



SABIKU BISCO

SHINJI COBKUBO

Illustration by
K AKAGISHI

World Concept Art by
mocha

**THE CATWISP
BLADE: CLAWS
OF THE CAT**



The Rust Wind eats away at
the world. A boy with a bow
matches its ferocity.

WISDOM

KNOWLEDGE

POWER

AND

FAITH



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CLAWS OF THE CAT**

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SABIKU! BISCU



The scriptures state...
When mankind's
greatest city fell,
We, their servants,
turned our tails.
And built ourselves
a pleasant land,
Deep beneath the rocks and sand.



THE RUST WIND EATS AWAY AT THE WORLD

A BOY WITH A BOW MATCHES ITS FEROCY





"I am Geppei Amakusa. I am the one who will lead all of Byoma, all of cat-kind, and all of humanity to *la terre promise!*"

"Geppei! No longer shall I allow your malevolent fangs to snap at innocent humans!"

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Claws of the Cat

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**YEN
ON**
NEW YORK

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Sabikui Bisco, Vol. 7

Shinji Cobkubo Translation by Jake Humphrey This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

SABIKUI BISCO Vol. 7

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Class. Society. Tradition.

Anyone who blindly follows these
formless concepts is no cat.

A cat is a beast of freedom.

With sharpened fangs,
he tears at the throat of any agent
of these meaningless chains.

“Your wicked schemes end here, Geppei!”

A peal of thunder. A large tree erupts into flames, bathing the peak of Mt. Koban in vermilion light. A feline warrior, black as night, stands tall, opposed by an ivory-furred temptress.

Sparks dance like petals as two bitter foes glare holes into each other’s souls.

“Even one so wicked as you must still possess honor,” says the black cat. “I will allow you to keep it. Draw your claw across your gut and die a gracious death.”

His voice is as keen as the edge of his ringing blade, the point of which he aims between his foe’s eyes. A slender black tail trails from the seat of his emblazoned *hakama*.

The white cat glares back for a moment, and then...

“Myah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Though caked in blood and sweat, the ivory-coated feline returns cackling laughter, even as her plan to conquer the realm is sure to meet its end at the paw of the black cat before her.

“You, the Catwisp Blade, would show mercy to me...?”

She pants and gasps. And then her eyes produce a crafty glimmer.

“How very foolish!”

A blinding flash, like lightning! The black cat, his sight dispossessed, can do nothing to avoid the dagger-like claws bearing down on him!

“Your compassion shall be your downfall!!”

Swish!!

The two combatants pass. For a moment, silence grips the battlefield. And then...

Splat!

A spray of blood erupts...from the white cat’s shoulder. She cranes her neck

behind her for one last look at her killer.

“With my dying breath, I curse you, Yokan. You and all nine of your lives...”

And then she falls.

The black cat turns and examines her vacant expression, leaving his sword unsheathed to soak in her blood. Even as sparks from the immolated tree crackle in her eyes, her long lashes do not flutter.

Clang, clang.

Thank you for listening. What you have just heard is the first of many acts in the tale of the Catwisp Blade, a story passed down to us by the god Byoshoten. For slaying the wicked Geppei Amakusa, Yokan was crowned the eighth shogun and went on to perform countless other legendary feats.

But it is a strange tale, is it not? Even back when felines roamed the earth, nobody ever heard tell of a samurai cat.

Today is a day of ceremony, that most holy Day of Cats. By listening to this tale on this day, it is said that one can earn the favor of the catwisps, ensuring a healthy and prosperous year.

Now, I would like to continue the tale, but it is rather a strenuous one. Let us take a break and regale ourselves with the story of how this land of feline warriors came to be.

Byoshoten teaches us that the land of Japan is divided, into this, the human land, and the Feline Realm, where cat-kind is known to dwell. When Tokyo was ravaged by explosion, cats turned tail on humanity to begin a new life underground. A land where they could live in peace and harmony...

And the scriptures state that once, Japan was ruled by tyrannical creatures known as humans and was prosperous.

Many ancestors of feline-kind curried favor with them, while others eked out their own lives in the wilderness.

They concealed their true intellectual prowess, biding their time for the day they knew would surely come, the day they would finally usurp their masters.

It is hard to imagine now what they must have had to endure, do you not

think?

Eventually, as I'm sure you all know, their patience bore fruit.

Clang, clang.

Tokyo, the humans' seat of power, was destroyed by a terrible calamity! A bolt from heaven struck humanity's grandest idol, rupturing its reactor and spreading the Rust throughout the lands.

Saitama, Kanagawa, Chiba. One by one, humanity's cities, raised in arrogance, fell from their hubris.

While the humans dropped like flies to the Rust Wind, the ever-sagacious cats were quick to evolve and adapt. For this, feline-kind was granted the power of the catwisps, increasing their intellect, allowing them to walk upright and even to use tools.

And now they thrive, deep beneath the earth, in the subterranean empire of Byoma.

Or so the legend goes. With a wise ruler like Yokan at the helm, I am sure it must be a wonderful land, do you not think? Quite unlike things around here, I dare say. Though the corrupt Kurokawa was ousted as governor of Imihama, the young and inexperienced Pawoo Nekoyanagi doesn't seem to be faring a great deal better. Beauty alone does not a leader make.

Perhaps she could learn something from our feline shogun. A cat may look at a king, they say, but where do incompetent governors fit in? Oh dear.

Now, let us continue to act two. Ten years have passed since that fateful day, and Yokan has become a famed general. But just as he is about to be crowned emperor, the land is stricken by a mysterious plague...

Bang!

The doors to the storyteller's hut burst open, and in strode a furious woman—the embattled governor herself.

“Young?! Inexperienced?! Incompetent?! Who do you think you are?! You have no idea how hard I’ve worked to keep the peace! Wait until I get my hands on you! You’ll be telling your tall tales to the devil himself!”

The *rakugo* raconteuse cursed her rotten luck; she could not possibly have expected the very subject of her impertinent punch lines to be sitting in the audience.

Pawoo Nekoyanagi had a somewhat gentler air about her today. The workaholic governor had abandoned her stuffy suit, donning instead a *yukata* patterned with a Pipe Snake design. Her bundled hair was fastened at the side with a flower pin that brought out the natural beauty of her raven locks, and it was clear to see that she had been intending to spend a quiet, relaxing evening enjoying Byoshoten’s festival.

...Until a few seconds ago, at least. Her rage was evidenced by the incessant *Bam! Bam! Bam!* her festive water balloon made as she bounced it up and down on its elastic thread. It made everyone in the crowd turn and stare. Cries of “What’s going on?” and “It’s an air raid!” were heard.

“Slow down, Pawoo! Where the hell did you—? Ah, there you are!”

Into the hut a few seconds later came Bisco. He settled payment with the horrified doorman, then ran over to Pawoo.

“What’s got you so worked up?” he asked. “We can’t leave now; the story’s just getting good!”

“But they’re being mean! I came here to enjoy a nice story, not stress out

about work!”

“Yeah, but Yokan’s always talkin’ shit about authority; that’s the whole point! It’s just a joke!”

At this, Pawoo’s long black hair coiled as if it had a life of its own.

“You mean to say...,” she growled, “...this storyteller is poking fun at my government every time she tells this tale?”

“N-no! ...I mean, maybe?”

“That’s it! Anyone caught telling cat stories in Imihama will have their taxes doubled!”

You’re a tyrant!

“Anyway! I’ve had my fill of this place. Let’s move on.”

Capriciousness ran in the Nekoyanagi family, it seemed. In a flash, Pawoo twirled her candied starfish and pointed it between her husband’s eyes.

“Today is the Cat Ceremony,” she said. “And I intend for us to enjoy the festival together. Don’t you?”

Well, I was enjoying the story..., thought Bisco, but he didn’t dare say so out loud.

Yokan’s final battle against Geppei Amakusa was well known among Mushroom Keepers, and it had even been turned into a kids’ book. It was a story Bisco had heard many times, and yet...

It’s almost like she was there...

The tale was fiction, of course, and pretty absurd at that. But the way the woman told it had almost managed to convince Bisco she was recounting an old memory.

Bisco was a little saddened that his favorite tale had upset his wife. He scratched his tattoo and took one last look over his shoulder at the storyteller’s hut...before Pawoo’s monstrous strength wrenched him away toward the festive sounds of Karakusa Street.

CAT CEREMONY!

GIVE THANKS TO OUR FLUFFY FRIENDS!

ALL TOOLS AND METALS 20%–70% OFF!

Balloons floated in the clear sky, advertising their stores' discounts. An iguana rider, his steed adorned with a pair of false cat ears, distributed treats to excited children. Itinerant monks curiously eyed the wares on offer, and sellers of ritual tools hawked their wares over each other, fighting for business in the busy street.

Once upon a time, before the Tokyo Disaster, humans would keep cats in their homes. They would feed them, raise them, and it wasn't unusual to see them roaming the city streets.

However, the Rust Wind hit feline-kind much harder than it did humanity. Those who did not evolve died out, and what species remained were hardly tamable. Domesticated cats became practically extinct.

In the centuries that followed, many religious sects that revered cats as gods sprang up, and even one of the Eighteen was a cat god: Byoshoten, the god of freedom and financial good fortune, depicted as a beckoning cat statue.

The Cat Ceremony was a ritual to soothe the souls of all those dearly departed felines. Stories like the one just told were meant to allow the memory of cats to live on in oral tradition.

However, the one taking place in Imihama was ever so slightly different...

"It was Tirol's suggestion," explained Pawoo. "She said we should turn Imihama's Cat Ceremony into a festive affair. Get the whole prefecture involved."

She tugged on her husband's arm. Owing to the Pipe Snake design that continued up her costume's sleeve, it looked like Bisco was being pulled along by the creature's teeth.

"People were beginning to talk, you see. *The new governor can't keep her people under control! She never gets a moment to relax!* But look! Even tourists from neighboring prefectures are here, and the money is rolling in!"

"Sure..."

“...”

Pawoo frowned. Bisco's eyes were unfocused, and he didn't seem to be following along at all.

“I've got some good news that'll cheer you up,” she said. “I'm in talks with the Kyoto government to get your bounties rescinded!”

“I didn't even know they were scinded,” Bisco replied.

“It means you won't be a wanted man anymore!” Pawoo put her hands on her hips and puffed out her chest, as if to say, “*How do you like that?!*”

“It's been so long since you left Imihama,” she continued. “And our honeymoon went up in smoke. But now you'll be able to travel the country again! Isn't that great? The government finally recognizes your freedom!”

They recognize my freedom??

“It was a lot of work,” Pawoo continued, “but I bet you're happy about that, aren't you?”

“Hmm?”

“Come on! What's gotten into you?!”

Pawoo flicked her husband's forehead. But the force of a flick from *her* fingers nearly cracked his skull. Bisco bent over backward, clutching his head in pain, before running to catch up with his furious spouse.

Bisco was in a less-than-inspiring state. No longer did his bow match the ferocity of the wind. He was in a slump, out of sorts, and even his jade-green eyes had lost their luster.

You might even say he was...bored.

Pawoo turned and glared daggers at his calm, dopey expression. She was a woman who, once she made up her mind to do something, could never be dissuaded from that course, and ensuring Bisco's happiness was no different. However, everything she'd tried so far hadn't gone the way she'd hoped.

He wasn't all there. It felt like if she took her eyes off him, he would just vanish into thin air. She had to find some way to reach him, no matter the cost.

“What have I done to annoy you this time?” asked Bisco, oblivious. “You’ve been on the warpath lately!”

“I’ve been trying to make you happy, but nothing I do seems to work! What is it that you want?”

“What do I want...?”

“Just name it! I’m the governor of Imihama; I can get you anything! Is there something you don’t like about the festival? Just say the word, and I’ll change it!”

“Hmm...”

Nothing came to mind. It wasn’t so much the festival itself that was getting Bisco down but the radically different approach to festivities the common folk typically adopted. To Mushroom Keepers, the Cat Ceremony was a far more solemn affair. It wasn’t celebrated on a given day each year, but instead arose naturally, such as when a member of the tribe took down some powerful prey. At those times, the Mushroom Keepers would congregate and hold a ceremony as thanks to the god of the hunt for blessing them.

But that wasn’t even the main issue. What Bisco saw before his very eyes offended his ingrained sensibilities even more.

He could look past the cotton candy. He could look past the chocolate-covered bananas and iguana sausages on sticks. What Bisco couldn’t ignore was...

“...That.”

“Hmm?”

He pointed toward the prefectural bureau and the enormous TV monitor mounted to its side. There on the screen were three young ladies sporting cat ears and tails, prancing and twirling to a driving and irresistibly catchy beat.

“Is that supposed to be a ritual dance?” Bisco asked. “What the hell are they wearing?”

The girls’ short skirts and cropped tops left little to the imagination. That wasn’t to say there weren’t other priestess garbs guilty of the same sin, but

Bisco couldn't help feeling that this was a different matter entirely.

"That?" replied Pawoo. "It's cosplay. They're dressed up like Byoshoten."

"Huh?! You're kiddin', right...?!"

Bisco paused to calculate the probability of a divine thunderbolt reducing the city to ash before the night was through. Pawoo, meanwhile, seemed to figure something out.

"Hmm, I see," she said. "So that's more your style..."

"Huh?"

"Wait right there, Bisco. I'll go change. Won't be a moment!"

"Whaat?! No, wai—! *Mmph!*"

Pawoo silenced her talkative husband with the candy starfish in her hands before leaping atop a food cart and out of sight. Bisco stood there in shock for a second before figuring he might as well not let the sugary treat go to waste.

"Om-nom."

He took a look around the crowded street as he did so. He saw priests putting cat makeup on a group of excited tourists. Heard the curious intonations of the Shimobuki folk bartering for metals and animals. Over at a shooting gallery, he watched as a bunch of Mushroom Keeper kids ran away with the top prize. Everyone was smiling, enjoying the festive atmosphere.

Then he felt a breeze. A chill wind that bristled the hairs on his neck.

I don't belong here, he thought.

If there was one constant in Bisco's troubled life, it was that he was always traveling. He was destined to wander, his heart pounding in search of the unknown. Lately, Bisco had found his jade-green gaze returning to the road, even if he didn't quite understand why.

I know Milo will be with me no matter what I do, but what about Pawoo? What'll she do if I go off on another adventure?

Bisco knew that his wife wanted nothing more than to settle down. It would just be him, Pawoo, Milo, and perhaps a new member of the family if it was in

the cards. Bisco couldn't deny her that life, even if he wanted to.

But does that mean...?

He stood alone in the crowd, listening to the wind go by.

...I'm lying to myself? Am I denying the god that lives within me?

"Yoo-hoo."

A voice cut through the wind, drawing Bisco's gaze toward a dark alley.



“You there. Mushroom Keeper.”

“Hmm?”

A figure sat at a table, their whole body wrapped in a burka. They appeared to be a fortune-teller of some sort.

“You seem lost, my friend. Perhaps I can help.”

The figure stared at Bisco through a veil, a tattoo of a single eye visible on their brow. Atop their head was a pair of cat ears, but somehow these seemed far more lifelike than the ones the girls on TV had been wearing.

“I am an oracle of Byoshoten,” the figure explained in a voice that sounded neither male nor female. “I can read your fortune, if you’d like.”

“No, thanks,” replied Bisco. “Don’t have money anyway.”

“No coin necessary, my friend. I would be happy to practice my art on a fated individual such as yourself. I feel a strong connection between you and feline-kind. Please, come this way.”

“...”

Bisco had to admit, he felt strange powers at work, too. The fortune-teller seemed friendly enough, so Bisco walked over and sat down opposite them at the table.

“So how does this work?” he asked.

“Our world,” said the mystic, “is split. Between the Human and the Feline Realms.”

“C’mon, dude. Even I know that’s just a fairy tale.”

“To the followers of Byoshoten, it is the truth. Now, give me your palm.”

Bisco did as requested and extended his left hand.

“The Human Realm and the Cat Realm are like night and day. Each plays off the other... Okay, now your right, please. By understanding disturbances in the Cat Realm, we can predict their effects on this world, and...wait a moment...oh, my goodness. Oh no!”

Immediately after taking Bisco's right hand, the fortune-teller ground their spiel to a halt. They stared at his palm, apparently unable to believe their eyes. It didn't seem to be part of the act.

"...You good?" Bisco asked. "You're not inspirin' much confidence here!"

"A-apologies, but this cannot be! A-an arrow! An arrow of unimaginable power will pierce the Cat Realm! And what's more..."

The fortune-teller leaped out of their seat and fell to the ground, crawling away in fear.

"It shall break the seal of Geppei Amakusa?!"

"Dude, what are you talkin' about? Calm down!"

"Oh, woe! Woe be upon ye!" the fortune-teller cried. "And woe upon freedom! The freedom your arrow seeks! Because of that, the Feline Realm is doomed!"

"I don't understand a word you're sayin'! Come back!"

"Eep!"

The mysterious mystic turned tail and fled as if they'd seen a ghost. Bisco began to pursue them but didn't get far before realizing what a pointless endeavor it all was. The figure had left all their fortune-telling paraphernalia there in the alley, too.

"The hell was that about?" said Bisco, peering at his hand, at the palm that had apparently given the clairvoyant so much grief. He turned to rejoin the main street but wasn't prepared for the sight that greeted him.

...What the?!

Everyone was gone. The street was silent. Stalls stood empty, and discarded food and sweets lay strewn about the ground.

Bisco exited the alley to get a better look, and it was then that he heard a screech from above.

"Myaah!"

"Whoa!"

“Miao.”

“...Pawoo?!”

She was crouching on a pipe that ran overhead, poised on all fours. She sported a pair of feline ears and a tail, and even her eyes had become catlike slits. And though she was cloaked in shadow, those reflective eyes shimmered like a real cat’s.

Bisco could come to only one credible conclusion...

Somehow, Pawoo had obtained the most realistic cat outfit in the world. She always did like playing dress-up.

“...Listen, Pawoo! I don’t care *what* you wear! If you waited for me to finish talking, you’d know that! Now get down from there!”

Pawoo leaped down from the pipe with feline grace. Bisco sighed and walked over to her, crouching to look her in the eye. Up close, Bisco could see the long, fine whiskers extending from either side of her face.

“Where the hell did you get this outfit anyway? And how are these ears stuck on...?”

Bisco grabbed them and gave a mighty tug.

“Myaaaagh!!”

“Huh?!”

Bisco was so shocked that he let go. The ears were warm and connected to Pawoo’s head. She snarled at him, and her face was bright red.

“Hissss!!”

“W-what?! What happened to you?!”

Slash!

Moving like a typhoon, she scratched at Bisco with sharp claws, leaving three straight marks across his face. Bisco put his hand to the wound and felt blood.

“What the hell?!”

Then Pawoo bared her fangs and pounced upon her helpless husband!

“Mrow!!”

“Whoa?!”



Cat Ceremony!

...read the balloon. Tirol hooked the string and brought it near her, prodding it with her finger, whereupon it popped.

The streets were silent. Where had everyone gone? Vendors had abandoned their stalls, customers had left their money and goods all over the place, and even one of the Vigilante Corps’ iguanas sat riderless by the side of the road.

“Dammit...,” said the pink-haired girl as she passed through the unmanned north gate into Imihama. “I’m too late! It got everybody here, too!”

She panted, out of breath. You might think that an enterprising young girl like her had shown up merely to trade, but that wasn’t the case. You needed only to take a single look at her to see that.

For Tirol’s pupils were as thin as knives. Fluffy ears grew through the hair on the top of her head, and a pair of cute little fangs peeked between her lips. It seemed that she, too, had been transformed by this bizarre affliction.

“It’s just like Grandpappy said. I gotta find Milo fast!”

Just then, a bonefly came over and hovered nearby. This species of dragonfly was not particularly uncommon and had no bearing on Tirol’s quest. However...

“Mmmrow!”

Tirol was assailed by an uncontrollable urge! The bonefly narrowly dodged her claws and hovered a little higher. Tirol sat and glared at it, growling.

Then...

“...Ah! What the hell am I doin’? I’m lookin’ for Milo, not playin’ with bugs!”

Tirol tore herself away and began walking down the street, when suddenly she froze again. She felt an unbearable pressure bearing down on her from every window. And when she looked, she spotted the slitted eyes of the transformed townsfolk staring back at her.

“Uh... Uh-oh!”

Crashhh!

The glass windows shattered, and out leaped the half-feline people of Imihama. They came straight for Tirol—or rather, the bonefly at her side. Children, merchants, and members of the Vigilante Corps all sprang at her, but with catlike reflexes and agility, Tirol escaped the ensuing brawl in the nick of time.

