joy's wall rising once more from the ground.

Looking at the pristine, finely engineered buildings, it was easy to believe Apollo's claim of victory over the mushrooms. Even Bisco and Milo could see that the integrity of their construction was far beyond anything they had already witnessed.

"...It's beautiful. Yes. This is the way it's meant to be..." Apollo breathed a sigh of relief as he surveyed his new domain. "Hope, do you understand me now? Give up on your futile dream of saving humanity. Those two standing beside you... *Why, they never had any right to exist in the first place.* Rejoin me, Hope.

It's not too late."



“...How ironic, Apollo!”

“...?”

“It’s because of you I realized...that dream is brighter now than ever before! I can even see it shining, right behind you!”

At Hope’s indomitable smile, Apollo wheeled around to see a golden mushroom towering from the city, brilliant as the sun. Around its base, the buildings had failed to regenerate, and they lay in a glitched, disordered mess.

“Th-the Rust-Eater...!”

“What happened to your mushroom antidote program, Apollo?” Hope smiled. His eyes shot open, and the mark on his forehead glowed. “That right there is a truer representation of life than you could ever hope to create! *That* is the power of evolution, capable of surpassing even our wildest dreams! While we’ve been standing still, they’ve been moving forward. And you would stand in their way? Replace them with the ghosts of the past?”

“...Hope... You stupid...”

“*They’re* the future of humanity, Apollo, not us! Why can’t you see that?!”

Even Bisco and Milo were surprised at Hope’s rare outburst of anger. Apollo, however, quietly gnashed his teeth and stared cold daggers into his heart.

“...I was once plagued by emotion, as you are now.”

Then, slowly, he raised his arm.

“...But I cut out that plague. And now, I shall do the same to you. This time, for good. Then no one will be able to stand in my way.”

“Hope! Run!”

“Launch:City:Maker...”

Thud! Thud!

The two Mushroom Keepers stepped in to defend Hope, and their arrows impaled their mark. However, thanks to Apollo’s anti-mushroom program, they didn’t even slow him down.

“...Shot.”

“Dammit!”

As the cube left Apollo’s palm, Bisco fired a King Trumpet into the ground, deflecting it upward. However, the cube warped around on a curved trajectory and flew into Hope’s side.

“Gaaah!”

“Hope!!”

Milo stretched out his hand, but Hope was torn from him and lifted over to where Apollo stood. The blue cube then split into four parts and bound Tirol’s arms and legs, crucifying her in midair.

“Milo! We gotta use the Mantra Bow!”

“Got it!”

Without even looking at the bow forming in Bisco’s hands, which had torn him apart once before, Apollo walked over to Hope.

“...My role in this...is over...Apollo. I brought them...all this way. You’d better make sure...you finish me off...because...you’re not going to get...another chance.”

“Hope...you were far superior to Joy and Rage in every way.”

“...”

“So tell me. Why did you betray me...? Why were you unable to stand by my side?”

“...Be...cause...”

Tears streamed from Hope’s red eyes as Apollo brought his arm close, his whole body wreathed in blue particles. As his glowing hand neared the mark on Tirol’s forehead, a spinning red cube emerged from her skin.

“...Because I loved you...Apollo. I loved you...”

“...Good-bye, Hope.”

“Get the hell away from him!!”

Bisco unleashed his solar arrow in a burst of fiery sparks, but Apollo merely raised a single hand. The Rust-Eater crashed against Apollo's particles, making the very air in the room tremble.

"I must admit," he said, "your power is considerable." The impact fluttered his hair, but Apollo's expression was as hard as stone. "Unfortunately, it is only an ant's power, fleeting and fickle. I fail to see why Hope was so taken by it. Compared to the power of civilization, wielded by actual humans, it is very little. Very little indeed."

With a flick of Apollo's wrist, Bisco's mighty arrow was deflected up into the ceiling, where it erupted into a cluster of Rust-Eater mushrooms.

"...H-how...?"

"That bastard...he took it head-on!"

The two boys fell to their knees in despair. Dislodged by the blast, a small red cube tumbled to the ground before them.

"Milo...are you there?"

"Hope!"

Milo scrambled to pick up the cube, glowing with a soft red light, and brought it to his eyes. However, it quickly fell apart, becoming nothing more than scarlet particles dancing in the air.

"No... You can't... Don't leave us, Hope!"

"You mustn't give up, Milo. Humanity never gives up. Even when they're brought to the brink of despair, they always climb back out...just like the sun rising over the horizon to banish the night..."

"Hope...!"

"I have very little power left...but it is yours, Milo. I trust you. I trust your light to show us the way forward!"

"Hope! Wait—!"

But the last of the red cube shattered like glass into hundreds of tiny fragments. Upon coming into contact with Milo, they turned green and sank

into his skin.

“Hope...”

His warmth still lingered on Milo’s palm, and he clenched his fist. His eyes downcast, he muttered to himself:

“You got it, Hope.”

Suddenly, a blast of wind emanated from his body. The Rust-Eater spores that lay dormant within Milo’s blood surged out of him. His hair, flapping in the wind, regained an emerald hue. And as he opened his eyes, a blazing green mark appeared on his forehead, the same as Hope’s.

“...You’ve inherited Hope’s access rights?” muttered Apollo, his steely gaze tinged with the slightest surprise. “But how? You’re just a monkey...”

“Bisco, let’s go!”

“Right!”

The two boys took off like a storm, left and right, firing arrows into Apollo from all angles. However, the mushroom antidote programmed into him was far stronger than the one applied to the city, and it prevented even the Rust-Eaters from taking root.

“I already told you, it’s pointless. Do you not understa—? *Rhh?!?*”

Gaboom! A King Trumpet at Apollo’s feet launched him high into the air, colliding with the transparent ceiling.

“Wh...at...?!?”

“Milo, now!” shouted Bisco.

“Won/shad/gahnahi/snew! (Crush target with large mass!)”

Milo spoke his mantra, and the mark on his forehead glowed even brighter, strengthening it. He conjured up an enormous bell above Apollo as he fell, and brought it down, slamming Apollo into the ground.

“You fools...!”

Apollo’s enraged yell went unheard as the bell struck the ground, letting out a loud gong-like noise and trapping his left arm, cutting it off. Milo leaped back to

his partner's side and watched as cracks appeared all across the bell's surface.

"It's no good," he said through gritted teeth. "It's not damaging him at all! If the Rust-Eaters don't work, what are we supposed to...?"

"Hey. Why'd you make it a bell?" asked Bisco. "It looks kinda dumb."

"Well, that's just what Kelshinha... Hey! Stop distracting me! I'm trying to think!"

Apollo finally punched through the huge bell, and the whole thing vanished into a cloud of green spores. He looked impassively at his severed shoulder and chanted a program.

"Launch:City:Maker."

Before he even finished speaking, a cluster of buildings sprouted from the wound, twisting together, forming an arm, a wrist, a hand, even regenerating Apollo's white lab coat.

"Ha!" scoffed Bisco. "These guys're like lizards! You cut off a limb, and they grow it right back!"

"...*City Maker*..." Milo suddenly looked up, and the mark on his forehead glowed. "...That's it! I just have to intercept the commands...!"

"I think I have let you live long enough. I wasn't going to kill you..." Apollo raised his arms, clad in blue particles, and his bright-red eyes stared into Bisco's. "...But the Rust-Eater is too powerful to ignore. Just deflecting that arrow of yours took over half my memory. There's no telling what kinds of bugs you are capable of introducing into my new world."

"You're soundin' pretty respectful all of a sudden, Professor Apollo."

"I told you. It is proper manners to acknowledge your opponent's strength."

Bisco stepped toward him, accepting Apollo's challenge. Then he turned back to Milo one last time and whispered:

"I'll buy you forty seconds. That enough?"

"You think I need that many? I'll do it in twenty."

"Ha! That's the spirit!"

Boom! Bisco and Apollo rushed forward at incredible speed, two streaks, one a blazing orange, the other the dark blue of night. Two sweeping kicks cut through the air toward each other, clashing with such force that it sent a shock wave throughout the room.

“You’ve got a pretty good kick for an egghead!” mocked Bisco.

“I have replicated your combat data. There is no way you can win when I know your every move.”

“Oh yeah? Well, you know what they say: *Every three seconds, a man...* Hmm?”

“It’s *In three days, a young man is born anew*, you utter fool.”

“Whatever. The point is, I’m always learnin’ new tricks!”

Bisco spun around and flung his cloak over Apollo’s eyes, drawing his blade in one clean motion and slashing at his blinded foe. Apollo, however, showing no lack of situational awareness whatsoever, generated a glowing blue knife in his hand and parried Bisco’s strike deftly.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Their bodies were now just two flashes of orange and blue, and every clash of blades or legs threw off multicolored sparks. With each passing second, Bisco’s attacks grew faster and faster, and the spores flooded from his body with ever greater intensity.

“It’s no use! I’ve downloaded all your moves! I don’t even have to think!”

“Well, how ’bout that?! Ain’t nobody been able to keep up with me this far, Apollo!”

“H-he’s still going! He’s still getting faster!”

The faster Bisco got, the more resources Apollo had to allocate to defending against his blazing-fast moves, without any chance to counterattack. But then...

...Gaboom!

“...Rhhh!”

A red-hot mushroom burst from Bisco’s neck, and his attacks slowed. It was

only for an instant, but that small amount of time was all Apollo needed to feel confident in his victory.

“You’re overheating, Bisco! You’re a tough little ape, I’ll give you that, but even you can’t handle that amount of spores! You’re only going to kill yourself without me having to lift a finger!”

“You think that’s gonna stop me?!”

Boom! Boom! Rust-Eaters sprang from Bisco’s flesh one after the other, and his entire body glowed until it looked all but certain that an explosion was imminent.

That fool...! He’s going to blow himself up, securing my victory!

“...Now!”

“...?!”

At last, Bisco drew his bow and landed upside down on the ceiling before firing a shot at his feet.

Gaboom!

The Rust-Eater’s explosive growth was far superior to even Bisco’s King Trumpets. It launched him down like a lightning bolt, planting his foot in Apollo’s chest.

“I-impossible... I couldn’t block!”

“Of course you couldn’t,” sneered Bisco, “‘cause I just made that move up!”

Ker-rash!

Bisco’s meteoric landing cracked the ground and blew a hole in Apollo’s torso.

I...must regenerate...

As he began a chant, Apollo suddenly coughed up white particles, and in that moment of hesitation, Milo spoke.

“Won/viviki/nagira/city/maker/snew!”

The green cube flew from Milo’s hand and over to his partner, where it re-formed into an emerald arrow, glinting in Bisco’s radiant light.

“Haven’t you learned your lesson, fools?!” said Apollo. “Your arrows don’t work on me!”

“Mine and Milo’s arrows can do anything!”

Bisco leaped back as he unleashed his shot, and Milo’s emerald arrow landed deep in Apollo’s chest, shattering the barrier he projected as though it were made of nothing more than tracing paper.

“Khhh...!”

Apollo braced himself for the explosion, but still no mushroom came. Slowly, the grin returned to his face.

“A disappointing bluff. If that is all, then I shall end this. **Launch:City:Maker!**”

At Apollo’s command, the blue particles coalesced in his arm once more.

“Hey, Milo!” shouted Bisco. “What’s with that arrow you gave me? It didn’t do shit!”

“Keep watching!”

“...What...? I can’t focus the particles...?!”

Apollo looked down at his arm, but the blue particles refused to bend to his will, instead dispersing into thin air.

“What is happening? **Launch:City:Repair... Launch:City:Maker!**”

Suddenly, there was a *Vwm!* and a small rectangular window appeared, hovering in midair before his eyes. It read, in bright flashing text:

“Due to a system modification, access to the City:Maker program has been restricted. Error Code: a20280409.”

“My access has been restricted?! Impossible! I am the greatest authority in the system!”

“Vwm!”

“That’s true. According to *your* code, at least.”

“Vwm! Vwm!”

“What are you...?”

“Vwm! Vwm! Vwm! Vwm!”

One by one, the error windows piled up, spinning around Apollo, before all at once, they stabbed into him.

“Gblaaah!”

“That Anti-City arrow was made by mantra. Mantra is a *new* code that Hope granted us. A code created to be greater than your own!”

The rectangular windows that impaled Apollo like a pincushion started sucking the blue particles from his body, neutralizing the mushroom antidote program, before shattering into pieces. It was then that Apollo felt the mycelium of the Rust-Eater spreading across the open hole in his body.

“Hope...created a new code? Disguised it as religion? Kept it hidden from me all this time... For this? All for a single arrow?!”

“Hey, what are you guys talkin’ about anyway?” interrupted Bisco. “Explain it in a way I’ll understand.”

“Basically, our mantra is stronger than Apollo’s worn-out magic.”

“Huh.”

Apollo stood hunched, panting. He glowered up at Milo.

“I cannot lose... Not to a false program... Not to a false humanity...”

“He says we’re not real, Bisco. What do you think about that?”

“Does it matter?” Bisco seemed unfazed, plucking a Rust-Eater from his shoulder. “Either way, he’s the one who’s gonna die, and we’re the ones who’re gonna live.”

“You...monkeys!”

With the last of his strength, Apollo wrenched the arrow free from his chest. His steely gaze turned to one of pure rage, and the particles flooded from his arms.

“Heh. Now, maybe if you’d shown that side of you from the beginning...”

“...Who knows?!”

Back-to-back, the two fired their mushroom arrows, piercing Apollo's heart and brain. Soon, a bright orange glow burst from his eyes, mouth, and ears.

Gaboom! Gaboom! Gaboom!

The Rust-Eater explosion tore the man to pieces, fluttering Bisco's and Milo's cloaks. They stared for a while at the aftermath.

"...Is that it? Doesn't really feel like we won..."

"We still have to stop the server. I need to use Hope's clearance to get in there and—"

Suddenly, the huge green cube in the tank stirred to life, emitting a rumble that shook the entire room. The glass surrounding it cracked before shattering completely.

"Euuuh. Euh. Euuuuhh."

The surface of the cube roiled and churned, and a horde of screaming human faces appeared on the exterior, crying out with vengeful wails. In an instant, it had gone from an orderly, geometric shape to something more resembling a restless ghost. Several clusters of particles rose from its body like will-o'-the-wisps and floated over to the fallen Apollo.

"It's trying to bring back Apollo!" shouted Milo. "There's not enough of Hope's power left to defeat him again!"

"Then you go on ahead. I'll hold him off."

"Bisco, no!"

"You're the only one who can go inside that thing anyway." Bisco cracked his neck and watched as the Rust-Eaters covering Apollo's corpse slowly turned into buildings and got retracted inside Apollo's body. "It's just tryin' to distract us. You get in there and shut that thing down."

"Bisco, you won't let him beat you, right?"

"Not a chance. And you're plannin' on coming back, right?"

"Of course!"

"Ha!"

Bisco laughed, and the fiery spores appeared all over his body once again.

“Get going already.” He didn’t have to say it for his partner to understand. Milo turned and dashed off toward the server, now a host of the damned. But before he got there, he turned around.

“...Bisco!”

He looked back at his partner, his eyes trembling with tears. Together, the two had shrugged off the threat of death so many times, but for once, Milo felt he might actually have to say good-bye.

It had been a long time since Milo had looked so hopeless. Bisco put away his bow, walked over to his partner, and grabbed the back of his emerald hair, bringing him in for a hug.

“ ...”

“ ...”

“ ...”

“ ...”

“Is that enough?”

“...Just...four more seconds.”

“ ...”

“...All right, I’m ready.”

“Good luck!”

Bisco let Milo go and shot him his usual roguish grin. Then he swept Milo up in his arms, leaped into the air, and tossed him over toward the glowing green server.

“Off you go, Milo! Go save humanity!”

“This isn’t good-bye, Bisco! I’ll be back!”

The mark on Milo’s forehead glowed, and he placed his hand up to the server. He watched as blue particles coalesced on its undulating surface, and he frowned.

“Hope... Lend me your strength!” he said, his azure eyes gleaming. He closed them and muttered a mantra under his breath. As he did, the swarm of particles receded, and a hole opened up in the server. Milo was sucked inside it and disappeared.

“...All right, then,” said Bisco with a smile, and squared up with Apollo’s corpse, still picking itself up off the floor. The cluster of Rust-Eaters that marked his end had already vanished, and the hole in his chest had healed over, as the malicious energy continued to flow from the server and into him.

“Euuuh. Euuh. Bisco. Euuuuh.”

The particles surrounding him were now such a deep, dark blue, like the bottom of the ocean, that they were almost completely black. He shuffled unsteadily, and it was only his crimson hair and eyes that still resembled the old Apollo at all.

“...You’re not Apollo,” said Bisco. “What have you done with him?”

“Bisco. Bisco. Euuh. Scary. Must delete. If we don’t delete, we die. Bisco. Delete it. Delete it. Delete Bisco.”

It’s like a whole buncha evil spirits in one body..., thought Bisco. While Apollo’s form was human enough, his voice was not his own but those of men, women, and children all steeped in fear and hostility toward Bisco.

“Apollo. Fight. Delete him. You must kill him...”

“Urgh... Argh... Aaaargh!”

“Apollo!”

“They’re scared of you...! The year 2028...is scared of you!” For a fleeting moment, Apollo’s own voice returned, as if through strenuous effort. “I’ll kill you...Bisco...and bring back 2028! Even if it means I must die to do so!”

“You ghosts of the past got some real nerve, showin’ up here three hundred years later like you own the place!” Bisco leered at Apollo with his same invincible smile. Then *Fwoom!* Like a flame igniting, a shroud of orange spores enveloped him. “The present belongs to me. The past should stay buried!”

“I’ll see you removed from this world, Biscooo!”

The two men, one of light and one of darkness, flew toward each other and clashed in front of the rapidly shifting server, into which Milo had disappeared.

"I'm scared." "It's horrible."

"It hurts." "I'm scared."

"I'm scared." "It's not faaaair!"

Milo was falling down a bottomless chasm, filled with an unimaginable amount of trapped souls. It was a torrent of thoughts violent enough to crack the mind of any normal person, but Milo had to bear it.

"No! I will return! For everyone...for Bisco!"

"Milo! You mustn't close your eyes! This is the protection layer! Find the key!"

"...Hope?!"

Suddenly, at Milo's side appeared the form of the jellyfish girl, Tirol. But her red eyes and serious expression told him it was Hope inside.

"I'll protect you from their pain," he said. "You must find the pass! The key!"

"A key...? Somewhere in this big hole?"

"We are within the program, Milo. Don't trust your eyes. Remember, Apollo is a slave to his etiquette, above all things! He must have left you a way to find it!"

"...Okay, Hope, I'll try!"

"And hurry! I can't hold them off for long!"

With the mental assault lifted, Milo could think clearly once more. He sharpened his Mushroom Keeper senses and peered into the inky blackness. All around him were vertical walls that seemed to go up forever, devoid of any sign of life. Even if he could spot the key, at the speed he was going, it was very unlikely he'd be able to get to it before it disappeared out of sight forever.

"...Bother!" said Hope. "It could be anywhere! We might even have fallen past it!"

"No," replied Milo. "Apollo wouldn't pull such tricks. He'd much sooner not leave us a key at all."

“Milo, do you know something?!”

“I have a hunch. Sorry if it doesn’t work out, okay?”

Milo drew the lizard-claw knife at his waist.

This hole is a hint. I can’t find the key because I already have it. And if I already have it, that means...

Without hesitation, he turned the knife on himself and plunged it deep into his chest. With surgical precision, he sliced open his rib cage.

“Milo! Wh-what on earth are you doing?!”

“It’s okay—it doesn’t hurt. We really are in a program, just like you said.”

“E-even so...!”

Hope was staggered by Milo’s exceptional force of will. The doctor boy scrounged around inside his own chest cavity, eventually pulling out a small glowing object.

“Found it.”

“Wow!”

“What is it...? A ring?”

There, in Milo’s hand, was a brilliant platinum ring, inset with an emerald gem. Simple, yet beautiful.

“This can’t be the key. Maybe it’s in my stomach.”

“No! That’s it! That’s...the key,” said Hope, looking over Milo’s shoulder. He picked it up and held it to his chest, breathing a sigh of relief. Then, as the two of them still continued to fall, he opened his eyes and turned to Milo.

“Even I don’t know what you’ll find beyond here. Are you ready?”

“Aren’t you coming with me, Hope?”

“You’re strong enough to face this trial alone, Milo. I’ll get you to her... You take care of the rest!”

Hope placed the ring on Milo’s finger, and the pair were engulfed in blinding light. Once again, Milo was thrown from his world and into another.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

The battle between the sun and the night continued. Where their blades clashed, a shower of sparks lit up the room. Bisco's burning incandescence was matched only by the all-consuming darkness of those from the year 2028. Apollo's jet-black blade parried Bisco's at lightning speed, and with a counter-slice, he tore a gash across Bisco's chest.

"Rrrghh?!" Bisco frowned as the hot blood rushed from him like a volcanic eruption.

"Greuuuuh!"

Apollo was now the embodiment of night, a vessel for the hate of those lost souls. He launched a spinning kick, Bisco's very own signature move, at a far greater speed than even its creator was capable of. It landed deep in Bisco's stomach before he could recover from the previous slash and propelled him backward into the far wall.

"Delete. Delete. Delete. Delete him. Delete Bisco."

"BISCOOO!"

Apollo let out a bestial roar and flew toward Bisco, when...

...*Pchoo!* Bisco's arrow ripped through the air and sank into Apollo's shoulder. The arrow's sheer momentum sent him spinning, collapsing to the ground and writhing in pain.

"You fool... Bisco... You still haven't learned..."

Bisco watched, blood streaming from his mouth, as Apollo gripped the arrow, and he slowly transformed it into his own midnight-blue.

That was the strongest arrow I had. If that doesn't work, then...

Bisco could already tell from their fight so far that the Apollo before him, possessed by darkness, held a power far beyond any human's. Still, he laughed as the blood left him, and his jade eyes flickered even brighter.

"You sure like lettin' your pawn do all the hard work. How many people were there in 2028? You all just sittin' back to watch?"

“Bisco, cease your blasphemy! You mock the dead!”

“If you can’t take the heat, then go back to your graves. No wonder you guys died off.”

“Euuuuh. Euuuuuh! EUUUUHHH!”

The spirits raged, and the darkness surrounding Apollo grew darker than ever before. Just at that moment...

“Aaaah! Aaaaah! Aaaaah!”

...the server suddenly started emitting a high-pitched shriek. Apollo turned his eyes for just a second, shocked.

“Impossible! The protection layer!”

From seeing the astonishment on Apollo’s face, Bisco guessed that his partner was wreaking havoc inside the server, even if he didn’t exactly know what that meant.

“Waaah. Something’s inside. Get it out. Get it out.”

“Get it out, Apollo. There’s something inside. I can feel it wriggling around.”

“I’ll kill you!”

Apollo leaped toward the server, but Bisco shot him out of the air, sending him flying back down to the ground.

“Looks like you didn’t just get way stronger; you got way stupider, too, huh?” Bisco grinned and nocked another arrow to his red-hot bow. “I ain’t lettin’ you go anywhere. If you wanna go after Milo, you’re gonna have to go through me.”

“Bis...cooo...”

Apollo looked like the night sky itself, Bisco’s arrows having left dozens of blazing pinpricks in his jet-black skin. Wrenching the last one free, he let the vengeful spirits wash over him once more, and in his hands appeared an ebony bow modeled after Bisco’s ultimate move.

“I have replicated...all your techniques. There is...no escape...for you now.”

“You’d better hurry. While you’re flapping your gums, Milo’s in there fucking shit up.”

“Time to die, Bisco!”

The sound of Apollo’s bow was like a tank cannon. Bisco’s solar arrow split the air, and the two collided in the center. A shock wave swept across the room, and Bisco was just able to leap out of its path as Apollo’s midnight arrow split his own in two and embedded itself in the wall.

Gaboom!

The spot where the arrow struck exploded just like Bisco’s mushrooms, but into a cluster of buildings, traffic lights, and telegraph poles. The force launched Bisco upward, and he collided with the ceiling, coughing up blood. Then a second arrow came, just narrowly missing him but setting off a second explosion of urbanization that sent Bisco crashing down into the ground with a sickening crunch. A sharp pain rushed through Bisco as he felt every bone in his body snap at once.

That bastard...! How come his work and mine don’t...? Eh?

“We win. We win. We win. We win.”

“Kill him. Delete him. Kill him.”

Apollo’s spectral bow grew more and more twisted by the second, and he nocked a final jet-black arrow. Bisco slowly dragged himself to his feet, battered and bloodied, and just stared down his fate, his gaze filled with the burning power of life.

The corridor was sterile and white. The scent of pharmaceuticals hung in the air, and the *Clack-Clack* of high heels rang down the hallway. Milo stopped in front of a door that looked as if it didn't see much use. He flashed a mischievous grin and burst into the room.

"Boo!"

"Whaaah?!"

The person within fell out of his chair in shock. Milo laughed and extended a hand to help the young man up.

"O-ow...", the man on the floor groaned. "You could at least knock... Oh, it's you, Nekoyanagi."

"I told you not to call me that," replied Milo. "It's such a mouthful! Domino's fine."

"...O-okay, Domino..."

"You were up all night again, weren't you, Akaboshi? You should see the bags under your eyes. They're insane!"

Then Milo leaned over and peered into the man's face. Red hair and red eyes. There was no doubt about it; this man was the very same Apollo with whom Milo and his partner had been locked in a mortal struggle just a few minutes earlier. But at the same time, he looked different somehow. Younger, certainly, but also his nervousness, plain to see on his face, was a far cry from the ruthless and emotionless Apollo whom Milo had met.

"My god, look at your trash can! It's full of Red Bull cans! Have you been drinking all these? You'll have a heart attack!"

"Hey...Domino... Don't look through my..."

"So?" said Milo, swiveling around and swishing his long sky-blue hair. "You

didn't pull an all-nighter for nothing, right? The look on your face tells me you're in a good mood. Bags aside, of course."

"...!" Apollo's face immediately brightened. "You want to...see my research?"

"Don't I always? Don't act so surprised."

"Look at this, Domino!" Apollo turned to a cylindrical glass tank containing a floating cube, its surface constantly shifting.

"It looks just like before. Did something happen?"

"Okay, keep looking at it...and think of a shape. Anything you like."

"A shape?"

Milo looked at the cube and frowned in concentration, drawing a shape in his mind. As he did, the particles in the tank re-formed, changing shape as if bending to his will.

"W-w-w-whoa! That's insane!"

"Um, Domino. What shape is that?"

"A mushroom."

Apollo looked back at the floating shape and nodded appreciatively. Milo took his hand, pulled him up out of his chair, and started hopping up and down in excitement.

"This is amazing! You did it, Apollo! Nobody's been able to isolate the particles that can record what people are thinking before!"

"W-wait, Domino. They don't just record thought; these particles can be completely controlled by the mind. Think about the possibilities. We could have robot bodies for the disabled...high-precision medical tools... You can make anything you want out of them!"

Though Apollo spoke falteringly, Milo was stunned by the scale of what he was saying.

"That's insane... Really?"

"Domino! I need your help. When my research is complete, I need to get it out there... But I'm awkward, and nobody knows my name. You're much better

than me at that sort of thing, and I want to know it'll be in safe hands, so... I want us to pretend you're the one who made the discovery."

Bonk!

"Ow! Not the corner!"