““““Mrowrowrow!””””

“That was close! I’m gonna end up like that if I don’t hurry!”

Tirol gave one last look at the cloud of dust being kicked up in the street behind her before turning and setting off for Milo’s clinic.

“Doctor! We’ve got another case!”

“Bring them in!”

A stretcher was carried in. On it lay Nuts, the ace of the Vigilante Corps. Tight restraints bound his arms, waist, and legs. He was not hurt or bleeding, but one look was enough to know he was in a very dire state indeed.

“Nuts! Not you too...”

“Myagagaga!”

His trademark sharktooth mask had been lost during his fits. The doctor tightened a belt around the patient’s mouth to stop him from snapping, and instead, Nuts shook his head wildly.

He’s the same as all the others, thought the doctor. *Completely implacable.*

He wiped the sweat from his panda-spot eye. It was Milo, back to medical work and now the director of his own hospital. The other doctors and nurses all looked to him for guidance.

“The infection is spreading,” he said. “Why haven’t they stopped the festival yet? Have you told Pawoo?!”

“Well, she asked not to be disturbed today, even for matters of the highest priority...”

“...She’s on a date. Honestly, that woman!”

Milo shook his head and gathered his thoughts, then called out to the junior doctors.

“Everyone, gather round! I’ve worked out the major identifying symptoms of this disease! I’ll use this patient to explain.”

“Mrowrowrow!”

“First, take a look at these eyes.”

Milo held open Nuts’s eyes and showed them to the gathering doctors. They all shrank in fright at the boy’s mad, ferocious gaze.

“When exposed to light,” Milo explained, “the patient’s pupils become narrow slits, like this. In darkness, the pupils dilate to an extreme degree in order to take in as much light as possible.”

“But the boy’s only just been infected,” muttered a voice.

“The disease spreads so quickly,” said another.

“The other major symptom,” Milo went on, “is this transformation of the teeth.”

Milo carefully used a pair of forceps to pry apart Nuts’s lips so that the feral boy wouldn’t bite his fingers off. His jaws now resembled those of a fierce beast.

“There seems to be some individual variation, but all infected show some lengthening of the canines,” Milo pointed out. “They become so long, they could even be considered fangs.”

It’s almost as if...they’re turning into cats!

As he gave his explanation, Milo turned the horrifying realization over in his mind.

“Sir, what’s the name of this disease?”

“For now, let’s go with *catitis*.”

A simple name, but easily understood. Milo wiped Nuts’s slavering mouth and pressed a few buttons on his medicine machine.

“Have all our machines work on producing the antidote,” he requested. “The ingredients are cactushroom, lurkershroom, *enoki* mushrooms, and hiratinamine, applied under a rustine anesthetic.”

““Yes, sir!””

The doctors wheeled away Nuts’s stretcher and returned to their posts, mixing up medicine to deal with the crisis.

Alone in his office once more, Milo thought to himself. Even if he could calm the patients who were brought to him, all he was doing was buying time. He still had no idea where the disease had come from or how it spread.

We have to get to the bottom of this, before the whole country is turned into cats!

It was then that a panicked voice reached his ear.

“Thank god I made it! Where’s Dr. Panda?!”

“Eep! H-hold on! Dr. Nekoyanagi is very busy at the moment! If you like, I can take a mess—!”

“Outta my way, lady! This is life or death!”

Milo approached the door to his office to see if he couldn’t work out what all the fuss on the other side was about, when...

Bang!

“Whaah?!”

The door was flung open, and in tumbled a pink-haired girl with braids.

“Milo!!”

As soon as she spotted the fair-faced doctor, the cat ears atop her head wiggled, and she pounced on him. Seemingly unconsciously, she gently nibbled on his neck with her sharp fangs and sank her claws into his lab coat.

“Mrow! I’ve been lookin’ all over for ya!”

“T-Tirol! Wh-what are you doing here? ...O-ow, wait, stop! That hurts!”

“Hgyaagh!!”

“You’ve caught catitis!” he cried.

I need to calm her down!

Milo was pinned beneath her unusual strength. He relaxed his entire body so as not to trigger her hunting instincts and stroked her head between the ears.

“Good kitty. I bet you were scared, weren’t you? Everything’s going to be okay, Tirol...”

“Purr... Purr...”

Her instincts are running away with her. This could be bad!

Tirol’s claws were sunk deep into Milo’s flesh, and she kept licking his neck with her coarse tongue, tasting his sweat. Milo was worried she would soon bite his head off.

So with split-second thinking, he said:

“Tirol.”

“Hmmrow?”

“You know, there’s something even tastier than sweat.”

Milo dug his own nails into his neck, drawing a trickle of blood. It dripped down his throat, filling Tirol’s nostril’s with the potent scent of life. Her ears pricked up, and her golden eyes went wide.

“Come closer.”

Milo’s soft voice shattered what little of Tirol’s human mind remained. She sank her mouth into Milo’s neck, staining her nose with his lifeblood.

Now!

Milo seized this opportunity and pulled out a vial from his hip case. Then he wrapped his arms around the distracted Tirol, holding her in place before jamming the needle into the back of her neck.

“Hgyaaagh?!”

The Mushroom Keepers were trained to bring down large game, and none were more meticulous in their movements than Milo. Tirol shivered as the

liquid entered her body, and she emitted a long, sultry breath.

“Don’t move,” said Milo. “Just let it take effect. Relax...”

“Uwehh...”

Tirol lay there dazed for a few moments before suddenly returning to her senses and picking herself off the boy doctor.

“Milo! Oh, shit, I’m so sorry, I dunno what came over me, I just...!”

“I’m just glad you got to me quickly enough,” Milo replied. “We still have some beds free. Why don’t you take a rest and—?”

“Rest?! Ya gotta be kitten me!” Tirol took Milo by the coat lapels and shook him violently. “Grandpappy sent me; I gotta put a stop to this...this catastrophe!”

While Milo’s medicine counteracted the worst of the disease’s symptoms and halted its progress, it couldn’t reverse the effects entirely. Tirol kept pawing at the plush carpet beneath her feet before stopping herself.

“High Priest Ochagama sent you?” Milo asked. “You mean to say he’s worked out the cause of the disease? What is it?”

“Feast yer peepers on this.”

Tirol shoved her laptop screen in Milo’s face. On it was a satellite image feed centered on Imihama, displaying the driftweed plains to the north and the Northern Saitama Iron Desert to the south.

“Grandpappy says it’s some weirdo particles called catwisps what’re spreadin’ the disease,” she explained. “And ya can see where they’re comin’ from, can’t ya?”

Tirol pointed to the screen, toward Imihama, then drew her finger down, across the desert, past the Tokyo Crater...to the far south of the image.

“Right here.”

“Whaaat?! Tirol, what’s this?”

“Exactly what it looks like. It’s called the Cat Gate.”

It was small wonder that Milo cried out in shock. For what Tirol was pointing

to was none other than a giant cat face, right in the middle of the desert, staring back into outer space with emotionless eyes. The fact that it was visible from the satellite's orbit meant it must be truly enormous.

And it was from this baffling formation's mouth that the so-called catwisps came, for even on the satellite feed, a strange mist could be seen issuing from it and drifting northward toward Imihama, carried by the winds.

"I don't believe it! The source of the particles...is a huge cat face?!"

"There's more, but there's no time to explain! According to Grandpappy, we need to chant some magic phrase to the Cat Gate, and it'll go away! Milo, will you guard me while I...?"

All of a sudden, Tirol stopped speaking. Milo turned his eyes from the screen and looked over to see what had happened.

"...Tirol?"

"Butterfly!!"

Unable to control herself, she leaped at him. Milo reflexively ducked, sending her sailing overhead. The cause was a white butterfly that had fluttered in through an open window. As she jumped around the room chasing it, her slender pink tail caught a flower vase and knocked it onto the floor, shattering it.

"Whaaah! Tirol, calm down! Sit! Stay!"

"Hgyaaagh!!"

Milo tried every command he could think of, but to no avail. Tirol was dragged around by her animal instincts, pursuing the innocent butterfly until the air was thick with shredded documents that met their end at her claws.

If this is what Tirol's like now, then we really can't take our time. We have to stop this disease at the source, or soon there won't be a single freethinking human left!

Milo took out another counteracting agent and got up to deliver a second dose, when...

"Myaaaa!!"

“Huh?!”

He’d barely had time to breathe before the window shattered and in came a whirlwind of black hair. It was none other than the Iron Governor herself, looking less like a cat and more like a panther, dressed in her *yukata* and with flashing indigo eyes.

“Pawoo?!”

The once prim and proper Pipe Snake *yukata* was now disheveled and torn, leaving Pawoo’s coverage in a very risqué state. Her arms extended far beyond the edges of her sleeves, lengthened as they were by the progression of the disease.

“Pawoo! I’ve told you a thousand times! Do up your clothes!”

But Milo’s transformed sister didn’t seem to even hear his words. Her attention was instantly seized by the butterfly in the room, and she fought with Tirol for it.

“Mmyaagh!!”

“Myowrow!”

They began throwing feints, testing each other’s guards, and rolling about on the floor. It was then that another voice joined the brawl.

“There you are!!”

It was Bisco, who leaped in through a second window. By now his face was all scratched up and bleeding, and while the Rust Eater spores in his blood worked to repair the damage, he glowed at the seams like an active volcano.

“Milo!” he shouted. “Do somethin’ about that sister of yours! Talk about bitin’ the hand that feeds you; she damn near ripped my face off!”

“Hiss!!”

“Rowr!!”

“Whuh?! The jellyfish’s here, too?! Wait, stay back!!”

In the blink of an eye, Milo’s office had become a mess. Torn documents and X-rays littered the floor, and the culprit was none more than a nameless

butterfly.

Milo, meanwhile, was already wearing a gas mask. He pulled the pin from the numbsroom grenade in his hands before hurling it into the center of the room, where it started spewing white smoke.

“Mr...owww...?”

“Myeu...”

This scored a critical hit against the delinquent duo’s heightened animal senses, and they both crumpled to the floor immediately.

Meanwhile...

“Asshole! Tell me before you pull somethin’ like that!”

Wise to the use of mushroom arts, Bisco had quickly pulled his cloak across his face to avoid breathing in the hazardous spores.

When the smoke finally cleared, the two cats, pink and black, lay asleep, curled up and scratching their faces with their hands. Milo quickly fixed their clothes, covering up Tirol’s exposed belly, which rose and fell with her snores, and Pawoo’s...well, everything...that risked spilling out of her loosened garb.

“Phew, finally,” said Bisco, while Milo examined Pawoo’s pulse. “I tell you, she’s been mad at me before, but never so mad she grew claws and fangs! What did I do wrong? I complimented her hair and clothes, just like you said.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Milo yelled back. “People don’t grow fangs just because they’re angry!”

Pawoo might, thought Bisco.

“It’s a disease called ‘catitis,’” Milo explained. “And it looks like Pawoo’s caught it, too. Get your gear, Bisco! There’s only one way to save her, and that’s to travel to where this is all coming from!”

At Milo’s words, Bisco’s eyes glimmered.

“You mean, we’re leavin’ Imihama?!”

“Tirol knows the details. One second, I’ll wake her up...”

“It’s okay; I don’t care. I’ll go get Actagawa!!”

“Wh-what?! No, wait!”

“I bet he’ll be glad to see the road again. Unlike *me*, he don’t adapt so easily to the quiet life!”

Milo didn’t even manage to say where they were going before Bisco left the room. Still, he hadn’t failed to see the spark return to his partner’s cloud-filled eyes just before he dashed out the door. He knew more than anyone else what adventure meant to him.

“...Well, that cheered you up, didn’t it?”

I know you’ve been holding it in this past year.

But you don’t need to.

If you asked us to, we’d follow you to the ends of the earth. You know that.

Milo removed his gas mask and sat back, letting the wind blow in through the shattered windows and ruffle his sky-blue hair.

...Then he cast a look around his ruined office and let out a deep sigh. He looked at the singular butterfly responsible for the mess and, gently nudging it with his finger, encouraged it to take flight through the window, into the blue skies beyond.

A single giant crab lumbered through the Northern Saitama Iron Desert, the harsh winds delivering iron grit into the faces of his riders. On the distant horizon lay the rainbow shimmer of Tokyo, toward which the two boys gave a brief glance before wrapping their cloaks around themselves and spurring Actagawa on.

The region south of Tokyo was uncharted territory, a blackened wasteland where not even scorched eels or ironrats could survive. When the boys first set out, the weather had been fair, but now thick clouds of iron sand smothered the land and blocked out the skies, making it dark as night.

Yet even amid this dreary landscape, Milo occasionally caught a glimpse of a sparkle in Bisco's gaze and smiled. After a while, it seemed that Bisco noticed this and grew embarrassed, for he sheepishly pulled his cat-eye goggles down over his eyes.

"Yokan's legend is more than mere myth, you know."

"So you mean to say that there really is a nation of cats living underground, Your Eminence?!"

"Hmph. Crazy old man. Bet he believes in Santa Claus as well."

"Bisco!!"

"Once, our world and Byoma existed on different planes of reality. But that all changed when a miracle arrow landed here, in the very soil of Kanagawa. That arrow connected the Human and Feline Realms."

""A miracle arrow...?"""

Bisco and Milo shared a worried glance. On the screen before them sat the Banryouji High Priest Ochagama, a pair of cat ears poking out of his all-engulfing fuzz. He cleared his throat and prepared to explain.

“I’m talking about the Ultrafaith Arrow with which you two defeated Kurokawa.”

“Uhh...”

“So what you’re saying is...”

“This is all your fault, you idiots!!”

Even the usually mild-mannered Ochagama couldn’t contain his anger at the boys’ blatant disregard for the natural order. Twin jets of steam erupted from his ears.

“Opening gates to parallel worlds? Why, I’ve never heard such absolute codswallop in my life! I swear, if you boys fire that arrow one more time, I’ll come down there and slap you both silly!!”

“Whaaat?! But if we hadn’t used it, Kurokawa would have—”

“Mraaaaah!”

“Tirol!”

Milo put down the reins and turned toward Actagawa’s luggage, where the girl had been riding.

“Are you okay?” he asked her. “Do you need another shot?”

“I-I’ll be fine... I’m just bored, I guess...”

Tirol had brought a mouse toy with her, but it was already torn to shreds, and now she was beginning to make the backpack itself the target of her unmitigated fidgeting.

Her claws and teeth are getting sharper, thought Milo. *There’s no time to lose!*

Pawoo was back at Imihama, keeping the catified population under control with the help of the Vigilante Corps. Her resistance was stronger than most, so she was able to keep her sanity by taking Milo’s medicine, but there was no telling when the situation might devolve into violence.

“C’mon, Bisco. Can you see the gate yet?”

The impatience was clear in his voice. But Milo’s partner was silent.

“Bisco!”

“Shhh. It’s close.”

Bisco tuned the controls on his cat-eye goggles. He had been using them to peer at the mysterious firelike sparks that danced among the iron sands—what Ochagama had termed “catwisps.” Apparently, this substance was spoken of in Banryouji legend, and it seemed only to grow stronger and more luminous the deeper Actagawa stepped into the storm.

...And the boys weren’t the only ones who had seen it.

“Look at the firefish.”

Their glowing fins wiggled back and forth in the dark skies above. They seemed to take notice of Actagawa’s presence and turned in the air to eye him curiously. Bisco brought his steed to a halt.

“See how their fins move? They’re full of life. We’ve gotta be close.”

“Be careful not to breathe in the catwisps,” Milo warned. “I’ve inoculated us both, but we still don’t know the full effects of the disease.”

“There it is!” Bisco zoomed in his goggles and leaned forward in his saddle. “What the hell is that?!”

“Let me see, Bisco!”

“One second. I’ll clear away this storm.”

Bisco took an arrow from his quiver and fired it into the desert sands ahead.

Gaboom!

An enormous Rust-Eater burst from the barren soil, devouring the iron sand that made up the storm, and scaring the firefish away. Once more, Actagawa was bathed in sunlight.

“W-whoa...!”

Milo’s eyes fell on a formation ahead that appeared at first glance to be a hill or small mountain.

It was a cat’s head.

Its nose was pointed skyward, so all the boys could see from Actagawa's back was the side of its cheek rising out of the ground.

The cat's face narrowed its eyes in response to the sudden sunlight and let out a sleepy yawn.

"MROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOW."

The volume was so great, it was like a gale that fluttered the two boys' cloaks. They didn't know how to respond.

"That's it!" came the voice on the screen. *"That's the Cat Gate!"*

"Gate?! That's a living cat!" said Bisco, flabbergasted.

"Tirol!"

"Reportin' for duty!"

The two boys turned to see Tirol leap out of the luggage, scoop up the computer in her hands, and set her golden cat eyes on the mountain ahead.

"I just gotta get up there and say the magic words, and everyone'll turn back to normal!" she cried. "Bisco, Milo! Take me to the nose!"

"It don't make any sense," pondered Bisco. "How can something like that grow in the desert?!"

"'Cuz of your dumbass powers, remember?!"

"Let's go," said Milo, gripping the reins. "C'mon, Actagawa!"

Energized by his master's command, the giant crab approached the Cat Gate's cheek and attempted to scale it, but immediately his legs met with an unexpectedly soft purchase, and he fell back down to the ground.

"Ugh. Gross!"

"Keep trying, Actagawa!"

Actagawa could traverse the steepest mountains and the deepest swamps, but he'd never had to contend with a cat's face before. Milo could feel their loyal steed's frustration through the reins, but somehow the giant crab managed to wrangle his way up to the peak.

“MROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOW.”

“Look at that...”

““It’s the source of the catwisps!””

As they struggled to stay upright against the force of the cat’s voice, the three of them peered down into the cat’s mouth. Inside was a swirling cloud of sparks, like a galaxy, which appeared to be disgorging the powder into the sky.

“So this mouth leads to the Feline Realm?” asked Bisco.

“Yes, but do not allow the sight to distract you. Stare too long at the cat...”

“...and the cat stares back. I see. A wise saying indeed,” said Milo.

“Is it?” asked Bisco. “Ain’t that just what cats do?”

“You two, stop quibbling, I gotta concentrate! Now watch my back!”

Tirol leaped off Actagawa’s back with feline grace, computer in hand. She took a cable extending from it and plugged it into the cat’s nose, then began tapping away at the keyboard.

“All set up on my end, Grandpappy!”

“Link secure. Our priests are at the ready! Now all that’s left is to execute the mantra Hope left us!”

Ochagama held his staff aloft, and the hundred priests behind him all began chanting. The red letters scrawled across their foreheads glowed.

“Run program gatesel.exe!”

““Yes, sir!””

“Expect heavy firewall resistance. Tirol, my child. I’ll leave that part to you.”

“Really wish I’d brought a gamepad, but this’ll hafta do!”

Tirol switched windows, bringing up what looked like a pixel-based shooting game. Cat-shaped enemies dropped from the top of the screen, disgorging bullets. Among them, a miniature jellyfish dodged and weaved, firing Sanskrit letters back at the foes.

“I’m in, Grandpappy! Inject the code!”

““Lawunch-geit-clowzer! Serch! Updayt! Deleet-kat-confyuzer! Bild! Updayt! Serch! Relawunch-kat-deleeter...””

“Son of a bitch! Who set this thing to ‘Lunatic’...?”

Tirol’s ship adeptly took out the enemy cats, but by now, her fur was slick with sweat. As the Banryouji mantra penetrated more and more of the Cat Gate’s defenses, the whole mountain began to shake.

“Hey, how come you just started playin’ a game?” Bisco asked.

“It’s not a game,” Milo explained. “It just looks like one. The power of Banryouji’s monks becomes bullets, which she uses to—”

“Well, whatever it is, it looks fun. I’m goin’ next after she dies.”

“Shut up, shut up! I’m tryin’ to focus here! ...C’mon...just a little more...!”

Tirol’s fingertips moved across the keyboard at lightning speed, her ship’s attacks slowly whittling away at the health gauge of a large cat statue that had appeared on-screen. But just before it reached zero...

“MR...MR...MR...”

“The cat’s wakin’ up!” Bisco cried.

“It’s too dangerous here!” shouted Milo. “Tirol, you have to come back with us!”

“Not now! I’m so close! I just gotta use a bomb, and—”

“MRAOCHOO!!”

The Cat Gate’s “sneeze” flung Bisco, Milo, Tirol, and Actagawa high into the air before they could even react. They were assailed by the gale-force wind that blew from the cat’s mouth and caught up in a tornado of glowing sparks.

“Bisco!!”

“I can’t even move! This wind’s too strong!”

“MROOOOOOOW.”

The mountainous cat suddenly awoke, and its eyes shot open, examining the four targets tumbling through the air above. It immediately homed in on

Actagawa, who looked the most nutritious of the bunch by far.

“Oh no! That cat’s going to eat our crab!”

“Not if I can help it!”

Bisco’s hand went to the pouch at his waist. Rummaging through it, he pulled out a clamshell mushroom grenade, which he tossed Actagawa’s way.

Bang!

The exploding clamshell mushrooms propelled the giant crab sideways, causing him to narrowly avoid being engulfed by the catwisp tornado. Watching him land safely on the ground below, the two boys heaved a sigh of relief.

“What are you two clowns so calm about?! What about me?! I’m gonna get sucked in! Hellp!!”

“Milo, King Trumpets, with wires! Ready?”

“Got it! One sec—”

“MROOOOOOOOOOWWW!”

With its meal usurped, the giant cat grew angry! The typhoon increased in power and speed, engulfing Bisco, Milo, and Tirol and sucking them in.

“““Whoaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!”””

The trio’s screams grew more and more distant as they disappeared into the innermost depths of the Cat Gate’s mouth.

“Th-they’re gone!!” cried Ochagama from the screen of Tirol’s discarded laptop. *“The Cat Gate came to life!!”*

“Mrowl.”

“Oh no.”

With one flick of its whiskers, the Cat Gate smashed the obtrusive device, bringing peace and quiet to the desert once more. A great rumbling filled the air as it sank into the ground. Actagawa leaped into action, brandishing his greatclaw against the beast, but managed only to graze the cat’s nose before any trace of it disappeared beneath the desert sands for good.

...

Actagawa observed the spot for a moment, emitting bubbles, but with no brilliant ideas spouting forth from his crab brain, he decided the safest course of action was to blaze a trail back to Imihama, so that he could tell of the fate that had befallen his masters.

7

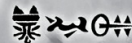
The Catwisp Blade:
Claws of the Cat

SHINJI COBKUBO

Illustration by K Akagishi

World Concept Art by mocha (@mocha708)

SABIKUI
BISCO



The Best Wind sails away at
the world. A boy with a bow
matches its ferocity.

Clang, clang.

In the eighteenth year of the Byoei era, during the rule of Yokan, now the eighth shogun of the Yatsuhashi house, a dark shadow falls over the realm. The evil prodigy Geppei Amakusa, Yokan's archnemesis, has returned!!

A mysterious power from the Human Realm heralds the reappearance of the monstrooms, come to terrorize Byoma like they did ten years past.

Naturally, our great shogun, Yokan Yatsuhashi, rises to oppose this new threat. And as agents, he employs the services of a group of mysterious travelers from the lands overground.

Now begins the latest chapter in Yokan's epic: Claws of the Cat. Keep those tails glued to those seats!

* * *

Ten years have passed since the death of the previous shogun, Rakugan Yatsuhashi. Under the governance of his eighth son, Yokan, Byoma has known a long and lasting peace. Though the general comes from humble birth, he is committed to rooting out wickedness and rewarding virtuous deeds. All are taken by his gentle personality—or should I say felinality—and as a result, Yokan is much loved by the people, and much reviled by evildoers.

However, in the eighteenth year of his reign, calamity struck the land of Byoma. A golden thunderbolt fell from the heavens, bringing with it a new and terrifying disease: the Rust.

"U-urgh. It hurts... The pain..."

Deep within Byoma Castle, Shibafune, one of the shogun's advisers, lay bedridden. He was an old Chinchilla breed whom Yokan's father had employed to watch over the young kitten from birth. He was spry and healthy for his age,

and none had ever seen him in such a miserable state. Yet now the Rust had claimed him, and his days were clearly numbered.

The disease took its name from the strange, rust-like coating that spread across the victim's skin. Once it appeared, death invariably followed; it was only a matter of time. Medical treatment could slow the spread of the disease, but no cure had yet been found.

"Have patience, my fellow. This should ease the pain."

Our beloved shogun, Yokan Yatsunashi, knelt by his bedside, nursing the dying Persian. He was now thirty years of age, and his black fur shimmered with the vigor of youth. He possessed a fearless and noble bearing, and so handsome was he that the people whispered there was not a cat in this land who could look into his dashing eyes and not be utterly charmed.

"Where would I be without your stubborn words, old friend?" he said, attempting to cheer his loyal servant. "You cannot die. Not yet."

"My liege. I wish to burden you no further. Pray, allow me an honorable death. Let me die at your paw, and not at that of this perishable disease."

"Do not speak of such cowardice before me."

Unlike the old Chinchilla's, Yokan's scarlet eyes showed no trace of tears. He gripped the adviser's paw tightly.

"We will find a cure," he said. "So I beg you, do not give up on life. If you die, then Byoma dies with you."

"Urgh...my liege... Shed no tear for this old mog..."

Shibafune returned to troubled slumber, and Yokan stroked the old cat's stomach through his futon covering.

What a truly bizarre ailment...

He turned his thoughts inward. As the Catwisp Blade, Yokan was the master of a hundred battles, but even he was powerless against a mysterious illness. Soon the physician came to change Shibafune's bandages.

"Be mindful of your own health as well, my liege. Rest assured, Shibafune is receiving the greatest treatment we can manage."

“Have we still not reasoned the cause of this affliction?”

“Our soothsayers claim it was brought down from heaven on a bolt of golden thunder, if you can believe the words of wizards. I, on the other paw, tend to take a more scientific view. Now, I implore you, my liege, you must rest.”

“We are running short on medicinal herbs. I shall go down to the beach to gather more.”

“My liege! You cannot mean to leave the castle grounds!”

“I am the shogun, and I will go where I please. I may be the only able-bodied cat in all of Byoma by now.”

Yokan was never one to wait on formality. After affixing his swords to his waist, he set off like the wind.

“Come, Hokusai. We ride!”

Straddling his trusty horse, Yokan departed for the castle town below.

Outside the castle walls, Byoma was a ghost town. Once-busy streets filled with fishmongers, apothecaries, and peddlers now lay deserted. From the makeshift infirmaries set up all over town, Yokan could hear the troubled cries of his townscats. Their wails tore at his noble heart and drove him to spur Hokusai on faster.

Such a shame, he thought as he rode. What good is a shogun who cannot save his people?

Keroom!

All of a sudden, the skies lit up with golden light, and a peal of thunder echoed across the land. A terrified townspuss cried out in fear. The first peal was swiftly followed by two others.

Hokusai halted his hooves and reared up in fright. From the direction of the coast, the earth shook, and a burnt smell filled the air.

“Whoa, whoa. Calm, Hokusai, calm.”

Yokan squinted over in the direction of the sound. According to his court’s mystics, this golden lightning was the cause of the Rust.

Three more. Most ominous. Can this plague get any worse?

With a tense feeling in the pit of his stomach, Yokan hurried Hokusai toward the outskirts of town. Before long, the coastline came into view, where dark clouds gathered above the sands. The cat shogun could feel a nascent rainfall in the air. His sensitive nose picked up the burning smell that pervaded the beach and drew him to its source. From atop a tall cliff, he peered down at the sands below.

“My word...”

The entire beach was burned to a crisp. The lightning had scorched the rocks black, and the wooden harbor was aflame. Electrified fish lay washed up and unmoving on the shore.

Yokan hopped down from the cliff and took a closer look.

“My vessel...”

His ship had been moored at the harbor, but the lightning must have struck it head-on, for it had split the boat clean in two, and both halves now burned.

Yokan uttered a curse under his breath, but his grief lasted only a moment, for when he thought of the old Persian suffering back at the castle, his own worries seemed slight by comparison. He would swim the oceans if it would grant that old mog a second chance at life.

Just then, he spotted something. Out to sea, a body floating on the water, wrapped in their own cloak.

“Cats!”

There were two of them. Perhaps they were fishermogs who had been caught in the storm.

They look burned, but the lightning struck only a few moments ago. Perhaps they still breathe.

Yokan wasted no time. He dived into the ocean, swimming out to where the two figures lay. Tugging their cloaks with his teeth, he succeeded in dragging them safely ashore. He paused to catch his breath after struggling with their unexpected body mass, then turned to examine the two figures...

...and froze.

M-my word!

One of them had bright-crimson hair, like a flame, with some curious binocular device affixed to his brow. Below one eye, he sported some kind of religious marking.

However, what was most striking was the cat's face. It was completely hairless.

Why, these aren't cats at all! They're men!

Yokan reeled in shock.

This is unprecedented. Did they fall from the heavens, too?

The second figure was another human, with sky-blue hair. Yokan recalled the words he had heard repeated ever since he was a kitten: *"If you don't behave, the humans will come down from the sky and carry you off!"*

Yokan remembered retorting that his retainers would swiftly cut down any such evildoers, but looking at them now, he was forced to reevaluate his position.

...It is said that cats and humans once lived in harmony. Perhaps we can do so again.

Having made up his mind, Yokan delivered a devastating poke to the bellies of the unconscious duo.

"Ghah!!"

"Pwah!!"

It appeared that Yokan's resuscitative techniques fared just as well on humans as they did on his fellow cat, emptying the pair's gullets of any stray water. Both of them seemed dazed and confused, perhaps as the result of some battle.

"I have saved your lives," said Yokan. "Pray, do not expect anything more."

"Wh-who the hell...?"

The red-haired man slowly lifted his head to get a better look at Yokan, and

when he did, his eyes went wide.

“Th-that cat’s on two legs! It’s a monster!”

“Heh. Impudent fool.”

The man was strong, despite his harrowing ordeal. Yokan cracked a smile.

“You are in Byoma, the land of the cats,” he explained. “If there is any monster among us, it is you.”

“Byoma...?”

“But so long as you keep your peace, I will not kill you. Pray, do not make me regret my decision.”

“W-wait, what’s goin’ on? Who are—? *Cough! Cough!*”

A live fish leaped from the redhead’s gullet. Yokan, meanwhile, turned and headed for the sea, to gather the medicinal seaweed he had come for. But just then...

“My liege! My lieeege!!”

“Hmm?”

A voice drew his attention back to the top of the cliff, where he had first arrived. It was Senbei, the town tailor.

“What brings you, my good mog? A storm is coming; you should remain indoors!”

“It’s worse than that, my liege! It’s terrible!”

Senbei’s agitated state piqued Yokan’s interest. It was not his usual manner.

“It’s the monstrooms! The monstrooms are back! They’re in the city!”

“What?!”

“Lend us your aid, my liege, before they burn the town to ash!”

Yokan’s face turned grave.

The monstrooms? But that can only mean one thing...!

He whistled, and his trusty steed Hokusai appeared. Yokan climbed atop him,

and he set off at once, snatching up Senbei as he passed and seating him at the back of the saddle.

“Are there no other warriors to fight them?” he asked. “What about the castle guard?”

“I heard tell that monstrooms appeared in the castle as well. They are busy defending it...,” said Senbei.

“They bring shame!” roared Yokan, his black fur bristling with anger. “What kind of samurai does not protect the townscats first?!”

He urged Hokusai on, racing toward the shadow of Byoma Castle in the distance.

“I swear on the Catwisp Blade,” he said. “You dastardly mushrooms shall not lay a single paw on innocent mogs while I still draw breath!”

“Any black cats here?”

“Is tomorrow really after today?”

“Found a house. Burn it.”

“Bab-ba-ba-bam!”

“Bweeeeeeh...”

Amid the chaos of Byoma’s castle town were some very strange beings that swaggered around as if they owned the place. They had a short and fat white body and a pair of stubby legs. This was topped off by a large red hemispherical head that scattered spores as they walked. They wielded halberds of fire even taller than themselves, which they lifted without issue. Some had only one eye; others had three, and each of them was shaped slightly differently from all the others, yet all walked with the same dull plod. They would look endearing, were they not the very face of the calamity that had befallen Byoma ten years ago!

It was an army of monstrooms!

“Any black cats here?”

“Bab-ba-ba-bam!”

“Found a house. Burn it.”

“I’m hungry.”

“Pao...”

The bumbling mushroom folk plodded through the streets with a complete lack of urgency, setting light to any houses they came across using their flaming polearms and flameshroom spores. The townscats were forced to flee, leaving their possessions to go up in smoke.

“Eeek!”

“The monstrooms! The monstrooms are here!”

Alas, one mushroom managed to grab a fleeing cat by the scruff of his neck.

“Who’s this?”

“Are you the cat shogun?”

“No!” the cat protested. “I’m just an innocent trader! I’m a brown tabby, not a black cat; please, have mercy!”

“He says he’s not.”

“He’s not black, but he is a cat.”

“That’s half right.”

“Do we get half a point?”

“Half a point!”

“HeIIllp!!”

The tabby’s scream hung in the air, and then...

Slash!

A whirlwind of black and a gleaming crescent flash. The sword, Kintsuba, sang a ringing note before returning to its sheath. Then the hand that had arrested the poor tabby slowly slipped from its owner’s arm.

“Pao.”

“You!”

The mushrooms’ gazes all turned and zeroed in on one black-furred

individual.

“Who are you, guy?”

“Who are you, cat?”

“Use your brains—or what little you have,” spoke the newcomer. “Or do you mean to tell me you have forgotten the face of Yokan, the Catwisp Blade—he who put down your reign of terror once already?”

“My liege!”

“Run. Get away from this place.”

The tabby fled, and Yokan stepped forward, illuminated by the flames. His noble features were contorted with rage, and he glared a glare as sharp as the edge of his sword.

“You are a craven lot, who would stoop to enact such cruelty upon innocent civilians. You have tested my wrath, foul beasts, and for that, you will pay the price.”

“It’s the black cat.”

“It’s Yokan!”

“Pao!”

“We burn houses, Yokan shows up.”

The mushroom men, all adorned with their own eclectic mix of equipment, suddenly stopped what they were doing and closed in around Yokan.

What strange and unsettling creatures.

Yokan’s dazzling strength was enough to confuse and overwhelm even other master swordscats, but the mushroom men seemed almost too stupid to feel fear. Even the one who’d had its hand chopped off only stared at the severed appendage with curiosity before apparently losing interest and hurling it into the fire. Yokan watched as life-giving spores swelled from the stump, regenerating the lost body part in no time at all.

“Pretty lady said...take him alive.”

“But...Yokan too strong.”

“Let’s kill him first.”

“Kill him first. Then take him alive.”

“Pao!”

“Pao!”

Without warning, one of the monstrooms launched an attack at Yokan, lifting his greatshield and smashing it down upon the cat shogun. But the elusive samurai was nowhere to be found. Instead, he had swiftly leaped upon the shield and pounced high into the air!

“Pao!!”

“Catwisp Art: *Flying Fish!*”

Yokan somersaulted over his foe, such that for one moment, he was upside down in the air directly behind the mushroom man. At that moment, he unleashed his blade at the back of the monstroom’s neck—or somewhere on its back, at any rate, considering the neck was pretty much absent.

Splaaat.

The monstroom bled mushroom spores. It shook for a moment, then tried to spin around and return the blow, but...

“Whoa-ee!”

The creature lost its balance and tumbled into the flames.

“Ouchiiie!”

The other mushroom warriors watched as their companion rolled about on the floor in an attempt to extinguish the fire.

“Yokan, fast!”

“Yokan, strong!”

“Use fire.”

“Smoke him!”

The mushrooms lowered their flaming poleaxes and unleashed wave after wave of fireballs toward Yokan. He leaped across the rooftops, avoiding them,

but the blasts were so powerful, they tore apart the thatched roofs, firing wooden splinters Yokan's way.

Hmm. They are much stronger than before. And they have learned to use fire, it seems.

The sparks singed the very tips of Yokan's fur.

"Smoke the smoky!"

"What's wrong? Come down."

"Roof goes bye-bye."

"House all leaky now."

Taunting the shogun, the monstrooms unleashed another volley from their flaming halberds. If Yokan did nothing, soon all of Byoma would be ablaze.

But instead, he stopped.

"He's given up."

"Take him alive!"

"Burn him first!"

The monstroom at the head of the pack leveled his halberd, and...

Click!

A decisively non-explosive sound came from it.

"Pao?"

"Three shots each," said Yokan, finally releasing Kintsuba from its sheath. "Not so impressive once you know how it works."

Then he pounced on the monstroom army.

"Shoot him. Shoot him."

"Out of ammo."

The black tornado danced among the startled and confused mushroom folk. The polearms were slow and easily dodged, which allowed Yokan to deliver slice after slice to the heels of the walking fungi, effectively immobilizing them.

“Pao!”

“Can’t walk.”

The dull-witted mushroom monstrosities could never keep up with the speed of any cat, much less Yokan himself. The samurai feline wrapped his slender tail around the blade in his paws, wiping it clean before returning it to its sheath.

“Be calm, fellow mogs,” he said. “I will dispel this foul hex soon enough.”

Indeed. For the true form of these malicious mycelia was nothing less than Yokan’s fellow feline-kind, transformed by the wicked Geppei Amakusa into unspeakable abominations. The last time she had used this power, Yokan had defeated her, and upon doing so, the curse had been broken.

This is Geppei’s doing, no doubt about it. But I thought her remains were sealed within Koban Temple...

As he was pondering this, however, Yokan heard a strange sound.

“Pao-pao-pao! Well done, black cat!”

“Hmm?”

He looked up to an elevated spot in the town, where one of the monstrooms stood laughing. He appeared to be the centurion, for his helmet and armor were trimmed with gold, and the quality of his armament was above and beyond that of the others’. Even his intelligence seemed a little higher than that of the rest.

“We know you are strong,” the mushroom said, “but what about those at the castle?”

“What?!”

“When I give the order, we will fire this flameshroom cannon, turning everyone in the castle into roast cat! Even you can’t save them all!”

Yokan spotted other monstrooms atop the same hill, standing around an overelaborate-looking device with gormless looks on their faces.

I should have known. It is just like them to stoop to such dishonorable measures.

Despite Yokan's unquestionable speed, there was no way he could reach the enemy general in time. The old Persian, Shibafune, still convalesced within the castle, in no state to move. If the cannon was allowed to fire, the flames would surely consume him.

So, Shogun? What's it to be?

The monstrooms were short on patience. If there was to be any hope for salvation, Yokan would need to buy time first. The feline samurai thus unfastened his sword and raised it so that the enemy general could see.

"If it's me you want," he said, "then I shall not resist. Come down and get me!"

"Very good!" replied the mushroom general. "Throw down your sword and wait right there!"

Meanwhile, over by the cannon...

"This is boring."

"Want to fire the cannon."

"Let's fire the cannon."

"Can't fire the cannon. Boss will get mad."

"Pao."

"But Boss is always mad."

"That's true."

"Let's fire the cannon."

"Fire the cannon."

"Pao!"

Ka-boom! Ka-boom! Ka-boom!

The monstrooms, apparently unable to sit still for one second, fired the cannon prematurely. Three balls of fiery spores hurtled toward the castle and exploded on impact into smoke and flame.

"Wh-what have you done?!" cried Yokan.

“You fools!” said the general. “Who told you to fire?!”

Curses. I didn't expect them to be this dull-witted!

Yokan took his sword in his mouth and sprinted on all fours across the rooftops, heading for the burning castle.

“Help, my liege!”

“Save us!”

Don't die, you old mog...!

With little concern for his own health, Yokan plunged onto the castle grounds, when...

“Outta the way, Sooty!”

“Huh?!”

Yokan moved swiftly aside, just in time to dodge a glinting object that skimmed by his side. It landed in the roof tiles before him, and...

Gaboom!!

A whole cluster of azure mushrooms spread out from the point of impact, in great enough numbers to cover the whole roof. The mushrooms were soft and gelatinous, and as soon as their caps unfurled, they began dispensing water-like spores that extinguished the fires in the blink of an eye.

The monstroom army attacking the castle suddenly stopped and examined the curious sight.

“What?”

“Yokan. What has he done?”

“Mushrooms? But we're mushrooms!”

But none were more astonished than Yokan himself.

“Wh-what the—?!”

At first, he suspected some kind of illusion, but the watery mushrooms had form and substance. And these fungi had just saved every last cat in the castle.

“They're rainshrooms,” came a voice. “Don't worry, the water's not toxic.”

At first, Yokan didn't recognize the voice. Then he realized it was one he had heard very recently.

"It's you!"

"There's more comin'! Don't just stand around!"

There was a *Swoosh!* as the redheaded man sprang into the air, heading directly for the flaming projectiles descending on Yokan himself.

"Take this!"

He spun, unleashing a fearsome kick like the swing of a battle-ax. It repelled the balls of fire and sent them flying away in the opposite direction! The monstroom army stationed on the high ground looked up to see their very own artillery redirected toward them, seconds before the whole hill went up in flame.