"You moron," said Milo, wielding a hefty book. "If that's the only problem, then we've just got to make you more sociable. I bet it's because you spend all your time in here. The isolation is getting to your head!" Milo looked Apollo up and down before nodding in understanding and crossing his arms proudly. "Okay. Here's what we'll do. I'll make the introductions for you. Some big company... Let's say, Matoba. But you have to take care of the rest! First things first, we need to get you out of that geeky lab coat and do something about that hunch. We'll make a socialite out of you yet, Apollo!"

"A socialite? M-me? Th-that's impossible!"

"You've already done one impossible thing today. What's one more? Starting today, you're Apollo Akaboshi, world-famous inventor!" Milo stopped and scratched his chin. "That's right, we'll need to print business cards. Say, what did you call them anyway?"

"Th-the particles? I haven't thought of a name yet...," said Apollo, wringing his hands and looking up meekly at Milo. "Besides, y-you're much more creative than me... What do you think we should call them?"

"Hmm. How about, 'Apollo Particles'?"

"A-Apollo Particles?! I can't name them after me!"

"Why not? That's what all the great scientists do."

Milo checked his wristwatch and muttered, "Wuh-oh!" before rushing to the door.

"Akaboshi, you have tomorrow off, right? Let's go and buy you a suit. We'll meet here tomorrow morning at ten, okay?"

"D-Domino!" Apollo called out after him. "...Thank you, Domino. This is all thanks to you."

"..."

Milo turned back, walked over to Apollo, and wrapped his arms around him in a hug. His spiky hair was a little painful on his cheek, but he chose to ignore it.

“I’m proud of you, Apollo. Even if nobody else understands you, I do. And I’ll be with you forever if that’s what you want...”

Milo continued to embrace Apollo for a few seconds before letting go and returning to the door, walking briskly down the hall. He was embarrassed because he knew Apollo had seen how much he was blushing.

What was that?

Milo fell out of the memory and into a sheer-white expanse. For a while, it was hard to remember who he was. Even when he did, it was vague, as if he shared his existence with another. Their emotions blanketed his mind, soft and warm like a down quilt.

It’s so comforting...

One of those emotions was one that Milo knew well. Love. It came as an odd relief to know that the stranger invading his mind knew of love as well.

Then Milo continued to fall, into the new memory that awaited him below.

“Slow down, Akaboshi! We’re here today to teach you table manners, not to watch you gorge yourself!”

“Table manners?”

“That’s right. Think of this as your next topic of research. Etiquette. You must not breach etiquette! Can you promise me that?”

“Um...sure. I promise. If you say so.”

“Good. Now then, with cutlery, you start from the outside...”

“Hey, where are you going?! This is your friend’s wedding!”

“O-oh, I just got a call from the lab. It might be about the particles...”

“Turn off your phone! Only the bride and groom, and the father of the bride, can cross the aisle! That’s the rules!”

“Domino, take a look at these particles! These are what the Matoba CEO requested.”

“...These are Apollo Particles...? They look all brown, like rust. And they’re all wiggly.”

“I commanded the particles to replicate themselves. Once they turn this color, they’ll devour anything they can find and keep multiplying.”

“What...? But, Apollo, that’s dangerous! Why did you...?”

“Listen to me, Domino. We need the world to see what we’ve done here. If we can’t get the arms manufacturers at Matoba to accept our research, it’ll never leave this room. If we want to make people’s lives better, then this is a necessary step. Do you understand?”

“This is...a ring! For me...?”

“Well, um... It is proper etiquette for the man to propose to the woman, is it not...?”

“Oh, Apollo!”

“Waaah! D-Domino! It’s bad manners to display affection in public!”

“You big dummy! Who cares about that?!”

A zoetrope of memories flashed through Milo’s mind as he fell. Though he knew not where he was anymore, he felt no fear. He was aware that something was guiding him, leading him to some discovery that lurked just around the corner...

...As he entered the next memory, Milo felt a sharp pain in his heart. This was the end of the line, and Milo steeled his nerves to face whatever he was about to witness.

“It’s a coup! Matoba is attacking the capital!”

“Stop Tetsujin! It’s about to crush the Imperial Palace!”

Milo pushed through the streets of Tokyo, fighting a current of fleeing people. He clung to the barbed-wire fortifications hastily erected by the JSDF and looked up to the sky, where a formation of fighter jets soared overhead and off toward Tetsujin, unleashing a salvo of missiles. Tetsujin, however, brand-new and with the Matoba crest on its breastplate, swung one of its titanic arms and knocked the missiles out of the sky.

“Stopppp! Stop attacking it!”

“Who let that woman in? Civilians are under evacuation orders! It’s dangerous here!”

“You don’t understand! Tetsujin is powered by the Apollo Engine! If it explodes mid-operation, the brown Apollo Particles will be scattered across the land!”

“What the hell are you talking about?! Someone take her away!”

“Please stop attacking! Somebody call a scientist!”

Milo screamed as several strong men dragged him away. Then, right before his eyes, he watched as a cascade of armor-piercing missiles swept across the sky. Like a scene from a monster movie, the missiles slammed into the rampaging Tetsujin with a barrage of explosions.

“Confirmed deactivation of Tetsujin! Ground troops, advance! Fan out and search for survivors!”

“Ahhh... No...! No...!”

Milo watched in horror as a thin wisp of brown particles spilled from the hole in Tetsujin’s torso, clinging to the outside of its frame.

“...Run...”

“What are you doing, woman? Come with me!”

“No! We have to run! Everyone, run!”

Boooom!

The tremendous shock wave wiped out all sound, and a ring-shaped cloud of brown particles swept over the city. In a single breath, all that lived was transformed into brown dust. The fighter jets overhead became nothing more than airborne clods of rusty metal as the blast wave passed over them, and they fell to earth in a fiery streak.

“Ah. Ahhh... Ahhh...”

Milo sifted his hands through the brown sand at his feet, all that remained of the soldiers who detained him. He looked up to the sky in despair. A tenth of a

second was all it had taken for the world to end.

“...Cough...”

The blood spilled from his lungs, and Milo felt the moist puddles at his knees. He devoted his mind to willing the Apollo Particles away, ordering them to leave him alone, but the rust-colored wind was far too strong to resist. A fierce gale swept up the Apollo Particles, and with each gust, Milo coughed up another lungful of blood, and a building behind him corroded away into dust.

“Domino!”

“A...pollo...”

A figure with red hair walked steadily through the Rust Wind. Milo summoned up all the courage in his heart and gave one final smile for Domino’s beloved Apollo.

“Thank...goodness...you’re safe...”

“Domino... No, this can’t be happening!”

Apollo took the dying Milo into his arms, trembling with fear. Only their creator, Apollo Akaboshi, had such command over the particles that he could subconsciously protect himself from the destructive winds.

“Forgive me...Apollo. I shouldn’t have handed over your research to those maniacs. I knew how powerful the particles would be in the wrong hands...and yet...”

“Don’t speak, Domino. Oh god, the blood...!”

“This wind...the Rust Wind...has been ordered to replicate. Nobody can stop the Apollo Particles now. They’ll devour all of Japan...and it’s all my fault...”

“I won’t let that happen!” roared Apollo as he held his dying love in his arms. “I’ll bring it all back from the ashes! I’ll bring you back, no matter how long it takes! Ten years! A hundred years! I’ll rewind the world, back to the way it was before!”

“Apollo...”

“So please...!” He looked down at his beloved’s face and gave an awkward

smile. "...Just rest, sweet Domino. We'll meet again."

"...Yeah. I'll be waiting. However long it takes...Apollo..."

With the last of his strength, Milo pulled himself up off the ground and brought Domino's lips close to Apollo's. The feeling of their kiss was so powerful, he couldn't even feel the pain as the rest of his body dissolved away into nothing.

Pop!

"Wha-waaah?!"

There was a strange sensation, like falling through a wall of cotton candy, and Milo was himself again. He landed on an unimaginably soft and springy floor that bounced him back up into the air so many times that he started to feel quite sick.

...Wh-where am I?

Milo looked around, but it was pure white as far as he could see. He tried to drag himself to his feet, but the ground beneath him was so soft, his legs almost fell right through it. Then there was a voice.

"Ta-daaa!"

"Whaa?!"

"Congratulations! You've reached the core of the server!"

A pair of high heels landed on the floor before him, and Milo looked up to see a beautiful woman with long sky-blue hair, dressed in a white lab coat. She leaned over and peered into Milo's surprised face, scrutinizing him for a moment, before nodding in satisfaction.

"Hmm! You're super cute! And handsome! That's my genetics at work!"

"...You're...Domino! Our ancestor!"

"You've done very well, Milo. You stopped the server; it can't handle two people being in the admin room at once," said the blue-haired woman, Domino Nekoyanagi, as she gave a bright smile so similar to Milo's own. "The restoration has stopped. You've won, Milo! It's game over for Apollo!"

“The restoration...has stopped? Th-thank goodness!”

Milo breathed a deep sigh of relief, then suddenly lifted his face once more. Domino’s smile was right there, as if she had been waiting for him.

“I know,” she said. “You want to go back, don’t you? To save Bisco.”

“...Will you let me? I mean, you loved Apollo, didn’t you?”

“Oh, gosh...! Yes, but I didn’t mean for any of this to happen. I think I died in such a romantic way that Apollo just got carried away...”

“...”

“He cut out his emotions. All to bring back the year 2028... No, not even that... It was all to bring me back... I didn’t ask for any of this. My children were always free to grow up without me. I never needed to be there...”

Domino brushed her hand gently against Milo’s cheek and smiled, her eyes wet with tears.

“I’m happy that Apollo would go so far for my sake, but it’s not right. We’re just ghosts living in a world that doesn’t need us. The future belongs to you. Isn’t that right, Milo?”

“Domino...”

“Milo, go help Bisco. And stop Apollo for me. Please.”

Milo stared into her face, so similar to his own. He took her hands, soft like his, and gave her a determined nod. The light in his eyes showed her just how powerfully life had flourished in all those years Domino had spent in the void.

“...Good. I’ll entrust the rest of my power to you, Milo.”

“Your...power?”

“And tell them both...I love them. I’ve always been watching...”

From their clasped hands, Milo felt a power unlike anything he had ever experienced flowing into him. As she took Milo into her arms, Domino began to glow, her whole body shining like an aurora in the seven colors of the rainbow.



“It appears you’re not so quick on your feet anymore.” Apollo leered. A pair of bright-red eyes still shone from out of his pitch-black form. “How long have you trained your techniques? How many years? A pointless endeavor, when I can use the power of civilization to replicate the fruits of your efforts with but a snap of my fingers.”

Bisco opened his mouth to retort, but only his golden blood came out, containing an assortment of jet-black nuts and bolts. Bisco was about 60 percent city now, and Apollo’s continued assault had finally outstripped the regenerative power of the Rust-Eater. The sun’s light inside him was fading. A little longer, and Bisco would die.

“Now, cease dodging my arrows. You’re only prolonging your own suffering,” said Apollo.

“Ha! How ’bout you start dodging some of mine? You’ve just been lettin’ ’em all hit you!”

“Because it is of no consequence either way. I have conquered your spores. They pose no threat to me.”

“Then quit chattin’ about it and kill me already! If you’re that desperate for someone to talk to, why don’t you grow yourself a maid café?!”

“Such insolence...!”

Bisco’s jokes showed that he felt no fear of his imminent death. His eyes still sparkled jade-green, burning with life.

“Euuuh. Euuh. Euuuuhh.”

“Delete him. Delete Bisco. Delete him.”

The fear and hatred oozing from the year 2028 made it impossible for Apollo to focus on anything other than the man before him, whom he’d been ordered

to kill.

Dammit! I need to check the server...!

Even Bisco could see the chaos whirling in Apollo's mind as he fought against the vengeful spirits of the past for control. Bisco whipped out a Rust-Eater arrow from his quiver, but instead of nocking it to his bow...

Splat!

...he plunged the tip deeply into his own heart.

"...?! Wh-what? What are you doing?!"

"Woooooaaaaaarrgh!"

Before Apollo's stunned eyes, golden Rust-Eater mushrooms sprang to life all over Bisco's body, breaking off the urbanization that covered his skin. This was Bisco's final gambit: to offer his own life as food for the Rust-Eater.

Just four more seconds... Three...

"Not so fast!"

Apollo realized what Bisco was doing and leveled his greatbow. The spirits of the damned washed over its surface, turning it an abyssal, all-consuming black. It creaked as he tugged the bowstring tight, lifting it as Bisco jumped up to fire a killing shot.

Two... One...!

"Now die, Bisco!"

"Take thiiiis!"

Fwmp! Pchoo!

The two released their arrows at precisely the same moment, producing a tremendous roar that cut through the very air itself. The blazing arrows were little more than streaks, orange and ebony, that ran from one to the other, and back again.

"Im...pressive..."

Gaboom! Gaboom!

A pair of glorious Rust-Eaters erupted from Apollo's back, in proud defiance of his supposed immunity. And that wasn't all: Outside the transparent sphere, in the city of Tokyo below, another pair of mushrooms rose out of the ground at the same time, as if synced to him. More Rust-Eaters burst from Apollo's body, and whenever one did, its twin lit up the night sky of Tokyo.

Apollo glared with scarlet eyes and dropped his midnight bow.

"An impressive specimen of humanity you are, Bisco. Had my plan been just three years delayed..."

Rust-Eaters continued to spring forth from Apollo's body, one after the other...

...but then they stopped.

"...then I might have lost."

Kroom!

All of a sudden, an enormous office block tore its way out of Bisco's back.

Kroom! Kroom! Kroom! Kroom!

Another, and another, flinging him in all directions. Just as he tried to string another arrow—*Kroom!*—an office block ripped through his wrist, causing him to drop it. He collapsed to the floor in a heap, just barely managing to breathe through the blood spilling from his lungs.

"..."

Apollo grimaced as he plucked one of the Rust-Eaters out of his body and walked over to Bisco. He looked down at the buildings ravaging his foe, gorging themselves on his unimaginable life force.

"...You're suffering, Bisco. It's okay. You don't need to stand any longer."