Ridiculous! thought Yokan. The man's hair flickered in the wind like a plume of fire. Like a god of war, he landed beside him. It was the fiercer-looking of the two strange human folk he had pulled out of the sea only minutes before.

"You save my life, I save yours," the man said. "Leave the castle to me, Shogun. You go protect the town!"

"You know me, then," Yokan replied. "And who, exactly, are you?"

"Bisco Akaboshi," said Bisco. "I'm a Mushroom Keeper!"

Then he took off across the rooftops, leaving Yokan to marvel at this bizarre introduction.

"Mushroom...Keeper...?!"

Then, after a second, he returned to his senses and sprinted after him on all fours.

We really are in the Cat Realm, thought Bisco. As he hurried across the rooftops, his curiosity was piqued by the strange mushroom folk—the so-called monstroons—that lumbered through the streets below.

Never heard of mushrooms that can walk and talk. Musta been my Ultrafaith Arrow that created 'em... Guess that kinda makes 'em my children, huh?

“Stop him! Stop him!”

“Don’t let him go to the castle!”

“Outta my way, assholes!”

Bisco took out his shortbow and landed a red oyster mushroom arrow right at the monstrooms’ feet!

Gaboom! Gaboom!

“““Waaaah!!”””

The explosion launched their bulky forms into the air, and the mushroom folk landed springily on the ground some distance away. Bisco continued along the rooftops until he reached those of the castle itself.

“Listen up!” he announced to the monstrooms upon his arrival. “I’m Bisco Akaboshi, son of Jabi. I’m a Mushroom Keeper! I wanna save all you who’re bein’ controlled, so who’s in charge around here? Let me talk to ’em!”

“Who’s he?”

“Oh my.”

Even the mushrooms don’t know who I am, thought Bisco. Kinda feels like a snub, not gonna lie...

Bisco’s diplomatic approach was answered by a bellowing roar from the monstroom centurion.

“You dare ask us to betray our mother?! Our loyalty to Geppei Amakusa is unwavering!”

Geppei Amakusa?

That was the second time Bisco had heard that name today, but he was given little time to consider it, for the monstroom leader’s celebratory words continued.

“We were born from our mother’s golden arrow. Now we carry out her orders, to turn all of Byoma into our kind and build a mushroom legacy to last a thousand years!”

“None may defy Lady Amakusa!”

“Long live Mother!”

“Long live Mother!”

“Long li—”

“Grr...”

Bisco unleashed a jade-green glare, and the mushrooms clammed right up. Spores scattered about them as their bright-red caps shook with fright.

“I see how it is,” he said. “So this Amakusa chick’s takin’ the credit for my arrow, huh? All you guys are bein’ lied to.”

Bisco’s cloak billowed in the wind, and he pulled out his shortbow, tightening the bowstring.

“He’s going to fire!”

“All units, defend!”

“You guys are life,” said Bisco. “And life should never be controlled. Let me teach you a thing or two about mushrooms!”

Bisco’s canines glinted in the moonlight. “But before that,” he said, “let me show you what I’m made of!”

“We’re in trouble.”

“Fire! Fire! Turn him into fried human!”

Ka-boom! Ka-boom! Ka-boom!

The surrounding mushroom soldiers all fired their polearms, but not a single blast so much as singed the hem of Bisco’s cloak. He was like a whirlwind, dancing comfortably between projectiles with a grin on his face.

Then it was time for Bisco to return a volley of his own. He unleashed arrow after arrow from his quiver, which hurtled between the fireballs and landed in the solid rock below, before exploding with a *Gaboom! Gaboom!* into clamshell mushrooms that blasted the monstrooms away.

“Pao?!”

“Mushrooms!!”

“Do not falter! He’s only one...man...”

But the centurion’s encouraging words ended on a somewhat disappointing note as Bisco landed right before him, cracking the earth.

“Tell this Geppei Amakusa that if she wants to keep mushrooms...”

“Pao...!”

Bisco reached out and grabbed the leader’s red mushroom cap, then with frightening strength, lifted him up and over his own head, twirling him three-quarters of a turn, before slamming him into the ground behind him!

“...She’s gotta be prepared to feed ’em!”

Gaboom!

The centurion’s heavy body struck the King Trumpet that Bisco had planted a moment before, causing him to be catapulted high into the air and off into the distance.

“WHAAAAAaaaaaaaahhh...?!”

The leaderless monstrooms shared a confused glance.

“He defeated the boss.”

“Who’s going to pay us?”

“Nobody.”

“Run away!”

They dropped their polearms where they stood and scattered in all directions.

“...”

Guess I’ve repaid my favor to the local lord now.

Bisco watched the strange mushroom creatures as they fled. Then, all of a sudden, he sensed a strange presence behind him. Wheeling around, Bisco took a step back in caution. There before him stood a large black cat, his paw poised on the sword at his waist.

It’s the lord again?!

It was the Catwisp Blade, Yokan himself, striking a form Bisco had seen

replicated in storybook illustrations as a child. Bisco opened his mouth to speak but found himself struck dumb by the terrifying aura the cat was giving off.

...He wants to fight?!

“I have made my presence known,” the cat said. “Let it not be said that I struck you from behind without warning.”

“What’s this about?” asked Bisco. “Aren’t you gonna thank me for savin’ your castle first?”

“Draw your weapon.”

“Listen, cat! I was doin’ you a favor!”

“Begin.”

Yokan closed the distance between him and Bisco in a flash, and within moments the sharp edge of his blade was bearing down on the spot between Bisco’s eyes. Bisco let out a panicked yelp before drawing his dagger and blocking the blow in the nick of time.

Ker-rang!

“You’re insane!” Bisco cried.

“I thought you were just a harmless human,” said Yokan as sparks flew from the clashing blades, “but you wield the mushroom arts as well. How could I have been so blind? You are nothing more than another mindless follower of Geppei Amakusa! I shall strike you down here!”

With another *Clang!* the two fighters flung each other back and returned to a safe distance.

“What, so anyone who uses mushrooms is evil?!” shouted Bisco. “They’re a tool, just the same as your sword!”

“Evil speaks,” retorted Yokan. “A true warrior proves his worth in combat!”

“I’m tellin’ ya, you’ll regret it!”

Clang! Clang! Ker-rang!

The sword Kintsuba and Bisco’s lizard-claw blade clashed again and again. Bisco himself was replete with the sunlight glow of the Rust-Eater, and he left a

golden trail in the moonlit night as he moved.

However, even with his superhuman strength and skill, he was no equal for Yokan's fearsome swordscatship. The feline samurai moved at impossible angles and speeds, and he used a style Bisco had never seen before. It was only by relying on his uncanny instincts that Bisco could defend the blows at all.

Wh-what the hell...? He's good!

"Your skill is impressive. A shame you have turned your paw to evil."

"I haven't! That's what I'm tryin' to tell you!"

With prodigal reflexes, Bisco parried a blow and launched Yokan's blade back. He stepped in, bringing his dagger through to capitalize on the opening.

"Got you!"

Slash!

"Wha—?!"

"You failed to consider *all* of my weapons, human."

It was Yokan's *claws* with which he struck back at the overconfident Bisco! The feline warrior did not flinch from having his blade repelled, but leaned into it, borrowing the momentum, twisting, and bringing up his sharp toes to slash at Bisco's chest.

Bisco reeled back, blood spurting from the three horizontal gashes in his skin, but Yokan rushed after him, holding his *katana* in his jaws.

He is a strong foe. I must finish him now, before he gets the better of me!

On all fours, Yokan dashed, pouncing at Bisco as he attempted to jump back...

But then the gleaming look in Bisco's jade-green eyes made him flinch.

"!!"

He hesitated. Only for a moment, but it was all Bisco needed. The Mushroom Keeper drew his shortbow tight, aiming it directly at Yokan's head!

"This is it!"

I've failed...

To Yokan's masterful powers of foresight, it was obvious how the pitifully short remainder of the battle would go.

Forgive me, Shibafune!

Pchew!

Bisco's arrow skimmed Yokan's cheek, disappearing into the distance and landing in the mountainous wilderness beyond.

Gaboom!

A second later, an enormous Rust-Eater mushroom burst out of the rock, with enough force to carve out a crater in the hillside. The golden stalk lit up the night like a volcanic eruption.



Yokan stared at it, dumbfounded, before bringing a paw to his grazed cheek.

He...missed?

Yokan turned back to observe his foe. Bisco was shaking, though due to what, he could not tell. And then he saw it.

Bisco's aim had been true. It was the single *claw* that sprouted from his finger and cut the bowstring that had led to his misfired shot.

Wh-what the...?!

Catitis had struck. Bisco froze as whiskers sprouted from his face and as ears grew from atop his head.

Wh-what's goin' on? What's happenin' to me?

"Bizarre! A human, becoming a cat?"

Bisco didn't even react as Yokan came closer to observe. Bisco watched as his fingers turned into claws one after the other, and his catlike eyes flared wide.

"This can only be divine intervention," said Yokan. "If only you had renounced your wicked ways when I gave you the chance. Then Byoshoten would not have seen fit to punish you so."

"Grh...! Dammit!"

"Now it is farewell."

Yokan's blade glimmered in the moonlight. He pondered the man's fate for a moment before steeling his resolve and preparing to strike.

But just then...

"My lieeeege!! Stay your sword!"

"Hmm?"

It was the tailor, Senbei.

"You must not kill this man, my liege! Please listen!"

"What is it, Senbei? Do you know him?"

"These humans were sent by Byoshoten!" Senbei explained. "This man's

partner is at the castle as we speak. He brings with him a cure for the Rust!”

“A cure?!”

Yokan was shocked. He didn’t know how to process this sudden, and apparently credible, godsend.

“Return to the castle, my liege. The humans would like to speak with you.”

“So...they are not servants of Amakusa?”

“I swear on my mother’s shoebox! If I am good for one thing, sire, it is my judgment of felinality! Or in this case, I suppose it would be ‘person’ality!”

“If you are in the mood for jokes, my good mog, then what you say must be true. Very well. Take me to this human worker of miracles.”

“Of course, my liege. Right this way!”

Senbei scurried off, and Yokan made to follow...but first, he turned and approached the ragged Bisco.

“Pardon me,” he said. “It appears I made a rather severe error in judgment. But if you were no villain, then why did you not simply say so?”

“Argh, just shut up...and kill me...before I kill you!”

“What a splendid fellow! I think you and I are going to get on swimmingly!”

Then Yokan threw the half-catified Bisco over his shoulder and moved dexterously on all fours toward the castle.

Why, hello there. My name is Geppei Amakusa. I suppose you haven't heard of me where you're from, but here in Byoma, I'm quite famous.

Why is that, you ask? Could it be because of my stunning beauty? My tail, soft and luxurious; my fur, white as freshly fallen snow; my gaze arresting; my bust full and— Oh-ho-ho-ho! Easy, tiger! Rrrowr.

That's all true, but it isn't the reason. You see...I am the miracle wonder child that brought Byoma to its knees!

Here's what they teach little kitties around here: The wicked Geppei Amakusa led the Matango, her army of followers, in revolt against the Yatsunashi rule, and the great Yokan, the eighth shogun, rose up and beat her to a pulp...

But I did *not* get beaten to a pulp! It's all lies, lies, lies!

Well, I did lose; that much is true. But the gods are on my side, for now I live again! Now, watch, Yokan. Watch as I flay the soot-black hide off your back and turn you into a rug, so I can step on your smug little face for all eternity!

Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!!

Oh-ho-ho-ho—!

Singe!

"Aiiieeeeeeeee!"

"Frick. Terribly sorry, Miss Amakusa!"

"Pay attention, you idiotic girl! See how you just burned my beautiful fur?"

Ahem. I do beg your pardon for that unseemly outburst. It's just that I am currently getting my fur permed, you see. Do you know what a perm is? It's a marvel of human technology, and it turns my fur into these dazzlingly stylish curls. Of course, that's not to say my fur isn't dazzlingly stylish *au naturel*, but a

little makeover now and then isn't— *Singe!*

"Aiiieeeeeeee!"

"Aw, crap! Terribly sorry, Miss Amakusa!"

"You little hussy! You're doing it on purpose, aren't you?! Wait until you get a taste of my claws!"

"N-no need to get violent, Miss Amakusa! It's all done! Here, take a look in the mirror! Doesn't your magnificent fur look even more beautiful now?"

"Oh... Well, yes, I suppose it does. You are rather competent, for a human girl. Very well, I believe you deserve a reward."

"Cheers, ma'am!"

Hmm? What's the matter? Oh, you want to know more about the little *mademoiselle* here? I feel I'm the more interesting one in the room by far, but very well, if you insist.

She came down from the Human Realm just yesterday, don't you know. She's quite the rarity. After all, no one's seen hide nor fur of a person in over a hundred years.

However, despite being human, she sports cat ears and a tail. Quite curious, I must say. I was originally planning to kill her, but it turns out she's rather skilled with all these odd machines and whatnot. That's how I got this perm, you see.

Her name? I don't concern myself with the names of common strays, I'm afraid... You insist? Oh, very well. I shall ask.

"What is your name, young child?"

"Oh? That's weird. I thought ya weren't interested earlier."

"Very well, I assume you won't be wanting your reward, then?"

"Tirol. Tirol Ochagama."

There you go. Wasn't that a letdown? So? Are the two of you acquainted in some way? I swear, these humans all look the same to me, with their creepy, furless faces. Urgh!

Still, as you can see, they are easily manipulated without the use of brute

force. As a high-class *madame*, I know when to deploy the carrot and when the stick.

As an example, watch as I use my miantra to give her what she wants...

“Nyan/nyad/myare/smeow.”

A veritable trove of *oban* and *koban* coins appears out of thin air. And I know what you’re thinking, but these are no mere illusions.

“Whooooa!! Real gold! I can’t believe my eyes!!”

Really, now. How rambunctious. I heard that humans are even madder for gold than we cats are, but this girl really takes the cake. She’s rolling around in the gold pile like a dog. It’s embarrassing.

...In any case, now that my perm is complete, I have work that must be done. I’d love to stay and chat, but this world isn’t going to conquer itself. *Au revoir!*

* * *

“Girl, I have work to attend to. Make everything ready for my massage session, will you?”

“Whooooa! Gooold!”

“Dearie me. Is this all it takes to make you so excited?”

Amakusa heaved a dramatic sigh and pulled a small hand mirror from the folds of her luxurious gown.

“And I don’t think you need me to tell you this,” she said as she examined herself in it, “but don’t you dare try anything funny. Got it?”

She snapped her claws, and a floating tube of gold lipstick appeared in her paw. Humming a tune, she applied it to her lips, puckering them in the mirror before disappearing down a torch-lined stone staircase.

Tirol was left to frolic in the pile of gold coins.

“Wahooo! Whooa! Yahoooo! Yippee...”

Then, once Geppei’s footsteps had faded, Tirol sat up straight, twitching her new cat ears.

...Is she gone?

Her catlike amber eyes cautiously scanned the bounds of Amakusa's sumptuous private chamber. Then she sprang into action...backtracking a little to stuff as many of the gold coins as she could into her pockets. After that, she headed for Geppei's desk, which was covered in old scrolls.

There she found the details of many magical techniques that Amakusa must have developed. It seemed that, in contrast to her overbearing personality, the cat lady was quite methodical when it came to her arcane studies.

She's gotta be behind the catitis; there's no doubt! There must be some way to reverse it in one of these things...

Tirol fished through the mountain of scrolls, taking care not to damage any with her sharp claws.

Magic Bell Technique... Not this one. Golden Claws Technique, Monstroom Control Technique... Not these either... Coin Generation Technique! This is the one! ...Wait, no it isn't. Don't get distracted, Tirol!

She tossed the scrolls aside one by one, until her eyes fell upon a single unassuming specimen at the bottom of the pile.

...

Her merchant senses told her it was important. She picked it up and unfurled it.

Research into the Ultrafaith Arrow... This is it!

Ten years have passed since I, Geppei Amakusa, fell at the hands of Yokan, the Catwisp Blade, and was sealed in the catacombs beneath Koban Temple. Ten long years of anger and resentment.

Until the day a golden arrow fell down from heaven, revitalizing my mortal body.

By my command, this miraculous arrow can be made to accomplish impossible deeds. With it, I may finally lay low my eternal foe, Yokan Yatsunashi, and unite all life in salvation.

The arrow speaks to me.

It calls itself, "the *Ultrafaith Arrow*."

“The Ultrafaith Arrow...”

Tirol’s brain went into overdrive, piecing together the fragmented clues. So essentially, after Bisco fired the *Ultrafaith Arrow*, it had found its way here, to the Cat Realm, and hit Amakusa’s entombed body, bringing her and her wicked schemes back to life.

And the arrow is the source of her power!

Tirol hid the scroll in her robe and began searching the room when a thought occurred to her. Amakusa would surely be keeping such a powerful artifact somewhere on her person...or on her cat, at any rate.

I need to get close to that caked-up kitty and steal it off her! Argh, geez! Why is it always me?

As she was pondering this, Tirol suddenly heard a voice from the caves into which Geppei had disappeared.

“Waaagh! Stop!!”

“Lord Yokan, please save us!!”

It sounded like Amakusa was torturing her captured victims.

I can sense the magic in ‘em, thought Tirol. She picked up one of the golden coins and ran a finger along its edge. But these ain’t the fakes we learned to make at the Gilded Elephants. They’re the real dealio. It’s gotta be the Ultrafaith Arrow that’s lettin’ her make ‘em. If I wanna steal it, now’s my only chance!

With courage far beyond her meager stature, Tirol steeled her nerve and crept stealthily down the stone staircase after her new mistress.

Ding-a-ling. Ding-a-ling.

The sound of a small bell echoed off the walls of the cell.

“Waaagh!!”

“Stop! Somebody stop that infernal sound!”

Ding-a-ling. Ding-a-ling.

“P-Pao... Gaga...”

“Yo-Yohee! What’s wrong?! Keep it together!”

“Urgh... Ga...ga...”

Gaboom!

“Pao! Bab-ba-ba-bam!”

“No! They’ve turned you into a monstroom! A-and now it’s happening to me, too...!”

Gaboom!

“Bab-ba-ba-bam!”

“Sure is cramped in here.”

“Like sardines.”

“Not sardines. Mushrooms.”

“Wha?”

“Oh no.”

“Bab-ba-ba-bam!”

“Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!”

Amakusa stood before the cell, deeply amused at the transfiguration of her captive catfolk. Above her outstretched paw, her magic bell rocked back and forth in the air, emitting a pleasant chime. It was none other than this innocuous sound that was responsible for the poor felines’ terrifying transformations.

“I really have become rather good at this, haven’t I?” Amakusa said. “I still remember what an effort this used to be... Hmm?”

“Ugh...ggghh...gggh...”

“Oh my. You’re quite a difficult one, aren’t you?”

One cat near the front of the cell—a samurai, going by his garb—paused just shy of completing his transformation. He wrapped his claws around the bars, struggling to hold out against Amakusa’s wicked spell.

“Well, now that I get a good look at you, you’re quite a *beau*. Why don’t we

have some fun before you become my pawn, hmm?”

“I will never bend to the wicked ways of the Matango, witch. My heart belongs to the shogunate!”

“Oh, really, *mon amour*. Brainwashing is so last century.”

Geppei waved her arms, and a golden bolt appeared—the *Ultrafaith Arrow*.

“Now that I have this, I need no longer resort to such...crude methods. Now, accept your salvation, you poor thing.”

“C-curses. I cannot resist. Yokan, my liege... Strike down this witch and release us...!”

“Don’t you dare speak that name in my presence, you sniveling little rat!”

“Grrrh!”

Ding-a-ling! Ding-a-ling! Ding-a-ling!

Gaboom!

“Pao!”

“There we go,” said Amakusa. “Oh, you’re a very handsome specimen, aren’t you? Why don’t you be one of my centurions?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Good boy. Oh dear, I *have* worked up an awful sweat, haven’t I?”

Amakusa fanned herself with her paw before turning and approaching a barren wall of the cavern. Here she lifted the *Ultrafaith Arrow* and spoke.

“Fantastique Action! Make me a bathtub!”

As if by magic, a door appeared in the wall, leading to a magnificent golden bathroom, with steam already rising off the piping-hot water. Geppei smiled at the sight, then turned to her minions.

“If any of you peek, you’ll get the claw! Got it?”

“We won’t peek.”

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

“Argh! Shut up!”

With that, she stepped into the bathroom and slammed the door behind her.

...*Now!*

Taking care to avoid the watchful eyes of the monstrooms, Tirol crept up to the bathroom door and teased it open. Inside, she spotted Amakusa’s gown hanging on a peg, and in one of the pockets, the *Ultrafaith Arrow*. Geppei was nowhere in sight, but her off-key tones could be heard drifting from the bathtub.