Bisco's eyes glowed jade-green as always, but he no longer had the strength to focus them. Yet on his face was a look of pure serenity, as if he were thinking of something very precious indeed.

" "

He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. He raised himself up on

one knee, and blood spilled out of the hole in his chest. Still, he reached out his hands and dug his nails into the floor.

“ ”

His voice stolen by the buildings colonizing his windpipe, Bisco was unable to say a word. Apollo put aside the recurring sense of emptiness he felt and raised his glowing blue arm in preparation.

“Farewell...Bisco Akaboshi.”

But just as he was about to fire...

“Stopp!”

Bwoom!

“...?! Uargh!”

...a blast of pink energy slammed into his back. Apollo wheeled around, sending his assailant flying with a kick.

“Gyaagh!”

There was a flurry of pink braids, and the attacker lay fallen on the ground. As she lifted herself off the floor, there in her hands was Apollo’s arm, the one Milo had broken off with his mantra bell. It was surrounded in particles that glowed with a soft pink light.

“The remnants of Hope’s possession, I suppose,” mused Apollo. “Tell me, why didn’t you remain hidden? You were doing a good job ensuring I would ignore you until now.”

“Heh. You got a point there. Maybe I should’ve.” Tirol was sweating and panting, but still her golden eyes remained trained on Apollo. “Step away from Akaboshi. I still got enough of Hope’s power left to disintegrate ya if I gotta.”

“Bisco is already dead. The best thing you can do for him now is allow me to finish him off. He’s in tremendous pain, can’t you see?”

“He’s still alive!” Tirol screamed, and even the specters around Apollo shrank in fright. “Akaboshi’s never down for good. No matter how close he is to the edge... Nah, even if he’s fallen off the edge... Nah, even if he’s fallen all the way

down to hell! He'll rise again, just like the sun! You don't get to say whether he's alive or dead!"

"Then let's see him stand again. How preposterous," said Apollo, leveling his arm at Bisco once more.

"I said step away!" shouted Tirol, leaping at him, but again Apollo sent her flying with a kick.

"..."

Seeing her fall, Apollo turned back to Bisco. Then her arms wrapped around his feet. She didn't even have a weapon this time. Apollo planted his heel into her face, sending her tumbling across the floor, but she sprang to her feet like a cat, tackling his legs again, this time bringing Apollo down.

"Just what are you?!"

"Haah...haah...haah..." Tirol's face was bloodied, her nose was broken, and the blood from her lungs pooled in her mouth. But her golden eyes were as bright as Bisco's were, even in the direst of circumstances. "I'm a human! That's more than you can say!"

"Die...!"

Apollo pointed his arm at Tirol, and it glowed with an azure light, when...

"Euuuuh. Euuuuuhh!"

...Apollo turned to see the server itself screaming, expanding, transforming, and all the while emitting a green burst of light that illuminated his horrified expression.

"Wh-what? What's happening?!"

"Hee-hee-hee-hee! That means we've won, loser!"

"...?!"

Tirol smiled her usual devious smile. "Hope told me to give Milo thirty seconds, so that's what I did!"

"You planned this all along!"

"Sure did. Guess even olden-day guys fall for the weak-girl act."

“Euuuuuuooooooooogggghhh!”

The server’s screech reached a new pitch, and the very air of the room shook. Then, in its center, a hole formed, and in a flash of emerald light, Milo flew back into the room.

“Milo! You made it!”

“You!” bellowed Apollo, aiming at his new foe.

“Whoops. Shouldn’t take yer eyes off me. *This* jellyfish’ll sting ya!”

Then Tirol swung the arrow she had been hiding in her hand, injecting its Rust-Eater poison into Apollo’s side. With a *Gaboom!* the mushroom rocked Apollo’s body, sending his shot wide.

“Launch:Life:Maker!”

Before he even hit the floor, Milo chanted the command words he had learned, and a multicolored light coalesced, forming a rainbow arc in his hands. He pulled its string tight and fired, and then all color and sound was extinguished from that place as a dazzling white light filled the room.

Life Maker was a program created to fill the new world with life.

It creates that life out of the cities made by the City Maker.

This is for you, Milo.

I trust you know what to do with it...

“Haah!”

It might have been an instant, or it might have been several minutes, but at last the white light faded, and Apollo saw his surroundings once more. He looked at Milo, helping Tirol to her feet, and down at himself, but there wasn't so much as a single scratch on him.

“He missed. His arrow missed.”

“Delete him, Apollo. Delete him, too.”

“...You thought you could beat me just by shutting down the server?” Apollo slowly collected his breath. “Fool. I can reactivate it as many times as it takes. And now, your life is forfeit, because Bisco, the only man who could stand against me, is dead.”

“Bisco's...dead?”

“See for yourself! He's nothing more than an urban sprawl!” Apollo glared menacingly with his scarlet eyes and gestured to the spot where Bisco fell...and gasped. “...He's gone! But how? Where is Bisco's corpse?!”

“You're wrong about one thing, Apollo. I didn't miss.”

Apollo's ears pricked up at Milo's piercing voice. Behind his panda birthmark, Milo's eyes twinkled like sapphire gemstones. “I shot you with the most powerful arrow in the world.”

Milo cast his eyes upward, and Apollo cautiously followed his gaze. There, he

saw a crystalline formation of buildings, growing out of a single point, glinting in the moonlight.

“Wh-what on earth...is that?!”

Krik! Krik! Krik!

Before Apollo could say any more, the formation began to shift. The skyscrapers that extended radially outward like quartz pillars all folded in on themselves, like a collapsing star.

“It’s eating away the City Maker! Don’t tell me...what you fired was...!”

“She told me to stop you,” said Milo, his hair swaying in the wind kicked up by the collapsing mass. “And also...she said she loves you.”

Milo’s words were like a drop of warm water in the frigid pool of Apollo’s heart. Somewhere inside him, emotions that should’ve long ago decayed surged back to life.

“...Domino...? Are you there?” he asked gingerly.

“Euuuuuggghhh!”

“Urgh! Grh! Aaaah!”

Just as it seemed Apollo was returning to his senses, the spirits of the damned overtook him once more. They would not allow him to feel anything other than their hatred, and their pitch-black form oozed over Apollo’s ears and into his mouth, preventing him from saying any more.

“The monkey should learn its place!”

“I’ll fulfill my promise, Domino,” said Milo. “Me and...”

Apollo was little more now than a black beast. He leaped up toward the ceiling, the particles around his arm forming into a hammer, which he swung at the rapidly shrinking formation of buildings.

“Me and Bisco will! Together!”

Kerrash!

As Apollo sprang toward it, the urbanized lump in the ceiling bounced back, slamming Apollo and launching him into the ground. He looked up in fear to see

a pair of dazzling jade-green eyes appear from amid the buildings.

“Euhh! Euuuh...!”

Apollo climbed to his feet and stared in shock at what he was seeing. The urbanization cleared away to reveal a human figure, bathed in an aurora of light, his long hair shifting prismaticly among all the colors of the rainbow. The man snapped one of the remaining buildings off his own neck and placed it in his mouth, crushing it between his teeth. After swallowing it, he let out a single burp.

“What the hell have you done, Milo?” he said. “Do you have to turn me into a freakin’ monster every single time?!”

“Bisco, you’re amazing! Like a god! No, you *are* a god!”

“That...is Bisco?”

A whisper of disquieted voices rippled across Apollo’s jet-black body. Then an idea occurred to him. *“Of course! It’s the Life Maker program! In that case, I just have to kill the administrator!”*

Apollo turned to Milo and darted toward him like a bullet, but before he could reach his target, a seven-colored bolt plunged into his back, nearly snapping him in two.

“Grrr! Bisco...!”

“Did you miss me? I’m here for my rematch, Apollo!”

Bisco grinned a wicked smile and followed up with his signature roundhouse kick. His foot traced a glittering rainbow through the air and landed in Apollo’s side.

“Gblah!”

Apollo was thrown aside with monstrous force, and he crashed into the transparent wall of the sphere, cracking it. Bisco landed lightly on the ground and brushed away his hair, clearly annoyed at its new length, and frowned at the rainbow-colored particles that surrounded him.

“What’s with all this twinklin’ bullshit? It’s givin’ me a freakin’ migraine!”

“It’s a new kind of mushroom spore...the evolved form of the Rust-Eater. It doesn’t have a name yet. You should give it one, Bisco!”

“A name? Me?” Bisco looked down and plucked off one of the mushrooms steadily growing from his own body. He peered closely at its lustrous cap.

“How about a rainbowsroom?”

“Because it’s rainbow-colored?”

“Yeah.”

“Euuuh. Stand. Apollo. You must obey.”

A torrent of shrill screams came from the server behind Bisco and flooded into Apollo. He was no longer anything but an engine for their vengeful acts. Slowly, he was made to rise to his feet, and in his hands, the jet-black bow that slew Bisco once already reappeared.

“Hey, is that what killed you?” asked Milo.

“Something like that. You saw?”

“No, but when you got shot, I felt it, too.”

“Heh. You can be pretty poetic for a panda sometimes.”

“I mean it. Right here, right? On your collarbone... Look, there’s still a mark.”

“What...? Whoa! How the hell did you—?!”

“Biscooooo!”

Apollo roared at Bisco, who was cracking jokes and had not even drawn his bow, and released his jet-black arrow of hate. It split the air and hurtled toward its target, but Bisco only turned to face it and...

“Khaaaah!”

...let out a howl that rippled the air.

That single yell caused Apollo’s ruinous arrow to shatter mid-flight into a million rainbow fragments that stuck into the ground, and after a second—*Plop!*—they turned into colorful mushrooms.

“Euuh. Euuuh...?!”

Apollo couldn't believe what he was seeing. His all-powerful arrow had met its end at nothing but Bisco's voice. As he faltered, Bisco seized the opportunity and leaped toward him, into the air.

"Bisco, where's your bow?!"

"Right here!"

Leaving a rainbow trail as he leaped, Bisco reached back and plucked out one of his long, shimmering hairs, which instantly transformed into a single multicolored arrow. He pulled it back as if nocking it to a bow...and one appeared in his hands, forming itself out of the prismatic spores surrounding him.

"Wow...!" gasped Milo. He had always thought his partner's glittering spirit to be a gift from God, but now all who saw the scene before him would agree that he *was* a god. A mushroom god of the aurora descending from heaven, giving rest to the restless dead with arrows of rainbow light.

"Apollo," said Bisco. "There's no past or future in life. No good or bad, either."

"Euuuggghhh!"

"There's only one thing that'll always be true..."

Apollo leaped into the air and fixed his aim on Bisco. In a moment of silence, all the air seemed to be sucked out of the room, and Bisco looked up into Apollo's eyes.

"...and that's that I will always defeat you."

"You don't belong here, Bisco!"

It was Apollo who fired his bow first, his hefty greatarrow closely resembling a spear of pure darkness. It hurtled toward Bisco's rainbow form.

"And that's all there is to it, Apollo..."

Two lights shone in Bisco's eyes. One, his desire to break down whatever stood in his path, and two, an almost motherly love and affection. He exhaled slowly and released his fingers from his multicolored arrow.

Boom. Boom. Boom. Bam! Bam! Bam! B-b-b-b-b-boom!

Bisco's arrow became a laser beam of rainbow light that instantaneously pierced both Apollo's black arrow and his body alike before dissipating into thin air. A stream of multicolored mushrooms appeared in its wake, growing out of nothing, before swarming the onyx arrow and breaking it down into shimmering rainbow dust.

"N-no... No... Euuhhh..."

"He's going to delete us! I'm scared!"

The ghostly presence that shifted and warped the jet-black surface of Apollo's skin watched the snaking form of the rainbowsrooms in fear and disgust, pulling away as if to escape. Meanwhile, Bisco landed with a thud and recoiled at the prismatic mushrooms that bloomed at his feet, and at the multicolored bow that dissolved from his hand.

"I just keep gettin' less human every time. How come life never goes the way I want?"

"Bisco! Have your existential crisis later! They're trying to leave Apollo!"

"Nah, they ain't. I shot them already. They're dead."

"You...you did?"

"My arrow was just too fast. You gotta wait a second for the effects to catch up."

B-b-b-b-b-booom! After a second, an even greater string of explosions began moving toward Apollo. He transformed his bow into an obsidian wall to protect himself.

"Nrrrrgggghhhh!"

The force of the impact pushed Apollo back, his heels digging into the ground, but at last he came to a halt, apparently unharmed.

"Haah... Haah... I did it! I stopped the—!"

Gaboom!

"Wraaaargh!"

One of the rainbow mushrooms burst out of Apollo's wrist, and it was

followed by a chain reaction that spread across his entire body with incredible speed, changing him from pitch-black to a radiant array of colors.

“Gyaaaaagh! Augh! Aaagh!”

“Kheee! Kheh! Kheeehh!”

The year 2028 let out a cacophony of mutated screams. They were the death knell of a monstrous amalgamation of humans who had died long ago.

“Run. Run. Run.”

“Discard. Discard this body. Run.”

The vengeful spirits scrambled to leave Apollo’s body as the mushrooms consumed their essence, but Apollo wrapped his arms around himself and prevented them from doing so.

“Stop it, fools!” he said. His eyes blazed bright, and he stared at Bisco, not with the revulsion and disgust he had shown so far, but with a mixture of astonishment and reverence. “...They’ve won. These rainbow spores...far exceed the Apollo Particles in all capabilities. Bisco has succeeded...in creating the next step in human evolution.”

“Graaargh. Have you lost your mind, Apollo?!”

“They have proved it!” Apollo yelled. “Proved that they are the future! We must accept...that we are the past! It is only proper!”

“Kill him. Kill him. Kill Apollo.”

Hope... Rage... Joy...! Please forgive me...!

But just as the swarm of jet-black spirits began eating away at Apollo...

“Wraaah!”

...Bisco let out another great yell, stripping the black ooze from Apollo’s body, which became rainbow particles that screamed in pain before transforming into mushrooms. Meanwhile, the rainbowsrooms that covered Apollo himself all turned to mist, and he fell to the floor, his pale skin and crimson hair visible once more.

“ ... ”

Bisco said nothing and strode over to the man, peering down at his face before turning back to his partner, Milo.

“Y’know, he doesn’t look so tough up close. Is he really our ancestor?”

“Yes,” replied Milo, “though there’s quite a few generations between us... You must admit, the family resemblance is there.”

Apollo looked up at the two boys as though he were gazing at an incredibly bright light. He sighed and lifted his hand. Already his fingertips were dissolving into clouds of radiant particles.

“I tried to rid this world of you...my children...”

“Hmm?”

“Should I be allowed a peaceful death like this? I should be forced to die in pain and misery for what I did. Not in hope at the future of mankind...”

“You know,” said Bisco, “you make a good point. All right, Milo, prepare the tickleshroom arrows!”

“Apollo!”

Ignoring his partner, Milo ran up to Apollo and embraced him as hard as his small body was capable of. He whispered gently into Apollo’s ear: “Look at Bisco and Milo, my love. Look at how strong our children have grown. This isn’t a mistake. This is the future. Our future.”

“Dom...ino... I...”

“It’s okay. I’m proud of you. Of Bisco, of Milo, of everyone else, too... But it’s time for us to go now, Apollo. The two of us. Together...”

“Domino..... Yes.”

Then Milo pulled back from Apollo, but a green light stayed behind in his place, a silhouette of a woman. Apollo and Domino sat there in each other’s arms until their bodies transformed completely into multicolored particles and disappeared on the wind.

Milo watched all this with a bittersweet feeling in his heart, but when he turned to his partner, the rainbow-colored mushroom god stood with his arms

folded, a sour look on his face.

“Dammit, Milo, you’re too soft. You saw what that guy did to me. I’d have torn him a new one.”

“There’s no need to kick him while he’s down. That’s bad manners.”

“Oh, don’t *you* start goin’ on about that!”

“I’m not sure Tokyo will last long with Apollo dead. We should grab Tirol and get—”

The two boys stumbled as, almost as if on cue, the room shook.

“Euuuuh. Euuuuh. Euuuuh.”

All of a sudden, the server, which until now had appeared brand-new again, screamed once more, and black, oily faces appeared across its green surface.

“Euuuh. No. Noooo.”

“Storage device destroyed. Moving backup data to new device...”

“Run. Run. To the sky. To the sky.”

“What the—?! I thought we stopped that thing!” cried Bisco.

“So did I! It shouldn’t be able to operate without the administrator...!”

“Noooo.”

The server started spinning rapidly and smashed its way out of the room through the roof, disappearing into the night sky.

“You bastards!”

Bisco fired a rainbow arrow after it, and although it struck its mark and exploded into seven-colored mushrooms, the server shed some of the vengeful spirits and kept on rising, in defiance of their betrayed screams.

“What the hell is it tryin’ to do?!”

“...Oh no! Bisco, it’s heading for the satellite!”

“The satellite?!”

“The broadcast satellite that beams the television signal all over Japan. It’s

positioned directly above Tokyo! If the server combines with that, it could bring the whole thing crashing down to Earth!” Milo searched the vestiges of Hope’s memories, trying to piece things together. “And that’ll urbanize all of Japan! We have to stop it!”

“What, so you want me to go to space, destroy a satellite, and come back?! That’s impossible?”

“You don’t really think that, do you?”

“Grrr!”

Bisco closed his eyes and took a deep breath, gathering the rainbow spores around him and around Milo, who held the unconscious Tirol in his arms. Bisco gave his partner a nod before leaping through the hole in the roof and into the night sky above Tokyo.

“Launch:Life:Maker!”

Milo chanted, and the rainbow spores coalesced in Bisco’s hand into the form of a greatbow. Bisco plucked several of the shimmering hairs from his head and attached them to his bowstring, where they became a bundle of ten arrows that lit up the night.

“Rrraaaarrgh!”

Bisco yelled and released his arrows, which streaked across the city, leaving auroras in their wake, landing in the ground all across Tokyo. Then, with even greater force than the Rust-Eater, they grew into towering mushrooms that broke apart the city itself and cast a seven-colored light into the surrounding desert.

“...It’s so beautiful...,” Milo said with a sigh, his arms around his partner’s neck. “It’s a shame Tirol’s not awake to see it. Do you think I should wake her up?”

“Nah, let her sleep. She wouldn’t get it.”

Once Bisco saw the rainbowsrooms blanket the entire city, he aimed his bow once more directly beneath him and pulled the string tight.

“Hey, don’t blame me if this burns us all to a crisp in three seconds flat!”

“I won’t! At least we’ll both go together!”

“Here goes nothing!”

Bisco released a beam of light into the ground, and only a few seconds later, an enormous rainbow mushroom several times the size of a King Trumpet catapulted them high up into space, surrounded by a barrier of spores, drifting among the unnumbered stars.

The girl felt something warm wrapped around her, shaking her awake. As she slowly came to, she gazed up at the face above her with murky eyes.

“Amli! Amli! Please wake up, Amli!”

“...Mo...ther...?”

“...Amli!”

It was Raskeni’s face, tears streaming from her eyes. Amli gave her a reassuring smile and gently stroked her cheek.

“...! Wait! I must take command! Mother, where is High Priest Ochagama?!”

“It’s okay, Amli. You don’t need to do any more. It’s over.”

“Over...?”

Amli followed her mother’s gaze and looked out of the tent. The pale light of the moon illuminated the desert outside, where all the monks stood facing Tokyo, praying.

“...What is that...?”

She looked over at the Tokyo Crater, which until just recently had been home to a towering metropolis, to see that now its menacing buildings were coated in rainbow mushrooms that cast a shifting aurora across the desert sands. The monks, weary from their long battle, stood in the fluctuating, seven-colored light, and were healed.

“High Priestess Amli is awake! She’s awaaaake!” Kandori’s booming voice rang out, and the priests of all denominations crowded around her.

“She lives! Priestess Amli lives!”

They lifted the tiny girl up and tossed her into the air in celebration. Amli was still trying to take it all in, blinking repeatedly with her one good eye.

“We’ve won, Amli. You can relax now.”

Amli turned to her side to see the cotton ball priest lying on his back as a similar crowd threw him, too.

“We’ve...won?” she repeated. “B-but the enemy troops, wherever did they disappear to? A-and my wounds... Yes, I remember, I was wounded!”

As Amli’s mind returned, she recalled throwing herself in front of the enemy’s urbanization ray to protect her followers. The pain she felt at that moment came flooding back to her, clear as day.

“There was no saving me. I was sure of it. How...?”

“Just look up.”

Curious, Amli raised her head to where the cotton wool ball pointed. Down from the sky came countless glowing motes, falling and melting like multicolored snow on the desert sand.

“Are these...spores?”

“A new kind of spore, as yet unnamed,” replied Ochagama. “A form of the Rust, transformed into the power of life itself.” He spoke a mantra, and some of the spores rearranged themselves into the outline of a mushroom, causing the monks below to let out a cheer. “These spores made those robots disappear in a flash...and they got rid of all the urbanization infecting everyone as well.”

“Rainbow...spores...”

With the monks distracted by Ochagama’s magic trick, Amli landed with a *Thump!* on the ground and gazed up at the forest of rainbow mushrooms, clad in an aurora.

“We won...didn’t we? My brother beat that man...,” she said, trembling with emotion. A long slender arm landed on Amli’s shoulder, and she looked up to see the smiling face of her mother. Amli embraced that arm and continued staring at the wondrous spectacle on the horizon.

Just then, they saw something streak across the night sky—a small sphere that shone ever brighter as it crossed the moon. It was hard to tell at this distance, but it must have been moving very fast indeed.

“Hey, what’s that?!”

“How magnificent!”

The monks cried out in awe at the sight. It was only Amli who knew what it was.

Mr. Bisco... Mr. Milo...

She looked down at her feet for a moment before kneeling on the rainbow-colored sand and praying with all her heart.

Then Raskeni kneeled down beside her and prayed as well.

Then Ochagama, too.

Then Kandori.

All the monks stopped their cheers and turned their thoughts to prayer. One by one, they kneeled down upon the sand. No words, not even a thought to what that prayer might be. All of them simply wished with all their hearts that happiness could be found at that rainbow’s end.

The rainbow sphere crossed Mach 1 and blasted upward through the stratosphere, shedding the yoke of Earth’s gravity and floating free amid the stars.

“So where the hell is this satellite anyway?” Bisco looked left and right, his rainbow hair glimmering in the blackness of space, and turned to his partner, who was flapping his arms and holding his mouth shut. “Hey, stop messin’ around! All of Japan’s countin’ on us!”

“I! Can’t! Breathe!”

“You can’t breathe? Oh, right. I guess it’s ‘cause we’re in space, huh...?”

Bisco nodded and blew into his hand. A bunch of multicolored mushrooms grew out of his palm, which Bisco plucked and stuffed into the mouths of Milo and Tirol. Upon doing so, they both began breathing normally again.

“...Hahh! Hahh! That was close! I thought I was about to die!”

Milo checked for Tirol’s heartbeat and began giving her CPR, but it seemed he didn’t need to, for the mushroom she swallowed was generating enough

oxygen to keep her alive.

“We might have missed it! Do you see anything that looks like a huge machine anywhere?”

“You mean that?”

“...Yes, that! Oh no, it’s already reached the atmosphere! This is bad!”

“Well, we just gotta blow it up, then, right?”

Bisco tore out several of his glorious hairs and fired them behind him, propelling him toward the satellite and leaving a trail of prismatic mushrooms in his wake. At last, he reached the giant falling object and latched on to the outside.

“Eeeuuuuuhhhhh!”

The satellite let out a groan as it was wreathed in flames. The vengeful spirits had bonded with it, becoming a single synthetic life-form, and at the rainbow intruder they clamored in fear and anger and crowded toward Bisco. They piled on top of his barrier of spores, leaving not a single gap, and applied pressure as if to crush the whole thing in one go.

“It’s a good thing Tirol’s already passed out,” said Milo. “Because if she wasn’t, she would, after seeing these gross things!”

“Milo, I can’t attack them and keep the barrier up at the same time. Can you take over?”

“Sure thing, Bisco! **Launch:Life:Maker!**”

With Milo relieving him of defense, Bisco took up several of his hairs and formed them into a great spear-like arrow, loosing it at point-blank range into the armored plating of the satellite. It pierced the machine’s outer layer and stuck there, whereupon Bisco held on to it with both hands, gritted his teeth, and focused all his energy into it. The rainbow spores sensed their master’s will and flowed into the arrow, emitting sparks of light in every hue.

“Rrrrrrrggggghhhh!”

Bisco yelled, and all of a sudden, rainbow mushrooms burst to life all across the satellite’s surface.

“Stop. Stop. Stop.”

“Oh, sure thing. What, you think I’m crazy? Who’d listen to you?!”

“Do you know what you are doing? We are innocent lives, snuffed out before our time! We should be the ones populating the planet, not you! Do you know what it means to wipe us out?”

“Milo, what happens if we kill them?” Bisco asked.

“I guess nobody’ll be able to watch satellite TV anymore,” Milo replied.

“Which one’s that?”

“Channel 6. The one that keeps rerunning the same cartoon over and over.”

“That one with the cat and mouse? Hmm... You’re right, I do feel a bit guilty about that.”

“EEUEUUGHH!”

Gaboom! Gaboom! Gaboom!

The mushrooms grew faster and faster, but those of the year 2028 still swarmed Milo’s shield in a mad frenzy until cracks appeared in its surface. Milo did his best to endure both their assault and the intense heat he felt as he descended through the atmosphere at terminal velocity.

“Bisco! I can’t hold on much longer!”

“...All right!”

Bisco grinned as he felt the fungal network complete its spread. He held up his right arm and plunged his fist deep into the satellite’s metal plating.

Crash!

With his other hand, Bisco tore off his right arm and kicked off the satellite with his partner in tow, leaving his limb embedded in the falling hunk of machinery.

“I’ll leave your lot to cool off in the afterlife!” he yelled, extending his remaining arm toward the satellite. In his hand appeared a gleaming multicolored bow, and Milo reached out in place of Bisco’s missing arm to grasp the bowstring.”

“Bisco! Don’t you really like Channel 6?!”

“Don’t remind me! It’s too late now!”

“Okay, ready? Three...two...”

““One!””

For a second, a perfectly straight rainbow flashed in the sky and punched right through the core of the satellite. The arrow struck Bisco’s severed arm, which triggered the fungi’s explosive growth.

Gaboom!

As the multicolored mushrooms infested their vessel, the ghosts of 2028 let out a scream and scattered to the sky. There, they broke apart and burned up in the atmosphere, until nothing, not even ash, remained, and the mad dream of the past died with them.

“Hey, Milo!”

“What?!”

“You can let down your barrier now! It ain’t gonna save us anyway!”

“I know, but still!”

“Still what?”

“I wanna keep it up a bit longer!”

Like a pair of falling stars crashing through the atmosphere, Bisco and Milo shouted to each other over the rush of the wind. Bisco’s luxurious rainbow hair had already reverted to its former crimson hue, and the rest of his godly power had disappeared along with it, leaving him too exhausted to move a single muscle.

They fell headfirst to Earth within the mantra shield Milo was straining so hard to preserve, and Bisco knew at that moment he was facing his own death.

“That world tore the shit outta me this whole time,” he muttered grimly as his red hair flapped in the wind. “Why do I hafta sacrifice myself to save it? Don’t seem fair to me.”

“That’s just the way things worked out!” Milo shouted back. “Besides, it

wasn't all bad! We got to meet all sorts of interesting people, didn't we? And, Bisco, you found yourself a treasure more precious than anything!"

"And what's that?"

"Me!"

Bisco turned to his partner. His sky-blue hair was blown up out of his eyes, which twinkled like stars behind his broad and cheerful smile.