Now’s my only chance!

Focusing all her wits on the task at hand, Tirol tiptoed over to the hanging gown and extended an arm out toward it. But as soon as the tip of her claw grazed the artifact, thick golden brambles shot out of the arrow, binding her!

“What?!”

The arrow then broke through the door, bringing Tirol into the bathroom. Amakusa was there, crossing her legs in the bathtub with a triumphant look on her face.

“Caught you prowling, you little human burglar.”

“S-sorry, ma’am. I just saw it shining gold and couldn’t help myself.”

“Oh? Is that so? Then why didn’t you go after the other golden things in that room? Golden statuettes, golden soaps, golden towels.”

“Erk...”

“All far easier to pilfer, I dare say, and just as valuable. But no, you went straight for the arrow, didn’t you? Why is that, I wonder?”

“Well...”

“I can think of one answer. The arrow was your aim all along. You thought you could trick me, didn’t you, my little *mademoiselle*?”

Geppei reached out a paw and grabbed Tirol by the neck. With fiendish strength, she lifted her, standing up in the bathtub and revealing the full sleekness of the huntress’s nude body.

Tirol clenched her jaw, her amber eyes as fierce as ever.

“Don’t think I don’t know about your two companions,” said Amakusa. “Did the three of you come here to take the arrow back? You’re to tell me everything you know about them. Do I make myself clear?”

“I ain’t gonna...tell ya nothin’!”

“We’ll see about that.”

Amakusa raised her other paw, and her magic bell appeared in it.

Ding-a-ling-a-ling. Ding-a-ling-a-ling...

The simple sound burrowed its way into Tirol’s mind.

“Agh...! Ghh...!”

“I am Geppei Amakusa.”

Milo... Akaboshi... Help!

“I am Byoshoten’s gift to Byoma.”

She smiled. A gleaming, fanged smile whose beauty rivaled that of the bell’s tones.

“I am the one who will lead all of Byoma, all of cat-kind, and all of humanity to *la terre promise!*”



A clump of Rust-Eaters stood tall, their marbled caps gleaming in the sunlight. Milo picked a handful of them and threw them into a mortar, along with a few different berries. Then he worked the pestle, crushing the ingredients until the contents of the bowl resembled fine golden sand. Finally, he mixed in a few fish bits to make it more palatable to cat-kind's capricious tongues.

"There, it's ready!" he said, wrapping the offering in paper. "Try this, Your Excellency!"

Milo's skill in the healing arts was clear in the meticulous way he handled his tools, and his handsome face could usually charm even the stubbornest patients, but the old Chinchilla wrinkled his nose at Milo's medicine, hiding his face beneath the covers.

"Hmph! As if I, a noble samurai of Byoma, would ever be tricked into sampling the dubious concoctions of a lowborn outsider!"

"Please, Shibafune," said Yokan, standing by his bed. "This Nekoyanagi fellow has already cured the townscats of their Rust; I saw it with my own eyes. What cause do you have to suspect him?"

"Hah! Some trick or another, no doubt. You have grown too trusting, my liege."

The strength in Shibafune's voice was admirable, given his age and ailment. Yokan and Milo shared a worried glance.

"And to top it all off, you have invited these witless strays into the castle! If your father, Rakugan, could see you now, he'd be ashamed! What am I to tell him when we meet in the world beyond—? *Cough! Cough!*"

"Your stubborn streak is worse than it ever was, my old mog." Yokan sighed. "There's only one thing for it now. Prepare yourself!"

He reached toward Shibafune with both paws and pried his jaws wide.

“Aaaagh! Hie hiege! Hoo hannot ho his!!”

“What’s that? I can’t hear you!”

“I think he said, ‘*My liege! You cannot do this!*’” offered Milo.

“Yes, I know. I was just...never mind. Administer the cure, if you will, Nekoyanagi.”

Milo nodded and poured the Rust-Eater medicine into Shibafune’s open gullet. He was grateful for the shogun’s support, as Milo was on the verge of forcing the medicine down the uncooperative Persian’s throat himself. At least this way, he would avoid any awkward diplomatic incidents.

“*Cough! Cough!* Wh-what have you done, my liege?!”

“It’s okay!” Milo reassured him. “The medicine should take effect immediately! You’ll be up and walking by this afternoon!”

“This afternoon, you say? Preposterous!”

The Chinchilla cast off his covers and flapped his white *kimono*, revealing his bare shoulders where the Rust was deepest.

“Look at this! My fur is falling out, my skin turned to rust! Laugh! Laugh at the once-great Shibafune of Byoma, reduced now to a shambling... H-howhaaa?!”

All of a sudden, before his very eyes, the golden spores of the Rust-Eater began healing Shibafune’s infection. His chestnut-colored hair grew back in full force, and in moments it was like he had never had the Rust at all.

“N-never in my nine lives...!”

“I’ve noticed the cure works much faster on cats than it does on humans,” said Milo, putting away his things. “I expect your illness will be all gone by the end of today.”

“Indeed. We cannot thank you enough, Nekoyanagi.”

Yokan looked at Shibafune, who was patting himself all over in disbelief, and gave a satisfied nod.

“You are this country’s saviors. Ask for anything, and I shall grant it. ...Though,

before we get to that, what say we share a drink together? It has been a long day.”

“Don’t mention it,” said Milo. “I’m a doctor. I only did what needed to be done...” Then, the full realization of Yokan’s words set in. “...Wait, what?! Sh-share a drink?! But you’re the shogun! And we’re just strangers to this land!”

“You are no strangers to me. I have seen the mettle of your spirit; it is time for me to show you Byoma’s in return. Now, come. Ah, not you, my old mog. You stay in bed and rest.”

While his retainer reeled in shock, Yokan slipped out of the infirmary and headed for the castle’s dining hall. Out in the hallways, passing samurai bowed deeply as Yokan strode on by, and Milo felt all eyes on him.

“E-erm, perhaps we shouldn’t do this after all...”

“Stand proud, Nekoyanagi. Your lineage is of no import here. You are the savior of Byoma; act like it!”

“...”

“Akaboshi should be waiting for us in the dining hall,” he added, turning and flashing a feline smile. “A boy that age should not be kept waiting for his meals. Now, come. It’s just through here...”

Three. Four. Five. Five empty plates. And just as Yokan and Milo entered, a sixth was placed atop the pile.

“H-here is your salt-baked golden haddock, O honored guest! Apologies for the wait!”

“And these are beckoning shrimp, Milord! They are exceedingly fragrant when enjoyed from the head—”

“Looks nice! Gimme, gimme!”

The serving maids were all in a great rush to accommodate the appetites of their singular patron. The redheaded barbarian snatched food from his seventh and eight plates, destroying their meticulous arrangement without even hearing how he was meant to eat them.

Mmm, so fresh! I’m losin’ my freakin’ mind here!!

As was perhaps to be expected from a nation of felines, the culinary offerings were mostly seafood-based, and fish in particular. Whether baked, boiled, or served raw, the flavors danced on Bisco's tongue, delighting his rudimentary palate.

I get it. All the fish up top evolved to handle the Rust, and that made 'em taste kinda crappy... Man, this tenderloin just melts in the mouth...

Bisco leaned back in his seat, his tail flicking and cat ears twitching.

"Erm, Milord... You're not meant to eat the bone..."

"More!!" Bisco bellowed, flicking his eighth empty plate to the top of the pile. The terrified serving maid scurried off, leaving Bisco to glare at the empty spot before him with what could only be construed as gently simmering resentment over each passing moment he remained unfed. The kitchen was in overdrive, working so hard to placate their guest that those bent over the stoves presumed there must be a hundred-strong feast taking place in the other room.

Mmm. The food's great, but this place is so weird.

Bisco's surroundings were beyond curious. Folding screens lined the hall, embroidered with scenes of feline heroes wrestling with tigers and dragons. Outside, rasp-like ornaments hung from the eaves, on which passing cats could sharpen their claws. And behind each floor cushion was what looked at first glance like some sort of armrest, and only later did Bisco realize it was for seated felines to rest their tails on.

Bisco had been all over the Human Realm—or all over Japan anyway—and never had he seen anything remotely like it. On what strange adventures could his four legs take him were he to suddenly sprint from this castle and journey beyond the nearest mountain?

Can't see myself going back up top anytime soon...

Bisco was toying with the thought of taking an extended vacation, when all of a sudden, a sliding door opened, and a voice cried out.

"Ahh!"

"Hmm?"

Bonk!

Bisco had barely registered the presence of his blue-haired partner and self-styled man of common sense when he felt a strike to the top of his head, sending him flying face-first into his empty plates.

“Owww! What the hell are you doin’?!”

“That’s what I want to know! When I heard the lord invited us to share a meal, this wasn’t what I had in mind! What were you thinking, eating all this by yourself before we even arrived?!”

“Well, what was I supposed to do, just sit and wait? I’m hungry!”

“That’s exactly what you’re supposed to do! Even Mushroom Keepers wait for the elder to arrive, don’t they?”

“Well, yeah, but that’s different! We’re guests here, so we’re allowed to do whatever we want!”

“No, you aren’t *‘allowed to do whatever you want!’*”

“Gwaggh! My throat! Y-you’re strangling me!”

Given Bisco’s condition, the boys’ quarrel looked more like a catfight than ever, and that was saying something. It was only after a few rounds of pummeling that Milo remembered Yokan was still standing in the entrance, having not said a word.

“...Ahh! Please forgive us, sire! I’ll make him behave, I swear!”

But, astonishingly, Yokan burst out laughing.

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

His bellowing laughter echoed off the castle walls and continued for a while, giving the two boys enough time to share a perplexed glance.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh, pray, excuse me. It’s quite all right, Nekoyanagi. You need not do anything.”

“See? Bet you feel silly now, huh?”

“I’m going to kill you when we get back...”

“Rather, I must commend you on your magnificent eating style,” Yokan went on, regarding Bisco’s empty plates with what looked like admiration. “You leave only the bones and skin, and let nothing edible go to waste.”

He stopped a serving maid to ask that his and Milo’s food be brought out, then he continued.

“You see, samurai cats are a self-important breed. They often eat only the most delicious parts and leave the rest to rot. It has been some time since someone showed our prey the proper respect, as you do.”

“Please don’t flatter him, Milord; it’ll go to his head.”

“I say, you two quarrel like a married couple. What say you, Akaboshi? Room for seconds?”

“You bet! Keep ’em comin’!”

“That’s the spirit, my good mog. Now, let the feast begin in earnest!”

Even the serving maids seemed relieved to see they had not gone against their lord’s wishes and began scurrying to and fro even faster than before, bringing out plate after plate of delectable foodstuffs.

Even Milo, who until now had been keen to impress propriety, suddenly found himself whisked away on an incredible culinary journey.

“Wh-whoa! Bisco! Get a load of this fish! It’s amazing!”

“Yeah, these are good, too. Try ’em. It’s deep-fried somethin’.”

“Deep-fried what?”

“Dunno. Hey, Lord Dude, what’s in this?”

“That is bellfish roe. One of my favorites, though others find it too greasy for their tastes.”

“It’s amazing!”

“Wah-ha-ha-ha!! What an amusing pair of fellows!!”

Though Yokan had always been the black sheep of his family, so to speak, he had nonetheless spent his years bound by the rules of the shogunate. This may well have been the first banquet he had ever attended where he was content to

let down his guard and enjoy the meal. Bringing a cup of *sake* to his lips, he watched with awe as the two boys devoured the platters.



The next morning, Yokan pondered how monstrooms had appeared within Byoma Castle the night before. Suspecting the work of spies, he gathered his closest confidants and ordered them moved to a remote castle, beyond the reach of enemy agents.

Shibafune and his peers were sent ahead first, and Yokan would follow... accompanied, of course, by the two foreigners whose personalities had taken his fancy the previous day.

The hayfields glimmered gold in the morning sun, their stalks wet with dew. For two humans who had spent their entire lives amid Rust-blighted sand, it made for an impossible sight.

Yokan sat astride his horse, the soft wind caressing his fur. "Our spies are combing the land for this human female called 'Tirol' of whom you speak," he said. "I know you must worry for her, but rest assured, nobody knows these lands like...hmm?"

Yokan turned to check on his two escorts, but there was nobody there. He spotted them a little ways back, clinging to their horses for dear life.

"My," said Yokan, surprised. "I thought you two were brave warriors. Have you not even the strength to keep your steeds under control?"

"Keep talkin'! It wasn't our choice! We ain't never ridden horses before!"

"Horses are an endangered species where we're from," explained Milo. "Nobody really remembers how to ride them anymore."

"That must be difficult," replied Yokan. "In that case, how do you normally get about?"

"By crab."

"...I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"Yeah, our crab Actagawa!" said Bisco. "He's bigger and stronger than any horse!"

“You ride...crabs?”

Yokan’s whiskers twitched in astonishment at the boys’ response.

“Well, that is surprising,” he said at last. “I never figured you one for jokes.”

“J-jokes?!”

“But you must lighten up a little as you tell them. I very nearly believed you for a second there. Now, stay close. We’re nearly there.”

“Hey, come back here! You callin’ me a liar?!”

Meanwhile, Milo was starting to get used to this horse business, guiding his steed around with the reins while taking in his surroundings.

There’s so much nature around. It’s like we’ve fallen into a fairy tale...

Down here, there were none of the windswept wastelands that Milo was used to, nor any of the mutated beasts that roamed them. Peasant cats sang planting songs as they sowed the fields. The flowers were blooming, and from the distant villages could be heard the voices of playing children. It made for quite a different scene from the blood and tears of surface life.

“The people...er, I mean, the cats seem so happy here...”

“They’re calm,” Bisco agreed. “It just goes to show how much they trust their leader.”

“Yeah. Yokan works hard for them, doesn’t he? I guess all that whimsy is just for show.”

“Bullshit. Whimsy’s all he’s got.”

“What?”

“He does what he wants, when he wants,” explained Bisco in between struggling with his horse. “That’s why everyone likes him. They can’t help but fall in love with him.”

“Huh... I get it...”

“Then again, rulin’s not really my thing.”

“I wouldn’t say that. I mean, if what you say is true, then you’d make a pretty

good elder, wouldn't you?"

"Me? Ha! I'd rather be thrown into Six Realms to rot... Hey, horse! This way, not... Rrrgh!"

Whether or not Bisco's philosophy had any merit, Milo couldn't deny his partner's keen powers of observation. He waited a little for Bisco to get his horse under control, and when that seemed impossible, he cantered over beside Yokan instead.

"It's a beautiful country, isn't it?" Milo said.

"Hmm."

"I hear you often leave the castle. Is that so you can be closer to your subjects?"

"You give me too much credit, my fellow. The wanderlust simply takes me from time to time, that's all."

"You know, we have stories about you where I'm from. They say a samurai cannot understand his people's troubles without seeing them for himself, and that Byoma's peace is thanks to Yokan's unwavering honor and righteousness."

"Honor, you say. Funny, I couldn't think of a word less fitting, myself."

Yokan squinted into the wind, allowing it to ruffle his sleek black fur.

"The seat of the shogun is all about compromise," he said. "There is no honor in it. And many of my subjects find fault with the way I rule."

"But you defeated the wicked witch, Geppei Amakusa! That must count for something!"

As soon as that name was spoken, a grim shadow crossed Yokan's features.

"Even aboveground, everyone knows how you put a stop to her evil schemes!" Milo went on. "We have plays, poems, storybooks..."

"Evil, you say..."

"...Sire?"

"...I see. So that is how the tale goes in your world."

When Milo looked into Yokan's mournful eyes, he suddenly couldn't find it in himself to continue what he was saying. The black cat gazed off at the distance, as though he were looking into the very past.

"I should be remembered as the evil one," he said. "For it was I who snuffed the life out of one of this land's greatest prodigies for the sake of peace."

"..."

"I still see her, you know. In dreams."

His voice was quiet now. Like it might vanish on the wind at any moment.

"I still wonder what might have happened if I had forsaken my country...and taken her hand instead..."

"..."

"Did you hear something, Nekoyanagi?"

"No?"

"Hmm."

"Waaaait for meeee!!!"

A loud voice came from behind them, and the two turned to see Bisco galloping up to them, his horse whinnying with fright.

"B-Bisco!"

"My word!"

Whatever he was doing, it wasn't in any riding manual Yokan had ever seen. Bisco was gnawing on the poor horse's head, using his whole body to force the animal into going in the direction he wanted. To his credit, it seemed awfully effective.

"See this?" Bisco yelled. "There ain't an animal alive I can't ride!"

"...Wah-ha-ha! You never cease to amaze, Akaboshi!"

"I don't think you can call that riding... It looks more like the horse is running away from him!"

"We're chasin' after a bright new future together!" yelled Bisco, coming level

with Yokan and casting him a competitive glare. “Race ya, Sooty. Last one to the castle’s a rotten plate of milk! The Yokan I know would never refuse a duel!”



“B-Bisco?! Show some respect!”

“Hmm. Very well,” said Yokan. “Come, Hokusai! Run like the wind!”

“W-waaait, sire! What are you doing?!”

Milo couldn't hope to compete with two rambunctious companions. It seemed that with just a little provocation from Bisco, the lord's rebellious disposition came to the fore.

“Heh. Half expected you to pussy out,” said Bisco. “You know, you're pretty brave for a highborn!”

“Brave? Is it brave where you hail from to accept a wager whose outcome is all but certain?”

“Now you've said it, Fuzzball!!”

The two dashed off at once, leaving Milo in their dust. After he'd finished coughing, he sighed and followed them.

I think Bisco's right about him. He's flexible. He knows how to control his emotions. And because he's calm, the people are calm, too.

He's...a very different style of ruler from Pawoo; that's for sure. She doesn't know how to compromise...in politics or in love.

Alone with his thoughts, Milo looked up to see that Bisco and Yokan were already a significant way to the castle. He picked up the reins once more and spurred his horse on.

When he had finally caught up and asked about the race, Milo found that neither of them would tell him who won. That alone was enough for Milo to deduce what the outcome must have been, but he decided to keep quiet, lest he end up on the receiving end of Bisco's sharp claws.



“Our spies have confirmed your suspicions, my liege. It seems that the first bolt to fall struck Koban Temple, where Geppei Amakusa was sealed away.”

Shibafune, the old Chinchilla, had completely recovered from the Rust by now, and was seated by his master's side, dressed in his tawny-brown

ceremonial robes.

“We searched the temple,” he continued, “but Amakusa’s body was gone without a trace. When combined with the facts of the monstroom attack the other day, it leads us to only one credible conclusion...”

“...Geppei Amakusa has been reborn.”

“Ha-ha!”

Yokan chuckled. He turned his gaze away from his bowing retainers and toward the two human boys seated opposite him.

“That aligns with what these two told me about the so-called *Ultrafaith Arrow*,” he said. “Amakusa must have used the power of this arrow to resurrect herself.”

“Lord Yokan, this Amakusa person...”

“She’s not a person; she’s a cat.”

“Yes, yes! All right! This Amakusa cat. She must be the one controlling the Cat Gate that links our two realms! We have to stop her before everyone aboveground is turned into cats, like Bisco here.”

“Indeed. Her power is a threat to both of our homes.”

Yokan nodded and stood.

“The attack on our town came from within the city bounds,” he said. “The Matango must have a hideout somewhere close to the castle. The next attack could come at any moment.”

“Then let us make use of our spies and locate her at once!” said Shibafune.

“No. It’s too risky. She has the power to turn our own mogs against us.”

Yokan picked up his pair of swords and fixed them to his waist, then began striding out of the room, turning to address the two boys.

“Akaboshi. Nekoyanagi. What are you waiting for? Come,” he said.

This threw the old Persian, Shibafune, into a fuss, and he cried, “Y-you cannot possibly mean to conduct the search yourself, my liege! It’s far too dangerous!”

“If it is truly Amakusa we are dealing with, then only the Catwisp Blade will be of any use. While we idle here concocting plans to save our own hides, the townscats remain at risk.”

“B-b-but even so! At least take an escort of our own men! What possesses you to place your own life in the hands of these...these barbarians?”

“It is precisely because they are not of this land that I use them, Shibafune.”

When Yokan turned around, the look in his eyes struck the old Chinchilla dumb.

“Our foe is wise to feline tactics, and who knows what schemes she has dreamed up in her decade-long slumber? What better way to outsmart her than by relying on those whose ways are foreign to us all?”

“My liege!”

“She may attempt another attack on the city before we can locate her whereabouts. If that happens, my old mog, I want you to command the samurai. Let none of our subjects come to harm.”