"For most people, death is the one thing they can't share. But not us! That's what we found together on this long, long journey!"

"..."

"Bisco!"

Milo, already holding Tirol in his arms, moved to embrace Bisco as well. He frowned at the cat-eye goggles obstructing his partner's brow and tore them off. Ignoring Bisco's protest of "Hey, give 'em back!" he pulled Bisco close and bumped their foreheads together.

"..."

"..."

"Bisco."

"...Hmm?"

"You're really sweaty."

"..."

"..."

"...Kheh!"

"Hee-hee!"

"Heh-heh-heh!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha!"

Strands of their crimson and sky-blue hair fluttered among each other, blending the colors.

The pair of them laughed as they fell, brow-to-brow.

They were as one in the stillness and tranquility of the scorching heat, feeling only each other's warmth.

"Milo."

"Yes, what is it?"



“I can feel the Rust-Eater spores returning. If we combine our powers, we might...”

“We might be able to save one of us?”

“Yeah.”

Milo peered into Bisco’s bright eyes and nodded. Then the two huddled around Tirol. They concentrated their power into her sleeping form, shrinking the barrier so that it protected only her. Outside, the blistering wind scorched their skin, slowly charring it black.

Milo shouted something to Bisco, but by now he was completely impossible to hear over the rumbling air. Bisco simply closed his eyes and thought of the past as his body was blasted away.

“Bisco.”

“Bisco.

“Bisco, get up!”

“...Hmm?!”

Bisco was surprised to find himself not burned up into a small lump of carbon at all, and he opened his eyes to see that he was still falling. His partner, charred black from head to toe, fell headfirst alongside him, coughing. Just as Bisco began looking himself over in wonder, he heard a voice.

“I’m so glad you’re okay, boys! Looks like I made it just in time!”

Falling ahead of them was Tirol, her four long braids shaking violently in the wind. She looked back at Bisco and Milo with bright-red eyes, her entire body covered in a crimson aura.

“...Hope!”

“Apollo and Domino used the last of their consciousness to send me back here. I’m sure they wanted me to save you!”

The large barrier Hope projected from Tirol’s hands was big enough to enshroud all three of them. It had most likely saved their lives at the very last moment.

“You dumbass! Where the hell were you five minutes ago? Look at my hair now! It’s all black!”

“Don’t be like that, Bisco! He saved our lives!”

Hope smiled and squinted as he watched them. *“You’re so bright, Bisco. Milo. I’m so glad I got to travel with you. This is my thanks. The last of my power...”*

Then he closed his eyes, and his small red cube left Tirol’s brow and flew over to Bisco, attaching itself to his severed shoulder. In a second, Bisco’s powerful arm was whole once more.

“Holy shit! M-my arm!”

There on his shoulder was Hope’s red mark. Bisco heard his voice echoing in his mind.

“You’ll get used to it. It’s an honor, Bisco, to be a part of you.”

“What about you, Hope? What’ll happen to you?!”

“Apollo and the rest of 2028 are gone. Thus, I must leave also. But I couldn’t ask for a happier way to go, truly. To think that I could become the foundation of your hope from now on...”

“Hope!”

“Bisco, Milo! This is where it all begins! The walls of the past have come tumbling down, and all that remains is a vast, infinite future! You must be the ones to take that perilous first step into a shining tomorrow!”

The Tokyo desert was completely still in the auroral glow, without even a whisper of the Rust Wind to break the profound silence. The ironrats danced in the rainbow snow, hopping to and fro to catch the spores in their paws before moving elsewhere in search of more.

Just then, the earth shook with a great rumble, and the ironrats abandoned their rainbow game and scattered in terror, fleeing beneath the sand. A few seconds later, an enormous eight-legged creature scuttled on by, kicking up clouds of dust in its wake.

“Hyo-ho-ho! What speed, Actagawa!”

“Master Jabi! Where exactly are we going?”

“I haven’t the foggiest! But this ol’ boy seems to know, and that’s good enough for me! I ain’t ever seen him so feisty before!”

The creature was a mighty steelcrab, its body glowing here and there in rainbow colors. Atop its back, an old bearded Mushroom Keeper handled the reins while a young woman in battle gear sat beside him, her long black hair streaming behind her. The many wounds Jabi and Pawoo had sustained were gone, and in their place was the prismatic afterglow of the rainbow spores that had cured them.

“Master Jabi, look!”

Pawoo pointed up into the night sky, where an orange meteor hurtled to Earth. Actagawa sped off toward it, causing Jabi to lose control of the reins momentarily. The crab then hit a block of iron jutting out of the sands, did a full somersault, and landed miraculously back on his feet, but Actagawa continued running, without a thought to the dazed pair upon his back.

“The old boy’s heading straight for it! But what is it?!”

“Heeeellp!” came a shriek from high overhead. The two looked up and shouted out in unison:

““Tirol!””

“Now why on earth is that lassie fallin’ from the sky? Wait, that’s...!”

“Milo! And Akaboshi, too! That’s why Actagawa led us here!”

Pawoo strained her eyes to make out the forms of Tirol and the two Mushroom Keepers protecting her. While they held her in their arms, their eyes closed, Tirol herself was screaming for her life and wriggling to break free.

“They’ve passed out!” she yelled. “We’re gonna die! I don’t wanna die!”

“We’re too slow! We’re not going to save them!” shouted Pawoo.

“Then how about this?” said Jabi, perfectly aiming a mushroom arrow behind them so that the explosive growth catapulted them forward. However, it was still not enough to reach the falling trio.

But then, without even waiting for Jabi’s command, Actagawa reached up onto his back and picked up his two riders, spun them round, and tossed them ahead, using his prized Tornado Throw technique.

“You grab Bisco, lassie!”

“Yes, sir!”

Jabi and Pawoo crashed into the three in midair. Jabi grabbed Milo and Tirol and used one of his balloonshrooms to parachute down safely. Meanwhile, Pawoo came in like a black streak and borderline tackled Bisco into her arms.

“Gwagh!”

It wasn’t too far off from the feeling of receiving a blow from her metal staff. Bisco’s eyes flew open in discomfort and immediately rolled up into the back of his skull. As Pawoo hit the ground, she stabbed her staff into the sand to slow her descent, carving out a groove in the desert nearly thirty meters long.

“Akaboshi!” she cried with joy, dropping him to the floor and cradling his upper body in her hands. “We saw! You won! Oh, I’m so happy to see you safe and sound—”

Then she saw the white eyes of the man with whom she had exchanged vows. She heard his gurgled groans.

“...He’s not breathing! Oh no! Akaboshi...! Bisco! Wake up, please!”

Without a moment’s delay, she placed her lips over his. The air flowing from Pawoo’s formidable lungs filled Bisco almost to bursting, until his crying organs screamed out for him to wake up, lest he explode.

“...!! Nghh!”

As the light returned to Bisco’s eyes, he slapped Pawoo’s back for her to stop, but Pawoo only pulled him tighter, squeezing him in a loving embrace that nearly shattered his bones all over again. It was a strong contender for the most pain Bisco had felt all day.

“Sorry to interrupt your meal,” said Milo as he slowly drifted down to Earth in Jabi’s arms. “But if you keep that up, you’ll be a widow...”

“Phah. How rude. This was purely a medical intervention,” Pawoo replied, rubbing her lips. Then the two siblings looked at each other and smiled.

“Owww. My arms are gettin’ tired,” said Jabi, dumping Milo and Tirol onto the desert sand and giving his neck a good crack as they screamed. “Missed another good chance to kick the bucket today. Was gettin’ all settled to pop my clogs, when what do I see before me but these crazy rainbow spores, bringin’ me and Actagawa back to life!”

Actagawa ran over, and Milo gave him a hug, then burst into laughter.

“Actagawa says he didn’t think you were going to die at all!”

“Well, what does he know?! His crab brain can’t remember what happened ten seconds ago!”

“At least y’all had time to prepare!” bawled Tirol, her braids pointed upward in anger. “Imagine waking up to find yourself fallin’ through the stratosphere! I don’t know about you guys, but when I die, it’s gonna be in a queen-sized bed! So why’ve I gotta deal with that weirdo controllin’ me, and—?”

“But you saved us, riskin’ your own life.”

All turned to Bisco, who had spoken at last. He sat cross-legged on the sand,

staring at Tirol.

“Back then, when Apollo had me on the ground, when Milo couldn’t save me, you latched on to him, just like a real jellyfish, and never let go. Even after he kicked you in the face and left you bleedin’.”

“W-wait, I thought you were passed out back then!”

Tirol went red as a beet, and Bisco strode over to her, slipping something warm into her hand.

“Thanks, Tirol. I owe you one again. Take this.”

“A-a gift...? For me? What is it?”

“One of my fingers that blew off my old arm. Take a look and you can see it shines all different colors if you turn it under the light.”

“Who the hell wants that?! Get it away! Get it away!”

Bisco watched in shock as Tirol threw the piece of his body into the sand. Then Milo clapped a hand on his shoulder. Bisco turned to see him staring up into the night sky.

“Hey, Bisco,” he said. “I think there’s a chance you might see Channel 6 again, after all.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Look.”

Milo pointed up among the stars. A pinprick of light moved against the fixed constellations, leaving a rainbow trail as it passed overhead. It flashed different colors as it went, finally settling back into the satellite’s old orbit.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

The six exhausted warriors stood united as they gazed up at the rainbow drawn in the sky. The glimmering snow fell about them, washing away their wounds, bringing an end to the long night.

The alliance quickly fell apart in the absence of the unifying threat of Tokyo, and following Pawoo's triumphant return to Imihama, the ever-feuding powers were at one another's throats once more. Though saying that, pretty much everyone had suffered heavy losses in the war, and so a small peace did reign as prefectures looked to repair the damage done to their lands.

In Hyogo Prefecture, the chairman of Matoba Heavy Industries was initially overjoyed to find that the urbanization had actually *improved* the realm's productivity. His happiness was short-lived, however, as the engineers who understood the technology objected to the weapons program and splintered off to form other firms centered on medicine and transport infrastructure. Thus, did Matoba quickly fall from market leadership and the land of Hyogo become home once more to a vast number of competing industries.

As for Kyoto, former seat of the Japanese central government and first to fall at the hands of the White Apollos, once it became clear the war was over, the politicians came scuttling out of their hiding places and returned to work, choosing the new urbanized prefectural bureau as their base of operations. The badgers who had taken up residence in the area had more than a few choice words for these opportunistic scoundrels, but the government paid them a hefty sum of money to kindly take their business elsewhere, and so they did. Every now and then, however, you would hear tales of civil servants going missing in the hallways, or of elevators swallowing up an intern or two, never to be seen again.

Once the government was reinstated, persecution against the Mushroom Keepers came back in full force. However, everyone had now fought alongside them and knew them to be trustworthy folk. Still, they were an unsociable people by nature, so their lifestyle ended up being not too dissimilar from persecution anyway. The freedom to come and go as they pleased, however,

proved great comfort to the Mushroom Keepers, who eagerly traded with the cities for comics, films, game consoles, and other diversions of the old world.

And all across the land, people were starting to realize that something very strange had happened. The scattered showers of rainbow dust that had occurred all over the country the day Tokyo fell never became more than a passing comment about the weather to most people, soon falling out of the collective public psyche beyond a rather vocal minority who took it as a sign the world was ending. But a few days later, people noticed a steady decline in the number of people catching the Rust, and there were even reports of patients recovering under their own power.

It was happening slowly, but the spores of the rainbowsrooms were allowing mankind to coexist with the Rust, elevating them to the next step in their evolution. Of course, it was not only humans who benefited from this blessing, but all living creatures, some of which mutated into ever more dangerous variants. But the mushrooms do not play favorites to humanity. That is simply life.

No one could predict what the future held, now that the shackles of the Rust had fallen away. But there was sure to be no good or evil there. Humanity, and indeed life itself, had been set upon a new path, with only one another's beating hearts for company.

And I would have liked to end this tale there. However, there is one more story that must be told. A story of two boys, somewhere in this vast and thriving world. Two boys who tore down the walls obstructing humanity, walls that no one even knew were there. Like a bow and arrow. Like a meteor. We go now to these two boys, to see what fate awaits them at the end of it all.

"...There. Got it out. Now we just have to disinfect it. Wash your mouth out with this, please."

"Is that the end, Dr. Panda?"

"All done! If it bleeds, chew on one of these cottonsrooms, okay?"

"Maw! Mah bad tooth's all gone!"

"Say thank you to the lovely doctor, sweetie. Here, your fee."

“Oh, no, I couldn’t take so much. It was only a simple procedure.”

“Really? Well, you oughtta take half, all the same.”

Somewhere in the north of Tagakushi Prefecture, the badgers had set up a new camp in the ruins of a large shopping mall brought down by the Nagano air force. Bisco and Milo were here to obtain a replacement for Bisco’s beloved cat-eye goggles, which Milo had let burn up in Earth’s atmosphere. As far as Milo was concerned, his partner ought to be off enjoying the perks of married life, but Bisco seemed to find the constant hair in his eyes quite distracting, and after all, it was Milo himself who had caused the goggles to meet their untimely demise in the first place. So in the end, he had agreed to help.

“Hey, what the hell’re you tryin’ to pull? Who’s gonna pay fifty sols for this old model?!”

Milo looked up from his sink at the sound of Bisco’s angry voice.

“Listen, son. Goggles like these are a rarity these days. This here’s a vintage item, and ya won’t find workmanship this solid comin’ outta the factories, I tell ya.”

“I know, but the price...”

“Well, I suppose it’s a little outside of a young man’s budget. Pity they reset the bounty system, wouldn’t ya say?”

“Why’s that? I ain’t got no interest in tradin’ heads for scraps.”

“You wouldn’t need to, Akaboshi. Just turn yerself in an’ pocket the three mil.”

Milo poked his head outside the tent that read TRAVELING PANDA CLINIC to see Bisco rolling about with laughter at the heavily armored badger’s awful joke.