Shibafune bowed his head deeply and acquiesced. Bisco immediately sprang from the floor and dashed after Yokan, but when Milo got up to follow him...

“...Nekoyanagi!”

The old Chinchilla’s voice made him jump as Shibafune’s paw grabbed his shin. “Waaah! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” he cried.

“Please look after my liege,” he pleaded. “He has always been too kind for his own good.”

Milo looked back into the Persian’s teary eyes.

“For thirty years, I have tried my best to relieve what I can of his burdens...but as I age, I find it harder and harder...”

“It’s okay, Mr. Shibafune. You know, Bisco’s a famous hero in our world.”

“Truly...?”

“And what’s more...”

Milo stepped out into the corridor. Glancing at the two figures ahead of him,

he couldn't help but feel that they looked awfully alike.

"...I have some experience taming wild beasts; you'll see!"



Away from the castle on the outskirts, back in the main city of Byoma, a black-furred samurai arrived in town a little before dawn. As he strode through the streets, two strange figures crept from corner to corner behind him, attempting to remain out of sight.

Eventually, the cat arrived before a rather prosperous-looking fabric shop.

"Hail, tailor."

"..."

"Hail. I have business with you."

Eventually, the shopkeeper wandered out, giving a big yawn.

"What is it?" he asked. "We're closed today. Can't you see the—?"

"Senbei. I have a favor to ask."

"Yokan?! What are you doing—?"

"Shhh."

When Senbei saw who it was, he wanted to cry out in shock, but Yokan placed a claw to his lips and silenced him.

"How quickly can you make uniforms for two of my samurai?" he asked.

"Your samurai, sire?"

Yokan turned and looked back over the street, but it was empty. "Akaboshi? Nekoyanagi? Where have you gone?"

The two figures slunk over from the shadows, appearing behind the young lord.

"The eagle flies at midnight," spoke one.

"But only when the moon is full," responded the other.

"What are you two playing at?" asked Yokan.

““We’re ninja,”” they both answered at once.

Yokan sighed. “I see. I fear you may have misunderstood the job description somewhat...”

“Ahh, I see your game,” said Senbei, displaying the trademark wits on which his textile empire was founded. “You wish to disguise these two humans as samurai, is that it?”

“Indeed,” replied Yokan. “Their hunter’s garb does make them stand out a tad.”

“I shan’t take a moment, Milord! Please come this way, my fine gentlemen.”

“The cuckoo crows at dawn,” said one.

“But only if I haven’t eaten it,” responded the other.

“I shall wait out here,” said Yokan. “You don’t need to do anything too fancy, Senbei! The more discreet, the better!”

Bisco and Milo stuck to the shadows as they slipped inside the shop; a maneuver rendered completely superfluous when Senbei loudly announced their presence to his staff.

“Listen up, everyone! We’ve got customers!”

Shuffling came from every direction as sliding doors were thrown open, and Senbei’s tailors emerged.

“Well, if it isn’t those humans you spoke of!”

“Look at their smooth skin! They’re adorable!”

The cat clothiers approached and began prodding the two boys’ faces.

“Milord has requested that these two be provided with inconspicuous clothing,” explained Senbei. “But at this store, we do not deal in common rags! Craft them the finest garments they ever did see! And hop to it!”

““Yessir!””

Bisco and Milo each felt a paw on their shoulder as the tailor-cats ushered them away to be fitted.

“Relax your shoulders a little... That’s it.”

“I’m thinking white for the bell; what do you think?”

“I think you ought to decide the color of the cloth first!”

“My, look at those muscles!”

“Perhaps we should ask our fathers to find us human husbands.”

“Oh, yes. The mogs around here are all as hardheaded as our boss.”

“Less prattling on the job, pussycats!”

““Yessir!!””

...

Unnoticed by all, one tailor exited through a sliding door at the back of the room. With one glance back to ensure she was not being watched, she slipped out of the building and into the streets on all fours.

“Yokan is back in Byoma, sire. He is picking out costumes at a clothing store.”

“I see.”

In a mansion somewhere, a *kimono*-wearing calico listened to a voice speaking through the screen door.

“The two humans are there as well. The shogun is having them measured for a set of *kimono*. His purpose is unclear, but he seems completely unaware of our bell scheme.”

“Very good. You heard the puss, magistrate.”

“Guh-huh-huh.”

The cat magistrate chuckled, his pudgy face lit dimly by the glow of the lanterns.

“I must say, I am surprised he came to the city in person. For all his confidence, Yokan is naught but a heavy-pawed fool.”

He puffed his pipe and expelled a cloud of white smoke. His flabby chins wobbled as he talked.

“There is little chance of him figuring out our plan, wouldn’t you say, Suzuya?”

“Hee-hee. I agree wholeheartedly, Your Excellency.”

This calico called “Suzuya” was markedly skinnier than the magistrate. Bells hung all across his body, jangling as he walked.

“Cats cannot do without bells,” he said. “But little do the townscats know, *my* bells are infused with Amakusa’s magic and will transform them into monstrooms when they hear them!”

“And I shall quell any messages of distress and ensure the news does not reach Yokan’s ears.”

“Quite right.”

“I must say, Suzuya, your aptitude for trickery is matched only by my own.”

“Most kind of you to say, Your Excellency.”

The two villains guffawed and cackled in chorus. Afterward, Suzuya took out a wooden box and presented it to the magistrate.

“As promised, Your Excellency. I believe you shall find these golden treats much to your liking...”

“Oh! Very good.”

“And once Byoma belongs to Amakusa, I hope you will see fit to put in a good word about me to her...”

“Yes, yes. Just give me the box already!”

The magistrate took the offering in his pudgy paws and tore off the lid, allowing the golden glow therein to fill the room.

Just then, a vicious metal dart ripped through the paper sliding door, destroying the wooden box and scattering golden coins all over the floor.

“Whaaah?!”

“Wh-what is the meaning of this?!”

Suzuya walked over to the door and threw it open to find a single cat standing in the courtyard outside. He wore a mask that concealed his face, but the moonlight illuminated his black fur and sleek tail.

“I knew you must have had a paw in this monstroom business, Suzuya,” said the figure.

“Wh-what?!”

“And to think the magistrate was involved as well, to ensure the castle would never hear of your villainous deeds.”

“Who do you think you are?!” roared Suzuya. “You dare slander us this way?!” He pointed to the magistrate, only now lumbering out of the room to see the intruder for himself. “You are in the presence of Ginzaemon Chikayama, supreme magistrate of Byoma!”

“You’ll hang for this, samurai,” said he. “That’ll teach you to stick your nose where it doesn’t belong!”

“What a strange thing for this city’s custodian to say,” replied the figure, lifting his head to reveal a pair of burning crimson eyes!

“Wh-wha—?!”

“Th-those eyes...!”

“It seems you haven’t yet forgotten the face of your lord and master, Ginzaemon!”

The figure ripped off his mask, revealing his true visage to the moonlight.

““Sh-shogun!!””

It was the visage of Yokan Yatsunashi, the eighth shogun of Byoma.

Suzuya and the magistrate immediately fell to the floor in prostration, sweat dribbling down their faces.

“I must thank you for sending your spy to the clothier,” said Yokan. “She led me right to you.”

“I—I know nothing of any spies, my liege. Th-this must be some kind of mistake...”

“Suzuya. And you, Ginzaemon. You have allied with the wicked Amakusa and betrayed our good city. The gold you were promised will not save your soul. And it will not save you from me! Surrender and await your judgment, or resist

and be cut down!”

“Grrrrggghhh!!”

His nose pressed to the ground, Ginzaemon’s anger built up and up until he rose to his feet, ears steaming, and drew his sword.

“You arrogant little child! Die like the irksome stray you are! I’ll present your head to Amakusa on a silver plate!”

“I’m afraid we must resist, my liege,” said Suzuya. “Attack, my minions, attack!”

The bell-seller raised a cry, and monstroom guards appeared from all angles, kicking down doors and pointing their fiery halberds at Yokan.

“He’s just one cat! Get him, you lot!”

“Just one, you say? I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

The monstrooms all launched their bulbous bodies at Yokan, but all of a sudden, a flash of steel sent them flying. They flew about the garden and onto the roof, cracking tiles and kicking up dust, all the while emitting a “Waaaaa...” noise that made it hard to tell whether the attack had actually hurt them or not.

“Wh-who’s there?!”

“We won’t let you lay one claw on Yokan!”

It was a human samurai, clad in a sky-blue robe, with a bell-shaped earring in each ear and with his sky-blue hair, which by now had grown quite long at the back, tied up in a ponytail.

“In the name of the cats, I will punish you!”

The samurai dropped down and landed before Yokan, striking a very un-ninja-like pose.

“Wh-wh-wha...?!”

“A *human* samurai?!”

“I’m Milo Nekoyanagi,” the samurai declared, “secret agent!”

“Listen here, Nekoyanagi,” said Yokan. “Secret agents are typically known for

keeping their names a *secret*.”

“Look at me, Yokan!” cried Milo with unbridled glee. “It’s like I’m a real samurai!”

“Yes, but...”

“I can’t believe Bisco didn’t say anything about it! What do you think, Yokan? Looks good on me, doesn’t it? And check out the hair!”

“Uh-oh, Suzuya is getting away. I’ll leave you to clean up here, Nekoyanagi!”

“What? Wait! Come back! You didn’t say anything, either!”

Yokan slipped away between the hordes of monstrooms lumbering toward the sky-blue samurai.

“Bab-ba-ba-bam!”

“It’s a human!”

“No, it’s a panda!”

“It’s a human panda!”

“He’s black and white! We’ll make him black and blue!”

“Hey, won’t anyone say anything about how good I look? C’mon!”

Then he drew his sword and faced the oncoming monstrooms.

“I get it,” he said. “What you’re trying to say is, there’s more to being a samurai than just clothes. Well then, let’s practice swordwork. You’ll be my sparring partners, won’t you?”

“Grrr! He’s mocking us!”

“We’ll teach you!”

“Come on, then,” said Milo. “I promise it won’t hurt!”

The monstrooms attacked, and Milo raced to meet them like a blue bolt of thunder! Yokan glanced back over his shoulder and smiled before pursuing Suzuya and Ginzaemon down the halls of the mansion.

“*Pant...pant...pant...*”

“W-we must hurry, Your Excellency...”

“I am hurrying!! This...is as fast as I... Whoa!”

As he was running, Ginzaemon tripped on a *tatami* mat and fell head over heels, tearing through a paper wall.

“Oof!”

“How the mighty have fallen,” spoke the black cat, his shadow falling over the pair. “You bring disgrace to our kind’s name, Ginzaemon. Were we not once friends who each sought to be taught the arts of the Catwisp Blade? I still remember our time in the dojo together. You were always an earnest student. What possessed you to turn yourself over to wickedness?”

“You...would never understand!” said the disgraced magistrate between labored breaths. “How could you know what it’s like to have nothing?! I thought, even if I lacked your upbringing, I could still beat you at the sword, but no! All my training, day after day, in vain! And when I lay beaten on the floor, cursing the heavens, you saw fit to extend your repulsive paw in sportscatship!”

“...”

“Y-Your Excellency...”

The bell-seller cautiously approached, when all of a sudden, Ginzaemon whipped around and stole one of his bells.

“Ahh!”

“The mushroom is the power that will grant us cats what we seek! It is Lady Amakusa’s salvation! No longer will I have to lie oppressed beneath your mocking paw! Rrraaaaaaaagghh!!”

Then he popped the bell into his open mouth!!

“Ginzaemon! What are you doing?!”

“Ohhh?! Ggh... Ggghh. Rrggghhhh?!”

“Oh no! Oh nooo!!”

Suzuya cowered and ran away. Yokan didn’t have time to go after him.

The bell sounded in Ginzaemon’s stomach, still emitting its mysterious chime.

The pudgy magistrate swelled up like a balloon, and then just as he was about to burst...

Gaboom!

“Ooooooggghh!!”

Where once he stood, there was now only a three-meter-tall, gold-skinned mushroom man! His head was so large as to break through the ceiling, and in his hand he still held the magistrate’s sword.

“I feel...powerful! Like I could take on anything!” he said, trembling with raw power. *“Even you, Yokan!”*

“You’ve gone mad, Ginzaemon! That is not true strength, but fiendish magic!”

“Ginzaemon...? A familiar name. Where have I heard it...?”

Curse you, Geppei!

“Die!!”

The diabolical mushroom man lifted Ginzaemon’s sword high over his head and brought it down on Yokan!

Ker-rash!

The wooden pillars splintered! Yokan was flung high up into the air, and then...

“Catwisp Art!”

Oh no!

“Carp Streamer!!”

The golden monstroom swung his second sword horizontally! Yokan blocked the blow on Kintsuba, but was tossed across the floor and went clattering into a decorative suit of armor positioned in the hallway.

“The power! Is! Miiiine!”

I cannot hold back!

The golden monstroom was a threatening foe. Not only for his size and strength, but also for the secret arts of the Catwisp Blade that he possessed. If

Yokan was to stand any chance at all, he would need to go all out and slay his old sparring partner.

“Diiie!”

Yokan looked up at the sword rapidly approaching and closed his eyes.

I am sorry, my friend.

His paw went to Kintsuba, but just before he could unleash his fatal art...

“Hee-yar!”

Yokan’s attention was drawn upward as a single samurai came crashing through the roof like a meteor, delivering a ferocious kick to the belly of the mushroom foe.

“What?!”

“Bwuuuuuh?!”

“Talk about getting bigheaded!” the figure yelled. “Any bigger and yours’ll be through the roof!”

Crash! Crash! Crash!

The monstroom flew through several paper walls, while the newly arrived half-feline samurai turned and flashed Yokan a fanged grin.

“You were gonna kill him, weren’t you?” he asked. “Not very lordly of you, is it?”

“Akaboshi! Do you have some kind of plan?”

“Well, let’s just say I know a thing or two about mushrooms!”

Bisco set off running, his claws digging into the floormats. Just as the monstroom was struggling to his feet, Bisco unleashed a trio of arrow-shaped *shuriken* that sank into the mutant magistrate’s body.

“Ha-ha-ha. You think these toys can harm me?!”

“You’re stupid strong. Must be a demonshroom variation.”

“A what? Foolish human, you can never comprehend my power!”

“I dunno what to tell ya, dude. I just call ’em like I see ’em.”

“Burn in hell, outsider!”

The monstroom raised both swords above his head.

“Catwisp Art: Starfish Dance!”

“Whoa!”

The giant monstroom began spinning at high speed, twirling his swords like pinwheels. Anything and everything in range, including the walls, was torn to shreds by his monstrous strength.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! Nothing can withstand this technique! Tremble before my might!”

“Slow down, you idiot! You’re speedin’ it up!”

“That’s exactly the point, you worm! But if this still doesn’t scare you, then let me reveal my true power!”

“No, you’re not gettin’ me. Listen—”

“Starfish Dance: Nebula!”

Ginzaemon’s speed increased, until he was nothing but a blur. Looking almost like an enormous spinning top, he advanced toward Bisco. Yokan placed his hand upon his sword, ready to jump in should the situation call for it, but he didn’t need to, for just then...

“Diiieee! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha...”

Boom.

“...Huh?”

Boom. Boom.

“Wh-what? I-I’m slowing down. Oh no. Oh no, no, no...”

“What on earth...?” muttered Yokan, trying to detect the source of those bizarre sounds. Then, as Ginzaemon slowed, he saw it.

“...More mushrooms? They’re growing on his body...”

Small violet stalks had begun sprouting from the points where Bisco had landed his arrowhead *shuriken* earlier, feeding off the golden skin of the giant

monstroom. Despite their small size, they seemed frighteningly effective in slowing the foe's movements.

"Why does nobody ever listen when I try to warn 'em?" shouted Bisco, annoyed. "I was tryin' to say you're speedin' up the poison."

"Poisoned shuriken? You coward..."

This battle had been over before it had even begun. Bisco's opening move had sealed Ginzaemon's fate.

"You see," said Bisco, "demonshrooms are crazy strong, but that just makes it easier for the boozeshrooms to grow. Don't worry, you'll live. Once you get over the wicked hangover, that is."

"You reprobate! You call yourself a samurai?!"

"I ain't no samurai. I'm a Mushroom Keeper!"

Yokan had seen many heroic cats in his time, but none so brave as the man who stood before him now, completely unfazed by the grotesque monstrosity he fought.

Meanwhile, Ginzaemon was desperate not to let it end so soon. His momentum depleted, he nonetheless raised his sword for one final blow. But Bisco, quick as a flash, used his feline agility to evade the swipe, grabbing the sword with his catlike tail.

"I-Impossible!"

"Apocalypse Style: Pipe Snake Strike!"

Slam!

Bisco swept the stolen sword upward, like a Pipe Snake climbing into the heavens, and struck Ginzaemon's mushroom cap with the back of the blade (as though that would do anything to limit the move's destructive potential). The weighty monstroom was launched into the air, through the roof, and off into the distance, silhouetted against the moon, all the while emitting the monstrooms' signature sleepy cry.

Yokan, meanwhile, let out a groan.

What a bizarre style. Those are not the movements of a warrior but of a wild beast!

“Another hollow victory for my blade,” said Bisco.

“What do you mean, *another*?” asked Yokan. “You told me this was your first time using a sword.”

“C’mon, man. No need to spoil the moment.”

Sticking the sword into the floormats and perching atop it, Bisco let his tail hang, turning to Yokan and asking, “So? We saved your old training buddy. Who’s next?”

Bisco’s gaze put the smile back on Yokan’s troubled face. “Indeed,” he said. “Next, we must save all the innocent townscats who have been turned into monstrooms by Amakusa’s magic. Suzuya must know where her magic bell is kept. We must catch him, and—”

“Lord Yokan!”

The lord’s thought was interrupted by Milo’s sunny voice. He stepped into the wrecked atrium, dragging a prisoner behind him.

“I caught one!” he said. “I don’t know who he is, but he looked suspicious!”

It was Suzuya. He kicked his arms and legs, jangling the bells all over his body.

“He must have made quite the formidable opponent,” said Yokan. “Akaboshi, your partner is no less fearsome than you.”

“Hmm. Maybe a little less,” Bisco insisted.

“Whoa, Bisco!” yelled Milo. “Look at this mess! Back home, this would all belong in a museum!”

“Hey, don’t just assume it’s my fault! So who’s this?”

“Oh, him?”

Milo looked back at his captive, whose endless struggles were availing him naught. Milo’s time in the medical industry had taught him a few things about handling unruly cats.

“I—I was just following orders!” Suzuya protested. “It was all the magistrate’s

idea; I had nothing to do with it!”

“Hmph. A laughable claim. ’Twas one of your bells that turned Gizaemon into that monster, was it not?”

Yokan strode over to Suzuya and crouched before him.

“Amakusa’s bells all draw power from the original. We destroy that, and her magic is nullified. Suzuya, do you know where to find it?”

“I—I don’t know. I really don’t know, I swear...”

“Suzuya. You know the penalty for refusing the shogun, do you not?”

“Aiieee! I...I can’t! She’ll kill me! Forget *la terre promise*, she’ll send me straight to hell! Please, you can’t make me say it, my liege, you can’t!”

It was clear that Amakusa’s threats still held some sway over the bell-seller, because he was shivering so hard, all his bells were ringing. Yokan could somewhat sympathize with his plight; he wouldn’t much like to be in Suzuya’s shoes himself, being forced to pick his poison between the heretical Amakusa and the Catwisp Blade.

Yokan placed his chin in his paw and thought for a moment.

“The poor mog is terrified. Perhaps we should bring him back with us to the castle?”

“I’ve got it, sire,” said Milo. “Leave it to me.”

Yokan looked at him and nodded. With the shogun’s approval to proceed, Milo walked over behind Suzuya and placed his arms around him.

“It’s okay,” he said calmly. “Everything’s going to be all right.”

“E-EEK?! Wh-wha...?”

“Relax for me. Take deep breaths...”

Milo stroked Suzuya’s coat, making sure to tickle the cat’s throat. When he did, Suzuya’s eyes narrowed, and he purred softly.

“Wh-what nature of massage is this...?” he asked, entranced. Milo continued to pleasure the uncooperative cat until the muscles in his neck were completely relaxed, and then...

“Sorry about this.”

Shnk.

“Ugh...”

Milo sank his needle into Suzuya’s flesh, injecting a spore-laden liquid into his veins. It took less than three seconds, and Suzuya had no idea what had happened. He simply got to his feet and began walking.

“Hmm?” said Yokan. “Where is he going?”

“It’s all right, sire. We just need to follow him.”

“I expect this is another of your dubious concoctions, Nekoyanagi.”

“It’s not dubious; it’s just a little truthshroom serum!”

Bisco screwed his face up, offering a further explanation. “This guy makes ’em so strong, you don’t even have to ask questions; the body just moves on its own. It’s disgustin’. Violatin’. You call yourself a doctor?”

“It’s for the greater good!” Milo protested. “Or do you want to let these cats die?”

“You’re a quack. A panda quack!”

“Well, you’re a mushroom head!”

“What?! Is that an insult? If it is, I’m gonna kill ya!”

“Quiet, you fools! Look!”

While the two quarreled, Yokan watched Suzuya approach a large sliding door and pull it open, then...

“Mrowww!!”

The bell-seller flew into a frenzy, scratching and clawing at the floormats of the room beyond. He continued like this for some time before the soporific effect of the truthshroom serum set in, causing Suzuya to conk out on the ground.

“The hell was that?!” yelled Bisco. “That was no help at all!”

“Perhaps it was,” said Yokan, nodding in comprehension. “The answer lies

beneath these floormats!”

The two boys watched blankly as Yokan moved over to the fallen Suzuya.

“Take care of him for me, will you?”

“Lord Yokan? What are you—?”

But Milo didn’t even have time to finish his question. Yokan leaped into the air, somersaulted seven times like a cartwheel, and brought his heel down in the center of the matted floor!

Ker-rash!!

“Catwisp Art: *Great Wave!*”

““Waaah!””

The force of impact blew the boys’ hair out of their eyes. Every last *tatami* in the room was launched high into the air, like a beach full of flopping fish left behind after a tsunami.

What the hell kinda move was that?!

Bisco couldn’t imagine the finesse required to pull it off. If he tried it himself, he would probably just wreck the whole room.

“Aha! There it is!” said Yokan, without even pausing to catch his breath, while the boys looked on in awe at what they had just seen.

Beneath one of the mats was a dug-out hole, containing...

“I-is this it?”

“The great bell?!”

The large globular bell shone gold in the dark crevice. Strange veins ran across its surface, and it beat softly, almost like a living heart.

“This beating,” Yokan explained, “emits sound waves we cannot hear. It resonates with the bells we wear around our necks, and then...”

“...It turns you all into monstrooms,” surmised Milo.

“So we just have to destroy it, and everyone’ll turn back to normal?” asked Bisco.

“Hold. If we do not destroy it fast enough, then the bell will go up in an explosion large enough to take out the entire estate. We must be careful.”

Yokan walked over to the magic bell and placed his paw on the hilt of his sword.

“Yokan!” cried Milo. “Let us help!”

“Leave it, Milo!”

“But...!”

“Look at his eyes,” said Bisco. “Yokan’s serious. We should let him do this.”

Bisco had witnessed firsthand the lord’s transformation into a fierce and noble warrior before, and he regarded the black cat with an esteem he had not felt in quite some time.

“Hidden Catwisp Art...!”

Yokan’s eyes flew open, and after he took a deep breath, his blade ignited with fiery particles that danced around him like fireworks, and a wind ruffled his coat, which gleamed black in the night.

His sleek muscles tensed, ready to deliver the decisive blow...

“...Hmm.”

““...Huh?””

...But the blow never came. Yokan dropped his sword and walked back over to Milo.

“Has Suzuya not awakened yet?” he asked. “No matter, let us leave him and get away from here.”

“Wait, wait, wait!!” cried Bisco. “What happened to your ultimate technique?!”

“Hmm? I already used it.”

“Wha—?”

Ka-slash!!

Not a second later, a large X-shaped split appeared in the bell.

“Aiiieeeee!”

The artifact let out a fur-raising scream as golden blood spurted from the cracks with enough force to cover Bisco from head to toe.

“Wh-what the...?!”

“The townscats should soon return to normal,” said Yokan. “Meanwhile, we must investigate this cave.”

The bell disintegrated to golden dust, revealing a passageway that stretched deeper underground.

“It will most likely lead us directly to Amakusa’s hideout,” he said. “Though if you are wounded, perhaps we should return to the castle and rest?”

“Bisco and I are fine, sire!”

“Very well, then let us proceed. No time like the present!”

Yokan peered down the staircase, over which the gold dust flowed like sand, then he began to descend. Bisco looked puzzled for a moment, then ran after him.

“Hey! Aren’t you gonna explain what the hell just happened? It looked like you slashed faster than we could see!”

“Perhaps that’s precisely what I did,” replied Yokan.

“No, I don’t think so,” said Bisco. “There’s no technique in the world faster than my and Milo’s eyes. You didn’t even draw your sword. But still you sliced that bell in half! How the hell’d you do it?”

In recognition of Bisco’s skill, Yokan answered. “The Catwisp Blade may seem like a sword art, but in truth...it is not,” he said without turning around. “Through the catwisps, I touched the core of the great bell. Then I didn’t have to do anything at all. I simply believed.”

“What...?!”

“Perhaps, when all this is over, I will teach you... Or perhaps you already know.”

Yokan turned and flashed a merry smile. “I always wanted friends like you,”

he said, before continuing.

“Hey, wait! We’re not done talkin’!”

“Amakusa is waiting for us just ahead,” said Yokan. “We must hurry on.”

The passage flattened out, lit on both sides by wooden torches. Bisco cursed under his breath, then he and Milo ran to catch up with Yokan.

“Hold on a moment, you two!”

Milo ground to a halt in a cloud of dust.

“Lord Yokan, the path ahead, it...”

“...splits in two, I see. We don’t have much time. If Amakusa gets away, this will all be for naught.”

Yokan placed his chin in his paw and pondered the problem, his furry face illuminated by the light of the torches.

“We must split up,” he said. “Is that okay with you, Akaboshi?”

“Sure. C’mon, Milo, let’s go!”

“Okay!”

“Beware Amakusa’s magic,” Yokan warned them. “Do not let down your guard!”

Bisco and Milo took the left path, and Yokan disappeared down the right. After a few minutes, the two boys found that the walls and floors were beginning to be replaced with gold that glistened in the torchlight.

“This must have been the right way,” said Milo. “You’ve got good instincts, Bisco!”

“Must be ’cause I’m half cat. That’s boosted ’em by thirty percent.”

“Still, this Amakusa sure has some odd taste. Everything’s all gold; it’s so flashy! See, if it were me, I would—”

Suddenly, the two boys stepped on one of the gold flagstones (or flagmetals, I suppose), and there was a great rumbling!

“Bisco, the ceiling’s caving in!”

“Behind us, too. We’re trapped!”

The tight quarters left no room to dodge the falling rubble. The two boys went back-to-back and, with surprising calm, each drew an arrow from the other’s quiver.

“This must be one of Amakusa’s traps,” said Milo. “And we just walked straight into it.”

“Works for me,” replied Bisco. “This should take us right to the lion’s den.”

“Or the cat’s den, as it were.”

“We’ll regroup at the bottom. Remember to land on your feet!”

The rumbling magnified as the tunnel tore itself apart, thrusting Bisco and Milo into an interminable darkness. However, their eyes glimmered green and blue, showing no sign of fear in the face of the encroaching threat.

Gaboom!

The clamshell mushroom exploded to life, quelling the speed of Bisco’s fall. He rolled along the floor, finally coming to a halt when he collided with a rock formation sticking straight up out of the ground.

“Ow. Tch...”

Usually, Bisco’s hunter’s garb would absorb the shock of impact, but with what he was wearing now, he felt every bump. It was their signature cloaks that Mushroom Keepers used to control themselves in the air, and Bisco’s *kimono* just didn’t catch the wind the same way.

...Milo!

Bisco looked around for his partner but found nothing. Knowing the enemy could be watching him, he was wary about calling out Milo’s name.

Still, it’s Milo we’re talkin’ about. There’s no way he’d mess up...is there?

Bisco couldn’t see a thing, but he sensed the presence of a mysterious being in the dark expanse. It felt as if it were watching him.

What’s goin’ on? If you wanna fight, just show yourself already!

“Hee-hee-hee...”

“!”

Bisco spun toward the source of the sound and saw the outline of a little girl, silhouetted in the gloom. It was as if her body itself emitted a faint glow.

“That’s my big brother,” she said. “The wild senses of an animal. A far cry from the languid beast of the past year, I must say.”

“Amli...?!”

She smiled. Her unblinking glass eye peered into Bisco’s soul.

“Even when surrounded by death, your eyes burn with life. Isn’t that what you fell in love with, as we all did? Take us with you, Mr. Bisco, sir...”

Shwoof!

Bisco’s kick tore through Amli’s head, reducing her to a mist of golden dust. A spectral chuckle echoed off the walls of the cavern, and the dust reformed, this time adopting Chaika’s form.

“*Ouya!*” she cried. “You don’t hold back, do you? As you shouldn’t. Never give up your freedom, *saushaka.*”

“These cheap tricks ain’t gonna fool me. Don’t think you’re hot shit just ‘cause you got a peek at my memories!”

“We are how you really feel; can’t you see that?”

“If I wanted counseling, I’d go see a shrink!”

Clanggg!

Bisco’s shortsword was caught by the Lion’s Crimson Blade. Its golden glow illuminated Chaika’s smile, and she slowly morphed into the weapon’s true wielder, the king of the Benibishi.

“Superb, Brother. I can feel the life within you. Why do you deny yourself? Why do you not free yourself from the black snake’s coils that bind you?”

“What are you talkin’ about?”

“Like that woman, for instance.”

Shishi’s voice was an emotionless void. Bisco felt a chill run down his spine.

“You don’t need her. You’re better off without her. You are not meant to live bound by the rules and structures of mankind. You are a cat. Wild and free, like us. Join us, and—”

Just then, a blue spark flew over Bisco’s shoulder, piercing “Shishi” in the head. The apparition bent over backward but did not die. Instead, it chuckled in Shishi’s voice.

“...It seems your partner was quicker to break free than you,” it said.

“Sorry about that,” answered Milo. “I guess I’m just less emotional.”

“Heh-heh...”

The specter dissolved into golden sand. Milo watched until the last of its glow faded, then helped Bisco to his feet.

“Bisco,” he said quietly.

“*Cough, cough.* Sorry ’bout that, Milo, guess I shoulda expected somethin’ like this.”

“There’s something you aren’t telling me, isn’t there?”

“Erk.”

Milo’s unusually clammy voice caught Bisco off guard. He grabbed Bisco by the back of the neck, like a cat, and glared at him.

“Something’s up, Bisco. Illusions normally wouldn’t faze you. What did you see? Tell me.”

“Wh-why don’t you tell me what you saw first?”

“What?! Why’s that?”

“It’s only fair.”

“Fine. It was super sexy. There were all these naked people.”

“Naked—?!”

It was true that the dashing Dr. Panda was well-versed in matters of the flesh, or so he claimed. Bisco struggled to think of any method of seduction that would sway Milo’s path at all. Milo, meanwhile, grabbed Bisco by the lapels and

swung his forehead into his partner's.

"Look at me, Bisco! Your willpower is your greatest strength. It's all you've ever needed to defeat everyone in your way. But if it wavers...we're lost! We can't even beat a pack of sewer rats without it!"

"Rgh..."

"I'm here," he stated clearly and concisely. "So it doesn't matter what you do!"

Then, nose to nose, Milo screamed into his partner's face.

"Don't let anybody tell you it's wrong! Only you get to say what's right! If you want to end the world with mushrooms, then I'll tell you that's the most beautiful thing I've ever heard! I don't care what you choose for us, even if it kills me! I'd follow you into the deepest pits of hell, Bisco!"

Their hot brows touched. In the dark cavern, two pairs of eyes gleamed, azure and jade. The light of devotion ensconced in the former slowly passed to the latter, reigniting the flame that had once been lost.



And just then...

“Milo! Get down!”

Pchew!

What looked like a golden arrow tore through the air, landing in the solid rock floor after nearly skewering the two boys.

“Boo-hoo. Boo-hoo-hoo.”

A voice emerged from the shade.

“What emotion. *Quel amour!* I’d give up all nine of my lives for someone to speak those words to me!”

“It’s you!!”

“Now you shall pay for making me weep so. Do you have any idea how long it took to get my mascara just right?”

The arrow shed golden motes, illuminating the vicinity like fireflies. Then this light suddenly swelled, banishing the darkness from every corner of the vast space, and revealing a sumptuous chamber.

The sight struck Bisco and Milo speechless. Even amid the gaudy furnishings of the Gilded Elephants, they had seen nothing like it. The whole room was plated in dazzling gold that lit up the room like sunlight.

“What the hell?!”

“What a tasteless room...,” Milo groaned, looking at the red carpet that approached a golden throne, flanked by a dozen large golden cat statues. These statues seemed to watch the pair, almost as if alive, and the two boys felt oppressed by their beady gazes.

“Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho! *Magnifique*, is it not? A little too much for you *petits enfants*, perhaps.”

Atop the throne, rearranging her long and elegant legs, sat a tall, suggestively dressed cat who could only be the wicked sorceress, Geppei Amakusa herself.

With a flick of her wrist, the arrow unearthed itself and flew back over to her, hovering above her paw.

“It seems that imbecile Yokan has chosen the wrong path,” said Amakusa with glee. “It’s a wonder the country doesn’t collapse overnight with him on the throne.”

“You must be Geppei Amakusa!” shouted Milo.

“Used the *Ultrafaith Arrow* to clamber outta hell, did you? Well, it’s mine! Give it back!”

“Who said I went to hell?” replied Amakusa. “I have come down from heaven itself! Oh, deary me, my blood pressure is rising. Oh, *mademoiselle*!”

“Yes, Madame?”

““Hwaa?!””

The boys were astonished when they saw who answered Amakusa’s call. And little wonder, for it was none other than Tirol Ochagama, dressed head to toe in layers of robes like something out of *Princess Kaguya*.

“Here you are, Madame. These are scorpion nectar cakes. Open wide!”

““Tirol?!””

Her pink, jellyfish-like braids left little doubt. However, her gleaming cat eyes lacked their usual chaotic glint, replaced by an unwavering warmth toward her apparent mistress.

“Mmm. Simply divine,” said Amakusa. “Desserts like these are wasted on you humans.”

“What the hell’s gotten into her?!” asked Bisco. “She’s actin’ even weirder than usual!”

“Tirol! It’s us! Come back!”

“Here’s another, Madame.”

“Enough. The taste is beginning to cloy. Pour me that tea, will you?”

“As you wish, Madame.”

“Tch. These humans. Can’t count on them to do one thing—Aaaaaaghhh!!”

As soon as she took a sip, Geppei dropped the teacup, her tongue burning

red. She turned to the fearful Tirol and delivered a devastating paw to the side of her cheek.

“Gyagh!”

““!!””

“You imbecile! How many times have I told you we cats cannot stand hot drinks?!”

Amakusa strode over to the prostrating Tirol and stamped on her hand with her heel.

“Owww...!”

“You’re supposed to make it lukewarm, you ignorant creature!”

“Step away from her...”

A flame sparked behind Bisco’s eyes.

“Oh? Jealous, are we?”

Meanwhile, Amakusa’s long eyelashes curled with glee.

“By all means, step on her, too, if you desire. The creator of the *Ultrafaith Arrow* can do as he pleases.”

“Get off her! Who do you think you are?!”

“*You’re* the one who doesn’t know what he is!” screeched Amakusa. “I know precisely what I am! I am a cat! An apex predator! And so are you! So why do you extend your paw to these miscreants?! Why do you bend your knee to their ways and uphold their laws?!”

The air was electric with Amakusa’s rage. Then, after a moment, she cleared her throat, adopting her previous persona once more.

“...I admire rebellious men,” she said, pointing a single claw at Bisco. “Become a cat. Your claws are too sharp for humanity. Become a cat and live free and forever by my side.”

“Stuff it up your ass, fleabag.”

“What?!”

Amakusa's gaze met Bisco's and rebounded right off his thin, glowing slits. His lengthened fangs lent his usual grin a more threatening air.

"Order, freedom. The way I see it, they're no different," he snarled. "You're bound, just like everyone else—bound to what you believe. I don't need any of that shit to be free; just prayers!"

"You insignificant child!"

"And besides..."

Bisco's proud grin became a mocking smile.

"If I spend any more time around you and your stinkin' perfume, I think my nose is gonna fall off."

"Those eyes...they're the same as his!!"

In an unprecedented display of anger, Amakusa kicked Tirol off the raised platform around her throne and glared at the three humans, her white fur bristling.

"I was looking out for you! I try to extend a paw in mercy, and this is the thanks I get! Well, if your feeble brains are too stupid to comprehend the danger you're in..."

"Watch out, Milo! Somethin's comin'!"

"...then I'll splatter those brains all over the walls!"

The *Ultrafaith Arrow* glowed in reaction to her magic and flew toward the two boys. But just then, the jingle of Kintsuba's bells filled the air!

"Catwisp Art!"

"Lord Yokan!" cried Milo.

"*Yellowtail Radish!*"

Clanggg!!

Yokan drew his sword and slashed in one clean motion, stopping the arrow in its tracks.

"There you are at last, black one," spat Amakusa. "You always did have the

worst timing.”

“Geppei!” shouted the feline lord. “No longer shall I allow your malevolent fangs to snap at innocent humans!”

The fated pair did not so much as exchange greetings.

“You dare take that tone! Do you have any idea how long I’ve waited for our reunion?!”

“Accept your judgment!”

Yokan leaped into the air, ready to strike, while Amakusa snapped her claws, and the golden arrow reappeared in her paw.

“Catwisp Art...!”

“Cat-o-mancy: *Hateful Seven!*”

The catwisp particles gathered in Yokan’s blade, but Amakusa’s technique was too fast. The *Ultrafaith Arrow* traced a circle in midair, and along its path appeared seven snarling cat heads.

This technique...it’s...!

“Devour him!”

At Amakusa’s command, the seven heads flew at Yokan, one after the other.

“We hate you.”

“We hate you, Yokan.”

“Bastard child.”

“Die.”

These are...my brothers!

Yokan twisted to protect his vitals as the heads latched on to his shoulders and legs, throwing him against one of the statues.

“Yokan!” shouted Bisco.

“What happened?” asked Milo. “He should have been able to dodge that, easy!”

“Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho!” Amakusa chuckled with her paw to her mouth, while the seven heads retracted and adopted a steady orbit behind her. “Such is the life of a highborn prince! Seven elder siblings, all simmering with resentment for the child who stole their throne. Ahh, court politics are so ugly.”

“Then that oughtta make you twice as ugly, for usin’ ’em against him!”

“...Whaaat?!”

Bisco’s flippant remark wounded Amakusa’s pride.

“Ugly? Me? You can’t have said that... Surely I misheard.”

“Listen here, bitch. You’re just—!”

“You’re just a rotten pig who rolls around in the muck! Let’s hear you squeal, Geppei!!”

“Milo?! Er... That’s a bit far, don’t you think...?”

“Shut up!!” screamed Amakusa, the ivory fur of her face bright red with anger. The seven heads all turned toward Milo.

“All right, their attention’s on me! Bisco!”

“Right!”

Understanding Milo’s plan, Bisco leaped into the air, avoiding the heads’ gazes. Speeding toward Amakusa, he drew his longsword.

“Take this! *Pipe Snake Blade!*”

Amakusa, however, remained unruffled.

“Simply mewling its name does not a secret technique make,” she said.

Clanggg!

“What?!”

Bisco’s sword struck a golden *koban* that had instantaneously appeared above Amakusa’s head like a shield. Bisco was sure the floating-head technique demanded her full concentration, so how...?

“Allow me...to serve you...Madame...”

“Tirol! What’re you doin’?! ”

“Nyan/nyad/myaruler/smeow!”

Tirol’s lips produced a strange mantra, like nothing Bisco had ever heard, and the shield expelled spears of gold at Bisco. Only by the grace of his feline form could Bisco hope to dodge the attack and leap back over to where his partner was.

“She’s controllin’ the gold!” he said. “Where did Tirol learn to do that?!”

“There is no mystery in it,” replied Amakusa. “Humans have a higher affinity for gold than does any other creature.”

“Is that how it works?!” cried Milo, shocked.

“You cannot lay a paw on me. Stand down and admit defeat, you uneducated strays! Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!”

Bisco and Yokan retreated alongside Milo, who was fending off the heads with his shortsword.

“What’s with Snowball? She’s really gettin’ on my nerves!” said Bisco.

“Indeed. With the *Ultrafaith Arrow* at her disposal, her magic has grown more powerful than ever,” said Yokan. “Any forthcoming ideas, Nekoyanagi?”

“Of course!” said Milo, glaring at Amakusa with indignation. “She just called us uneducated! You two I can understand, but me?!”

“Rude.”