“Oh, Milo,” he said when he noticed his partner’s arrival. “Gimme fifty sols, will ya?”

“Whaaat?! I have to pay?!”

“If it weren’t for you, we wouldn’t be here in the first place, you dumb panda!”

But just as the two boys launched into another of their farcical spats...

“Waaaah!”

...a scream erupted from the far side of the ruins. Bisco and Milo spun around to see a large white reptile clinging to the side of one of the buildings.

“What the hell? A chameleon?!”

“It’s a buildingchanger! It disguised itself in the ruins!”

The mutated reptilian creature with a window-like pattern on its back had snatched up a crowd of people in its long tongue and was just about to swallow them whole.

“I fear it’s already too late to save ’em. We gotta get the hell outta here!”

“Hey, badger! How much of a discount will you give me if I take that thing down?”

“You can’t be serious, pal!”

“Milo!” Bisco yelled, and immediately a great orange meteorite landed at his side, his blue-haired partner atop the saddle.

“Get on, Bisco!”

Bisco leaped atop the crab as well, and Milo lashed the reins, spurring Actagawa on. Just before they disappeared, Bisco turned to the badger and yelled, “If I take that thing down, you gotta give me those goggles for free. Deal?”

As Actagawa raced toward the foe, Milo flashed his bow, and his arrow embedded itself at the base of the buildingchanger’s tongue. His blue oyster mushrooms burst into being, freeing the trapped civilians. But Bisco just stared with his big green eyes.

“It didn’t feel a thing. I knew it; the creatures round here are a lot tougher than before!”

“Don’t do anything too reckless, Bisco! We’re not immortal like we were before!”

“Maybe not in body, but we are in spirit!”

Bisco pulled his bow tight, preparing the deadly finishing blow. The Rust-Eater spores, their part in this story apparently concluded, lay dormant in the Mushroom Keepers' blood, never again appearing when they fired their bows. Still, their mantle was taken up by the flames of life that burned within them, and which ignited Bisco's eyes with a fiery spark.

"I'm sensing some strong Rust power from that creature! Are you sure you can handle it, Bisco?!"

"Who the hell do you think I am?!"

As the buildingchanger lashed its long tongue, Milo cried out, "Actagawa!" and the giant steelcrab leaped up into the air. The lizard creature peered up into the blinding light and saw a pair of piercing green eyes and red hair silhouetted against the sun.

"I'm Rust-Eater Bisco! I help kids grow up big and strong!"

Pchew!

Thud!

Gaboom!

With a rumble of the earth, a gigantic King Trumpet mushroom pushed through the soil and erupted high into the sky, as if to touch the clouds.

Then it shed a rain of glittering spores, emitting a warm and welcoming light.

A light on all things.

Good, evil.

Faith, doubt.

Humans, animals, plants.

The past, the future, and today.

And all living creatures, great and small.

And all things that will one day meet their end

saw in that light a new beginning.

A light of blessing. A light of hope.

For a few beautiful moments, all who saw it stood petrified with wonder.
And then, once the moment passed, they each returned to their own lives.

AFTERWORD

So, while writing this, I encountered a bit of neck pain, and so one day, I went and sat in the café with a brace around my neck.

When I did, the following exchange occurred:

“Oh no, sir! Did you have an accident?!”

“Ah, no. I just...”

“How awful. Here, have a seat on the couch and put your feet up. That’s better. I’ll put your things here. Can I get you a coffee?”

“That’d be great, thanks.”

“I gave you two stamps on your loyalty card there. Take care of yourself. I’ll get you your coffee now.”

I received excellent service. It was the same café I usually frequented, so at that time I thought, “You know, it’s not all bad having people recognize you.” However, from then on, I became known as “neck-brace guy” and “accident guy,” so, you know...everything with a grain of salt.

It almost seems like a parody of modern life to see a man in a neck brace sitting in a café typing away on his laptop. Perhaps they were feeling sorry for me.

With that boring anecdote out of the way, we’re finally at the end of the third volume. It’s a deeply emotional experience for me. On top of the success of the first and second books, I feel like I’m on my way up a tall mountain. (Not that I’ve ever been mountain climbing before, but I imagine it’s the same thing.) The theme for this book was a struggle with the past, but by the end of it, I found that I’d exhausted my own past completely. When I started writing *Sabikui Bisco* for that contest all those months ago, my plan for the story comprised about a napkin’s worth of notes, all of which have been explored as of this

volume.

When I first came up with the ending to this three-book arc, I envisioned the two boys falling through Earth's atmosphere like a meteor after they narrowly averted disaster, closing their eyes in eternal sleep, becoming lost in the blazing heat, and eventually falling to Earth in some form or another.

"How's this? I think it's quite a dramatic finale...," I suggested, handing the plot outline to my editor, who said:

"Wait, so do the two of them die?"

"Erm... I suppose?" I replied. "It depends on how you want to look at it..."

"They can't die! What about the sequel?!"

And so, with the blessings of my editors, and of course the support of all its readers, it seems *Sabikui Bisco* shall continue. I, for one, am overjoyed to be allowed to pen their next adventure. Thank you ever so much.

In any case, I've a daunting task ahead of me. Hope's final lines, "The walls of the past have come tumbling down, and all that remains is a vast, infinite future!" apply to me as well. I should think myself free of the chains that have bound me and create a whole new world!

Now that's putting it theatrically, even for me.

But it's time to break my own rules (and I can hear you now—"You had rules?!"—but believe me, I did). I must avoid falling into stereotypes and allow Bisco and Milo to embark on a new adventure, free of all the baggage they've carried with them so far. I wonder how they will react to that? I can't wait to see.

And so Bisco and friends settled the score with the ghosts of the past. This marks an end to a large portion of their story.

But it is not *the* end, no.

Next time, they must...well...

We'll just have to wait and see, won't we?

(Shit, I have to come up with something?)

To finish off, I want to thank all readers on behalf of the production team for your support in making *Sabikui Bisco* a reality, and also I hope you will continue to bestow upon my colleagues the respect that they so deeply deserve.

With that, I shall see you next time.

—*Shinji Cobkubo*

SABIKU BISCO 4

SUMMIT CROWD PRESENTS

NEXT VOLUME
PREVIEW

THE MUSHROOM ARTS DEFEATED?!

BOOOOOOM!!

THE FAMOUS HIGH-SECURITY PRISON, "SIX REALMS"

"I SHALL NOW PASS JUDGMENT!!"

PRISON
CITY

"I'll break out.
Even if I'm
stripped of
all I have.
The spores
are everywhere."

WINTER
2022

A NEW
CHAPTER
BEGINS

24 HOURS Rampaging
Mokujin

"Akaboshi Mark I" "It's you...!"

"What did you do with Bisco?!"

"I put him in a coffin. He was a scarlet rose...the color of your blood."

MYSTERIOUS FLOWER
ARTS GABOOM!

"We cannot grant that wish. Not so long as
the two of you are Mushroom Keepers."



—*Some time later...*

“This all used to be apartment blocks. We were talking about making it a residential area again, maybe bringing down that office building and putting a park there instead...”

“I would advise against it. The Rust Flow here is too violent for human habitation. It will only rile up the Imihama citizenry, disturb public order, and turn the people against the bureau.”

“Th-the Rust Flow...?”

Milo scrambled to keep up with the skipping Amli, running for his blueprints after the strong wind tore them from his hands.

“I believe you should build a casino here, Mr. Milo, sir. It is the perfect spot to encourage a bit of fast-and-loose living.”

“Whaaat? This whole lot? It’ll be huge!”

“So I should hope. All the better to capture the hearts of your customers and keep them at the tables.”

Amli watched Milo as he hurriedly scribbled across the plans and gave a light chuckle.

“Rest assured, Mr. Milo, sir. I am the high priestess of the Kusabira sect, after all. No one possesses greater cunning for sniffing out the whims of the land than I.”

“O-oh, I trust you, of course!” replied Milo. “I just don’t know how I’m going to explain this to Pawoo...”

“Come along, Mr. Milo, sir. We have much surveying to do before sunset. Now, let us think about these shrines to the Mushroom Keepers’ eighteen gods...”

Once the threat of Tokyo passed, Pawoo herself took control of the efforts to repair the war-torn city of Imihama. Halfway through the schedule, however, she was approached by none other than the mother-and-child pair, Amli and Raskeni, who happened to be staying at Imihama a little longer.

“Pawoo,” Raskeni said. “Since we have the chance to rebuild, how about spiritualizing the place a bit? Let a little Buddha into the lives of the people?”

“Hmm?”

The fierce governor folded her arms over her loosened suit and nodded in understanding.

“In other words, you want me to build some extra shrines and temples, is that it?”

“Ha-ha!” Raskeni chortled at the directness of Pawoo’s suggestion. “Well, that’s certainly part of it, but it’s not all that simple. You have to be careful. You can’t allow one creed to become better represented than another, or it’ll tip the balance of power, and before long you’ll have an insurrection on your hands. After all, it’s not uncommon for one tribe’s god to be another tribe’s demon, you understand?”

“Hmm. Well, I suppose you must know what you’re talking about, to have kept the peace in Six Towers all this time.”

But even as she said this, Pawoo frowned at the design blueprints on her desk and brushed her long black hair aside in frustration.

“However, it puts me in a rather difficult position. No matter which theologian I employ to advise me in such an endeavor, they will inevitably be biased toward their own particular sect. How should I proceed, I wonder...?”

“Ms. Pawoo, ma’am. I assure you we did not make our suggestions lightly.”

“Amli...what exactly does that...?”

“It means we’re gonna lend a hand, of course,” said Raskeni, scooping up her excitable daughter into her arms. “We’ve been listening to the heartbeat of the land around Imihama over the last few days. Figured we might as well pitch in while getting some sightseeing done. What do you say?”

And so, in order to better understand the needs of the worshipers, the two Kusabira sect leaders had been brought onto the reconstruction efforts.

But what’s all this got to do with me? thought Milo as he struggled to keep his eyes open. The whole thing had been thrust upon him quite suddenly, and

initially it was supposed to have been his sister babysitting Amli on her tour of the city. But this morning...

...*Bang!* The door of Milo's bedroom at Panda Clinic flew open, and in marched Pawoo.

"Wake up, Milo! There's been a change of plans. Could you fill in for me during the inspections today?"

"...Pawoo... What the...? It's the middle of the night..."

"Please! I'll buy you your favorite honeycomb crackers... Oh, shoot, my hair's a mess... There we go. Thanks a ton, Milo. I'll see you tonight!"

"..."

Milo sat up in bed, watching his sister depart as abruptly as she had arrived. It was the unholy hour of four o'clock in the morning that Milo thus awoke and went to meet with Amli, without even having time to brush his hair.

"Mr. Milo, sir. I believe a shrine to Yatanaten would work best over there!"

"Hwaaaaahhh...?"

"...Dear brother! Does a walk with me truly bore you so?"

"Haah...?! N-no! Not at all!"

"...Well, I shan't press any further. It is evident that you lack sleep. You really do look like a panda with those bags under your— Er, I mean..."

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that. Yatanaten's shrine near the west gate..." Milo scribbled on his blueprints.

"Come to think of it, I wonder what Ms. Pawoo's business was that was so important she could not accompany me? That woman wouldn't miss a day of work in her life!"

Amli took out a drawstring pouch from which she popped a candy into her mouth and offered one to Milo. Milo munched on it, scribbled something on the plans, and gave a huge stretch before replying.

"She's on a date."

"...A what?"

“There are only two things more important to Pawoo than the office. Me, and her husband.” Milo opened his mouth as if to ask for more, so Amli tossed him another of her sweets. “She’s out shopping with Bisco today. I mean, I’ve been nagging Bisco to spend more time with her, so I suppose I got what I asked for.”

“Shopping, you say?” Amli blinked a few times to fix her straying glass eye. “At four o’clock in the morning?! What store is even open at that hour?”

“No, she’s taking him on a practice run first. That’ll take them about five hours. When Pawoo sets her heart on something, she likes to be thorough. She’s always been this way, for as long as I can remember.”

“...I-in any case,” stammered Amli, attempting to force a smile, “nobody can say that they aren’t getting on well enough, can they? To tell you the truth, I was a little worried at the prospect of Mr. Bisco getting married. Ms. Pawoo and Mr. Bisco are both formidable people, and I suppose to us mere mortals their married life must appear quite strange. But as long as they are living a happy and fulfilling life together, then who am I to complain?”

“I’m with you on that one, Amli,” replied Milo. “But I think there’s something you’re failing to consider.”

“Mr. Milo, sir? Whatever might you mean by that?”

She cocked her head and looked over at Milo, who scratched his head in displeasure. Just then...

...Bang! Crash!

A certain red-haired Mushroom Keeper came crashing through the wall of a recently constructed shopping mall and into the morning sky. He proceeded to fall through the roof of the bar next door, landed skillfully on his feet, and shouted back up through the hole:

“Hey! What’s wrong with you? Don’t you have the brains to talk things out?!”

“My words are lost on a man who has no concern for how I feel!”

Then from the hole in the wall came a woman with long black hair, wearing a floor-length dress. She was beautiful, but the one thing that might give an admirer pause was the fierce-looking staff she held in one hand.

“As the wife of a Mushroom Keeper, I know full well that logic will not persuade you. Thus, I hoped as warriors we might reach an understanding through battle! Now take up your staff, Bisco!”

The Mushroom Keeper caught the iron bar the woman threw him with a look of pure terror on his face.

“What the hell?! You really gonna throw down right here?! Okay, look, you win! We can—!”

“Less talking, more fighting!”

The woman in the dress fell toward the Mushroom Keeper below like a meteoric whirlwind of black, and a lightning-fast exchange of staff swings followed.

Klang! Klang! Kling! Kling!

Each blow caused a flash of sparks, and the echoing noise of crossed steel filled the streets. Very soon, a large crowd of people had gathered to watch.

“Look, it’s the governor! They’re having a lover’s spat!”

“They’re really at each other’s throats this time. I think that’s the fifth fight today!”

As the bystanders gawked, Milo and Amli climbed up onto a rooftop across the street and watched the two mighty warriors do battle.

“My! I have never seen a husband and wife so eager to kill each other! There must be some misunderstanding between the two, Mr. Milo, sir! We must go and stop them!”

“It’s fine. They’re always like this.”

“Whaaat?!” Amli turned to Milo in surprise.

“It always comes down to a fight with those two,” he said, shrugging. “It’s all they know. I hope it doesn’t cause issues in their relationship. I’ve never seen a couple like them before.”

Still, Milo was unable to take his eyes off Bisco. His warrior’s senses, honed and drilled by his partner and mentor, would not allow a second of the

extraordinary battle taking place to go unseen. There were zero openings in Pawoo's staff technique, and even upside down and in the air, she always swung with power and precision, wasting not a single movement. Her attacks rained down on Bisco from all angles: head, side, wrist, legs, whittling down his defensive opportunities.

On the other hand, Bisco's technique was nothing short of prodigal. Despite only ever having been trained in the bow and dagger, he was able to hold his own against Pawoo, perhaps the most feared staff user in all of Japan, using nothing more than his own self-taught style and his wits. It was enough to convince a master of the art to pack it all in and take up pottery instead. Only Milo and Jabi would have understood that Bisco's divine talent was not based on any weapon style at all, but was instead rooted in the very act of fighting itself. He heard Pawoo's every breath, every twitch of her muscles, and instinctively worked out what her next move would be. Though the Rust-Eater spores may have left him, Bisco's innate battle senses had not gone rusty in the slightest.

Even Amli, though worried at first, had quickly become engrossed in the high-speed battle taking place before her eyes.

"Wh-who is going to win, I wonder?!"

"Rrraaaargh!"

Pawoo swung her staff with all her might, nearly bending Bisco's weapon into an L-shape with the force of her blow.

"Grrr!"

"Time to finish you off, Bisco!" she yelled as Bisco backed up to the edge of the rooftop. Then, just as the crowd thought she perhaps ought not to finish off her husband, she swung her heavy staff down toward his skull.

"I suppose that's it," said Milo.

"Ms. Pawoo has won! We should hurry over and—"

"Not yet, Amli. Just watch."

Even at a distance, Milo could pick out the jade-green spark in Bisco's eyes.

Like a flash, he disappeared under Pawoo's legs at the last minute and evaded the blow.

"What?! Wh-whaaa?!"

A shock ran through Pawoo's arms. Her staff had kept going and struck a neon sign behind Bisco, sending an electric current through her body.

"Grrr...! What a foolish error...!" growled Pawoo as her staff fell from her hands.

"It's over, Pawoo!" said Bisco, turning around and wiping the sweat from his brow. "You're always gettin' too carried away! I know I said if you won we'd do things your way, but do you hafta act like you're tryin' to kill me every time?"

"Heh. Now why are you acting like you've already won, my love?"

"Huh? Well, 'cause I—"

Pawoo tidied her hair and walked briskly over to Bisco, flashing him a grin and flicking the staff in his hands with her finger. Immediately, a crack ran along the length of it, and the staff let out a metallic creak before shattering into pieces.

"Whoa!"

"I've told you before. My staff doesn't kill. I've been wearing yours down this entire time. The moment you blocked my last attack, you had already lost."

Pawoo gave a fearless smile, and the crowded street erupted into cheers.

"Woo-hoo! Pawoo won! She beat Akaboshi!"

Pawoo waved at the admiring crowd, while Bisco stared at his empty hands in astonishment.

"Dammit. I can't believe... Hmm? Wait, then why did you say, 'Time to finish you off!' as you attacked? Hadn't you already won by then?"

Ignoring him, Pawoo turned to her husband and smiled. "Now I've finally gotten you back for the defeat I suffered at your hands the first time we met. And since I won, the honeymoon is going to be ten days, nine nights! I'd like to say I don't particularly mind where we go... But I have to make sure you learn how to be a good husband, so I'll be looking forward to double-checking your

plans when they're done."

"Whaaat?!" asked Milo later that night, after dragging Bisco to the steamed bun stall. "That fight was about your honeymoon plans?!"

"Don't get mad at me! She just went off the rails all of a sudden. Besides, I woulda won if we'd been using bows or daggers. Why'd I have to use a staff? It ain't fair."

"That's not the point! Tell me everything that happened, from the beginning!"

Milo listened to Bisco's tale as he chewed on an alligator bun. His interpretation went something like this:

As Pawoo had been in a sullen mood over her husband's indifference lately, Bisco had turned to page twenty-one of the *Pawoo User Guide* (written by Milo Nekoyanagi) and said to her, in a voice Milo could only imagine being completely devoid of emotion, "Hey, how about we go shopping today and maybe catch a movie?" This had cheered up Pawoo so much that she took the day off work, foisting Amli onto Milo, in order to plan her date down to the exact minute. However, when the time came for them to meet, Bisco had been distracted by a woodworking workshop at the Imihama department store and had spent a total of three hours creating a marvelous, if unorthodox, effigy of the god Enbiten.

"So did Pawoo get mad that you stood her up and ruined her plans?"

"Nah. In fact, she loved the statue."

That setback was nothing that Pawoo hadn't been prepared to accept when she married a Mushroom Keeper, and she could handle it, knowing it made her husband happy. What she *couldn't* handle was what happened next, when the pair went to meet with a travel agent.

"She said I didn't understand why we were travelin'," Bisco explained, chewing his steamed bun, then asked the shopkeeper for seconds while Milo sat unable to respond. "Which is true. I mean, us two went all over the place and we didn't have to pay a single sol or follow some stupid schedule. I just didn't see the point."

"Erm... Well... I mean... Yes, that's true for us, but..."

“So I told her I wasn’t goin’ on any damn trip, and let me tell you, she lost her freakin’ mind. ‘How can we be newlyweds and not go on a trip?’ she said. ‘You should have been ready for this when we got married!’ she said. ‘We’re taking this outside!’ But I didn’t have any time to take it outside, ’cause she threw me out herself, through the damn wall.”

“And then? The usual?”

“Yeah.”

A couple whose first resort was to settle arguments with a brawl was a very odd arrangement indeed, but it was certainly a fair way of putting to rest any disputes that would surely arise along the troubled road of married life. By now, even Milo had accepted it was just the way things had to be.

“I ain’t mad that I lost; that’s fair play to her. So I said, ‘Fine, we’ll go somewhere, wherever you want.’ But she just said, ‘Well, there’s no point if you’re not going to enjoy it,’ so now she’s asked *me* to come up with suggestions.”

“Well, that’s good, then, isn’t it? You can go somewhere you want to go.”

“Yeah, but us two and Actagawa have traveled the country top to bottom. There ain’t nowhere left I *wanna* go.”

Milo knew he had to convince Bisco somehow, in order to protect the enthusiasm of his big sister, but it was starting to look like an insurmountable task. The only things that got Bisco excited were mushrooms, bows, and manga, and though he was a red-blooded man, he seemed to have no interest in sex or anything of that nature. He certainly hadn’t the sense to navigate the subtle workings of an intimate relationship. And Milo doubted that the couple’s bedsprings had seen any action at all after Pawoo once came home complaining, “That man only thinks of a wife as a sparring partner!”

“B-Bisco, it’s a little weird for me to say this as her brother, but have you ever thought about...you know...?”

“This is an urgent news report.”

Milo’s words were cut off by the voice on the TV.

“The Tenmangu shrine in Houfu, Yamaguchi Prefecture, has come under attack. Aerial shots reveal pillars of smoke and flame visible from far away.”

“Argh, that’s messed up. Holy crap...,” muttered the steamed bun merchant, seeing the devastation on the screen. My family’s from there... Sorry, boys, mind if I turn up the volume?”

“Sure. Whoa, look at that... The whole forest is up in flames.”

Bisco’s attention quickly shifted to the news report, and Milo felt he had missed his chance to comment. Instead, he watched the TV as well.

“The terrorist is supposedly a large man wearing red plate armor and a red cape. According to eyewitnesses, the man attempted to enter the temple when he was stopped by the head priest and asked to remove his armor. This caused the man to become enraged, and he began firing high-tech weaponry...”

“Tenmangu shrine...that’s where Yatanaten is worshiped. That psycho’s gonna get some real payback for that one. Probably gonna curse his entire family.”

“Um, Bisco, hold on. Red plate armor and a red cape? You don’t think...?”

“The suspect has been spotted fleeing westward, possibly in the direction of Kyushu. Residents in the area are advised to take caution, and to... Hold on, I’m just receiving word that we have a photograph of the criminal taken at the scene. Here it is. Can you see him? I’ll enlarge the picture a little...”

“We ain’t gonna be able to see him anyway if he’s in full plate armor,” said the shopkeeper. “Well, whatever, the important thing is, he’s dangerous. Looks like I’ll be steerin’ clear of that neck o’ the woods for a while.”

“...”

“Um, boys?”

Bisco and Milo stared at the screen in horror. There on the screen, his steel body glinting from head to toe, glaring toward the camera while framed in the light of the burning temple, was none other than the one born of Bisco’s blood, the vainglorious rogue robot, Akaboshi Mark I himself!

“What’s wrong, boys? Got a bit of raw meat in your buns? I’ll make you new ones, just sit tight.”

“N-no, everything’s fine. Thanks a lot. The meal was lovely. Here, keep the change.”

“?? What’s gotten into you boys? Come back again, y’hear?”

Bisco and Milo hurriedly exited the establishment and ducked into a back alley, their faces dripping with sweat. After watching to make sure nobody was around, Milo grabbed his partner by the throat and shook him back and forth.

“I *told* you something like this would happen! Why did you let him go?! He’s a loose arrow; he hasn’t got a teacher like you! How do you think *you* would’ve turned out if you didn’t have Jabi?!”

“Uhhh...”

Milo’s sound logic was like a spike in Bisco’s ribs, and he couldn’t utter a single word to defend himself.

“I mean, sure, I felt sorry for him, too,” said Milo. “He shouldn’t have needed to die just because he wasn’t useful. I just wish we could have talked to him... Not that I’ve ever talked to a robot before...”

“I-it’s...”

Sweating even harder than usual, Bisco finally managed to squeeze out what was on his mind.

“It’s...my blood that created him, so doesn’t that mean he’s like my son? Shit, the Eighteen Gods are gonna kick my ass in hell for this...”

“Y-your son, Bisco? I think that’s a bit of a stretch...”

“Wait, didn’t he say he was heading to Kyushu?!”

Bisco suddenly realized something. His eyes went wide, and he immediately ran back out into the streets, as if he had somewhere to be.

“Bisco! Where are you going?!”

“We have to stop him! He’s headed to Oita, where Hatohoten’s shrine is!”

“Hatohoten?”

“The god of marriage!” Bisco yelled behind him as his partner tried desperately to keep up. “It’s Hatohoten who watched over and permitted our

wedding in the first place! If my son destroys his shrine, I'll have to get a divorce!"

"Whaaat?!"

"Where's Actagawa? Actagawaaa!"

Bisco let out a yell in the cold night streets of Imihama, and before long his trusty steelcrab landed in the town square.

"Actagawa! Sorry to disturb you on your day off, but we gotta go...!"

But just as Bisco was about to leap up into the saddle, he found it was already occupied.

"Well, hello there, Bisco, Milo! I wondered where Actagawa was off to all of a sudden. Did you call him?"

"Erk!"

"Pawoo!"

"Lately, I've been practicing my crabriding after work. I shouldn't leave my husband to do *all* the driving, after all." Pawoo laughed, her raven hair fluttering in the cool night breeze. "Just finished supper, have we? How about we go someplace, like...?"

"Er, no... We have to, erm...", stammered Milo, when suddenly Bisco spoke up.

"Hey, Pawoo!" he shouted, leaping up into the saddle beside her. "We're goin' on a trip. Right now. To Oita, to see the shrine of Hatohoten."

"A trip...? Right now?! Wh-what do you mean?!"

"I've decided what we're doing for our honeymoon!" He turned to Pawoo with a fierce gaze. "We're goin' on a pilgrimage. To make sure our kids grow up big and strong, we're gonna pray to all five gods in Kyushu."

"...Our...our children...?!" The shocked look on Pawoo's face slowly shifted to one of delight. "Of course I'll accompany you, my love..."

Pawoo was rendered completely demure by Bisco's suggestion. Meanwhile, Bisco looked over at Milo, sweating almost as much as he was, and the two

boys nodded to each other. Though Bisco had managed to kill two birds with one stone, Milo knew it was more good luck and Bisco's impatience that had accomplished it. Still, he kept that fact to himself and climbed into the pack on Actagawa's back.

"It is not the time for me to be thinking of work," said Pawoo. "Come, let us begin our journey of love at once!"

"By the way," Bisco asked, "you got your staff? We, er...we could run into *anything* out there."

"Of course," she replied. "My staff is the one thing I couldn't possibly leave behind on our honeymoon."

"*Why...?*" Milo muttered in confusion, but fortunately no one heard him over the noise of the moving crab.

And so, in order to put a stop to the villainous deeds of the rampaging Akaboshi Mark I, Bisco, his new wife, and his worried partner set out on Actagawa, who harbored no particular worries of any kind, and crossed the gates of Imihama.

At the same time, in a dark room, within a cylindrical container filled with a strange blue liquid...

Aka...boshi...

...a small organism, like an unborn fetus, suddenly twitched.

"...It did it again. No. Not yet. Don't wake up...," whispered a man in a lab coat, face cloaked in shadow. "Your vengeance is not yet fully grown. Sleep, for now..."

He loosened a nearby valve, and the liquid slowly grew cloudy before the tiny organism soon became completely hidden.

A...ka...boshi...

Only its eyes, unclosing, gleamed black. A pure dark flame of mad intent.

To be continued...

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