“Off with your head.”

“Bisco and I have a secret technique called the Mantra Bow,” explained Milo. “But we need an opportunity to use it.” He flicked his wrist, and the emerald cube appeared above his palm. “If you can keep the heads, Tirol, and Amakusa all occupied...”

“How long do you need?” asked Yokan.

“Seven seconds.”

“You shall have ten. Do not disappoint!”

Before Milo could say another word, Yokan drew his sword and leaped at Amakusa.

“Curse you, Yokan.”

“Bastard child.”

The seven heads flew toward him, muttering their grudges. But now that Yokan was prepared for them, they proved little impediment.

“It seems that even death cannot save your souls, my brothers!”

Slam! Slam! Slam!

““Gaaah!!””

Yokan’s sword moved faster than the eye could follow, beating the heads between the eyes, dizzying them.

“Waaagh... Father...”

“Forgive us...”

Babbling, they all fell to the ground, inert. Yokan looked not at them but at his next foe, his sword glinting in his grip.

“I cannot let you live like this, Geppei. Come! It is time for us to fight once more!”

“Silence your caterwauling, stray.”

Yokan flew at her, bringing his sword down on her head!

“Madame! Allow me!”

Clang!

Tirol’s “miantra” shield deflected Kintsuba’s blow. Amakusa grinned and began casting a new spell, when...

“Catwisp Art: Sashimi!”

Yokan’s sword became a blur, delivering a hundred cuts in the blink of an eye! The golden shield was diced up into small cubes that rained down on Amakusa’s head.

“I-impossible!”

“Don’t think you’re the only one who’s learned something these past ten years!”

“Don’t let it go to your head, foolish prince!”

In a spray of golden sparks, Amakusa blocked Yokan’s slice on the *Ultrafaith Arrow*, which hovered alongside her paw. The whole room shook to the desperate flurry of blows that ensued, with neither side conceding one millimeter.

However...

“It’s not enough! Once, Kintsuba was more than a match for her, but now...!”

“Let me tell you something about this arrow, Yokan!”

Her fur slick with sweat, Amakusa jeered at her faltering opponent.

“It’s the ultimate treasure! Able to grant any wish!”

My sword...it cannot last...!

“It is leagues more powerful than your pathetic little toy!”

Snapppp!!

“Oh no!!”

At last, the *Ultrafaith Arrow* won out against Kintsuba. Amakusa watched the broken sword blade with glee as it twirled through the air.

“Looks like I win this one, Yokan!”

She wore a look of utmost triumph. Yokan, tossed back by the force of the decisive blow, struck one of the statues standing by the wall, smashing its nose and collapsing to the floor.

Amakusa was left panting but still standing. Without bothering to do up her untied robe, she strode over to the fallen Yokan.

“I’ll give you...one last chance...,” she said.

Amakusa’s voice trembled with elation or pride...or perhaps relief.

“One last chance to admit your mistake. Admit you were a fool to choose your country over me.”

A silence passed as those two cats, black and white, gazed into each other’s eyes.

“If you do that, if you give it all up,” she went on, “...then I will take you back.”

“ ...”

“We shall create a true paradise for cat-kind, a land brimming with life. What say you?”

“But only by bringing ruin to Byoma first. Is that not the case?”

“Do these rats mean so much to you?”

“...Geppei. It seems I still cannot reach you alone.”

“ ...”

“But...”

“?”

“I am not alone!”

With that, Yokan deftly sprang aside.

What’s this?! So much pressure...!

Amakusa trembled, sensing some strange, reason-defying power coming from the direction Yokan had evacuated!



“Thanks for waitin’, Snowball!!” came Bisco’s voice. He glowed with a golden light that outshone even Amakusa’s arrow. The surface of his emerald-green bow glittered in the light of the Rust-Eater spores. The bowstring taut, he pointed his mystical weapon in Amakusa’s direction.

“What?! You two?!”

“Finishing move!”

““Mantra Bow!!””

Ka-chew!

There was a crack, like a rifle bullet penetrating steel, and in no time at all, the projectile reached Amakusa’s brow. She focused all of her magical energies into the *Ultrafaith Arrow*, and...

Bwoom!

“Grh! Rrgh...!!”

She stood firm, resisting the overwhelming might of the emerald blast with her own golden force field. The statues in the room all instantly shattered from the force of the impact.

“Curses... Curses! This cannot be!!”

Geppei’s voluptuous lips twisted in rage. Sweat dribbled down her face like a waterfall. Her claws, digging into the golden plating at her feet, began to slowly edge backward...

All those times my talents were ignored, insulted. All those times I had to lie and lick my own tears.

I am Geppei Amakusa! The cat chosen by freedom!

This cannot be the end of my story!!

Amakusa's prayers funneled into the *Ultrafaith Arrow*, and it steadily shone brighter and brighter.

"I cannot die while my dreams lie unfulfilled!"

Soon it became a burgeoning torrent of hope, its glow exceeding even that of the Mantra Bow.

"I shall show you...what it means to be a cat!!"

Ptchoom!

"Wha—?!"

"What?!"

The light of the *Ultrafaith Arrow* became an aurora glow, and the boys' Mantra Bow arrow was deflected upward, into the roof of the subterranean throne room, where it continued burrowing through the rock until it shot out the earth's surface.



Amakusa fell to one knee, panting, her power exhausted. Bisco and Milo were similarly spent and lacked the energy to fire another shot.

“That was everything we had,” said Milo. “How?!”

“Looks like we didn’t give Snowball enough credit,” said Bisco, admiration creeping into his ragged voice. “Her desperate prayers fueled the *Ultrafaith Arrow*. That thing answers prayers, reshaping reality. There ain’t a force in this world that can stand against it.”

“Why did you ever make such a dangerous thing?!”

“Hey, you helped!!”

It was Yokan who moved next. Though nearing exhaustion, he presumed that Amakusa no longer possessed any means to defend against him. A presumption that turned out to be correct.

Urgh...I cannot move!

Amakusa watched Yokan leap toward her, his shortsword drawn. She painstakingly tried to gather what little magic power she could, but it was too late.

“Geppei!” roared Yokan. “It is high time I excise your blight from our land!”

Curse you...!

In her desperation, Amakusa hit upon a devious plan. She grabbed Tirol, slumped nearby, and brought her into the path of Yokan’s blade!

“What?!”

One second.

“Impossi—!”

That was all she needed. Yokan’s blade hovered in midair, a hair’s breadth from the brainwashed Tirol’s neck. Seizing that crucial moment, Amakusa recalled the *Ultrafaith Arrow*, and the projectile hurtled back to her, hitting Yokan’s arm and tearing it off completely.

Splattt!!

“I...”

“Yokan!!”

“I failed...,” he said as the force of impact bore him gently through the air.

“Vengeance is mine,” said Amakusa. She pointed her long, sharp claws, sending the *Ultrafaith Arrow* deep into Yokan’s breast, out the other side, and back through his leg!

“Adieu, mon cheri.”

Gaboom! Gaboom!!

A golden mushroom flung the impaled Yokan high, and Milo caught his body in his arms.

“Yokan!!” he screamed, but the legendary lord had already slipped out of consciousness, his throat emitting only a distressed purr. “Oh God, his arm!” he cried. “We’ve got to do something!”

“Keep it together!” said Bisco. “Damn, right in the heart... Milo, use my blood!”

“Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho! Aaah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!! What a fool! In the end, all it took to blunt your sword was one scrawny little human girl!”

Amakusa mopped her sweat with a paw, laughing all the while.

“The arm of the Catwisp Blade... I would have preferred the whole body, but this shall make an adequate offering.”

“An offering...?!”

“Rejoice, foolish children.”

Her composure restored, Amakusa snatched up the torn-off arm, then scraped Tirol’s windpipe with her claw, allowing a trickle of her blood to flow over the arm before giving it a big kiss.

“Once I have enough power, the *Ultrafaith Arrow* will grant my dearest wish—to allow all creatures to live together in peace and harmony, without distinction or prejudice, as one singular organism! ...But I don’t suppose you have any idea what I mean, do you?”

“You want to turn everyone...into one giant fungus?!”

“That ain’t salvation. You’re just lonely and delusional!”

“You two are too smart for your own good. I’m supposed to monologue about my master plan and the tragic past that inspired it! You don’t just sum it up in two measly lines!”

““Whoa!””

Driven by Amakusa’s anger—or embarrassment, perhaps—the *Ultrafaith Arrow* sped toward the pair. They leaped to avoid it, but then a large golden mushroom erupted from the floor where it landed, sending Milo sailing through the air with Yokan in his arms.

“Uh-oh!”

“*Adieu*, my child.”

The *Ultrafaith Arrow* then turned and flew toward Milo, about to skewer him in midair when...

“Hroooooaaaahhh!!”

“?!”

“Catwisp Art: *Waterwheel!*”

Clanggg!!

Amakusa recalled the arrow, barely in time to block an attack from above. It was a single aged cat samurai, dropping down through the hole in the ceiling that was left there by the deflected Mantra Bow arrow. With all the momentum from the fall, he directed his curved greatsword at Amakusa’s head.

“Wicked Amakusa! I will not allow you to harm my liege!”

“Whaaat?!”

The boys went wide-eyed in shock. There, in full samurai regalia, and wielding an *odachi* sword several times his height, was none other than the old Chinchilla, Shibafune.

“You decrepit fool!” screeched Amakusa. “You’re still alive?!”

Shibafune moved with a speed unimaginable for one only recently recovered from illness.

“Catwisp Art: *Carp Ascension!*”

Slash!!

The follow-up strike came from below, finally nicking Amakusa’s flesh!

“What?!”

A spray of blood burst from the left side of her face. Her power exhausted, she failed to move the *Ultrafaith Arrow* fast enough to block the second blow. She fell over in agony, clutching her eye, while Shibafune leaped over to the two boys and collapsed to the floor.

“Shibafune!!”

“Akaboshi... Does...does my liege yet live?”

“He’s going to be okay!” yelled Milo. “I promise! I promise I’ll do something!”

“Oh, my liege... I could not protect you. I am sorry...”

Shibafune gazed at the unconscious Yokan, and a single tear rolled down his furry cheek. He leaned in and gently nuzzled his master’s neck. In the old samurai’s mind, memories of the young lord played out in vivid recollection.

“How’s that, Shibafune? My swordplay has improved, has it not?”

“You may have won this race, Shibafune, but I shall take the next! Come, let us go again!”

“What an opulent kimono... At last, in today’s ceremony, I shall become a man.”

“Father has not visited recently... Does he detest my black fur so?”

“Do not say such things, my liege. Even should all of Byoma rise up against you, you shall always have me. I will always be here for you.”

For several seconds, Shibafune wept, his ceaseless tears wetting his master’s fur. Then, when his eyes ran dry at last, he looked up at the two boys.

“Save him,” he said in solemn tones. “And when he wakes...tell him my spirit

will walk with him always.”

“Can it, old cat! You’re comin’ with us, too!”

“I never should have let you all come here. The lord cannot kill Amakusa.”

““What?!””

The two were struck completely speechless by Shibafune’s words. He had always seemed to be on Yokan’s side.

“That is because,” he said, “Geppei Amakusa was once to be Yokan’s wife!”

The boys could not even react. Shibafune, anxious of time, moved swiftly on.

“The two were made for each other,” he explained. “‘Twas court politics that drove them apart. Yet even after she fell to evil, the lord still loved her. He thought, with the power of the Catwisp Blade, he could set her free, and—”

“Don’t tell them any more!!” screeched Amakusa.

The *Ultrafaith Arrow* shot like a bullet at Shibafune. Yet with fearsome stamina, the old samurai swept his blade, parrying it! His entire body glowed with burning catwisp sparks, his body driven by willpower alone, allowing him a final swan song before his bones gave out at last.

“In feline-kind’s hour of need, three humans fall from the heavens!” he said. “This must be the will of Byoshoten— *Hack!*”

A splutter of blood! Shibafune mopped it with his paw and carried on.

“I leave this country’s fate to you,” he said to the two boys. “Come what may, our future rests in your hands now.”

“Shibafune!”

“Go!!”

Shibafune barked his order at the pair, then flew toward Amakusa once more. On his way, he turned and aimed a swordstroke at the cavernous roof overhead. With a great rumble, rock and stone tumbled down from the ceiling, forbidding Bisco and Milo from following the aged warrior.

They heard the pair’s voices from beyond the cave-in.

“Amakusa! It is time for you to sample my blade!”

“You decrepit old fool! You dare stand in my way?!”

“Outta the way, Milo!” cried Bisco. “One mushroom arrow oughtta take care of this roadblock!”

But Milo looked grave. “We’re retreating, Bisco. We can’t win like this.”

“What?!”

“I understand now. It wasn’t a coincidence the arrow fell into Geppei Amakusa’s hands; it was all because of her!”

Milo looked straight at Bisco, his starlike eyes twinkling.

“She needed it, Bisco. She needed to win, to conquer, to be free. That desire was even stronger than your faith. Ninety-nine percent of the time, it’s you who wins, Bisco, but...”

“...right now, we’re in that one percent,” finished Bisco.

“We need Yokan,” said Milo, nodding to the feline shogun on his back. “He knows Amakusa better than anyone else in the world. It’s time to save his life!”

“Got it!”

The two boys turned and fled down the collapsing tunnel. Rocks fell about them, a little too close for comfort.

“We ain’t gonna make it on two legs,” said Bisco. “Hop on!”

“Won’t I be too heavy?!”

“Ha! You forgotten who I am?”

The half-transformed Bisco got down on all fours and, after Milo had climbed atop his back, took off down the tunnel at extreme speed. Not five seconds later, there was no longer any trace of the passage that led to Amakusa’s underground citadel.

Free from the subconscious influence of Amakusa's magic bell, the people of Byoma were enjoying their first restful nap in a long time. Or at least they were until an unholy rumbling shook the city.

"What's happening?!" cried a cat, sitting up in his bed.

"It's an earthquake!" came a voice.

"The sky is falling!"

Earthquakes were a rare occurrence in Byoma, so the cats were not sure how to react. Senbei, the tailor, fell out of bed and stumbled into the street, wide awake with panic.

"Gohei!" he said, spying a neighbor's familiar face. "What in the blazes is going on?!"

"Master Senbei! It's over, we're doomed!"

"It's just an earthquake, my mog! The worst it could do is bring down the eaves on your head! Let's get somewhere—!"

"Something's happening to the castle, Senbei! Look!"

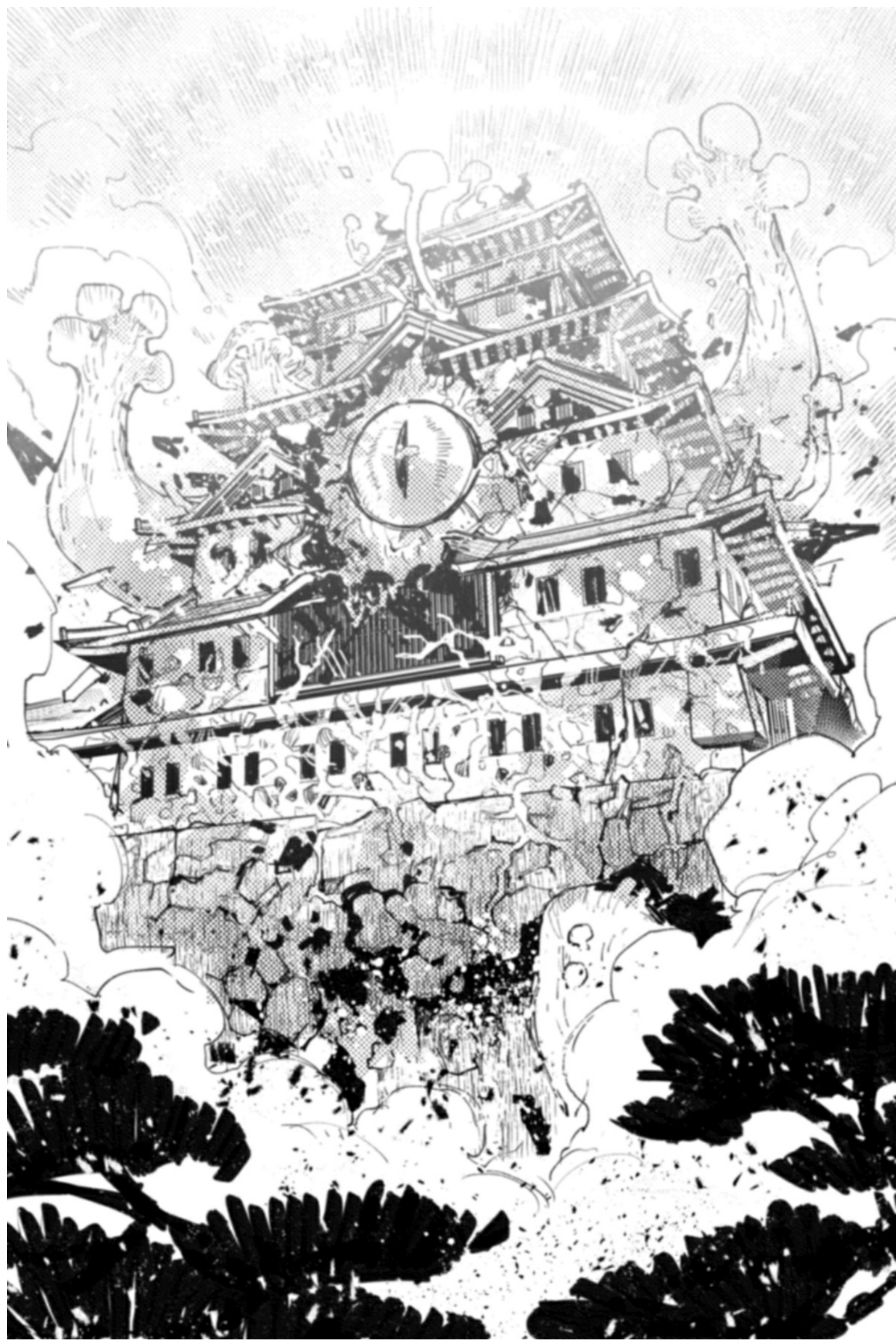
Senbei followed the townscat's shaking claw, and then he saw it.

The very air vibrated as the castle trembled, and a golden light emanated from its base.

"Hmm? How strange. What's—?"

Ga-boom!!

There was some kind of muffled explosion, and the castle itself was suddenly lifted into the air. Then two deafening crashes could be heard, and two colossal arms erupted out of its sides. These arms reached around to the front of the castle and tore away the wall, revealing a single, massive eye.



“BAB-BA-BA-BAM!!”

From within the castle came a booming cry. The culprit was a one-eyed, two-armed, two-legged, and truly gargantuan golden mushroom. Even from the streets, its mycelium could be seen creeping across the castle walls.

“I’M BIIIIIG!!”

“A...a monstroom! A monstroom has eaten the castle!”

“Look! There’s somebody up there!”

Sure enough, floating before the monstroom castle’s single eye, looking down on the town, were two figures.

“Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!”

It was Geppei Amakusa, twirling the *Ultrafaith Arrow* in one paw. Tirol stood behind her, pouring out a bottle of *sake*, which Amakusa drained before tossing the empty cup aside.

“See how they run and hide,” she sneered. “What miserable excuses for cats. Oh-ho-ho-ho!”

“Oh-ho-ho—”

“Shut up! Only I get to laugh!”

“Here, Madame.”

Tirol handed something wrapped in a purple cloth to Amakusa, at which she snorted before snatching it out of the girl’s grasp. She undid the binding, revealing the left arm of Yokan Yatsunashi within.

“Irony,” she said. “That the arm which once protected this city should be the very thing that ushers in its demise.”

She tossed the arm into the wind ahead of her.

“Watch closely. *Fantastique Action!*”

The *Ultrafaith Arrow* shot in the direction of the severed limb and pierced it! Immediately, an enormous golden light exploded from it, dazzling all who stood and watched in the streets below. When the light had faded, all that remained...

was a massive golden church bell, hanging in the night sky!

“Feast your eyes on the new great bell! Its power far outstrips all those puny little round ones.”

“Madame, I’ve made you some earplugs.”

“Oh? Fancy doing something useful for once. Very well, let me just put these in and— *Sacre bleu!* These are hard as rocks!”

“They are made of solid gold, Madame.”

“Well, what use are they, then?! You need to learn not to obsess over appearances!”

So do you!

Still, considering they were better than nothing, Amakusa plugged up her pointy ears and turned to address the city.

“Moggies and pussycats of Byoma!” she declared. “The time has come! Harken to the sound that will unite all of cat-kind!”

“OOOOOHHH.”

Amakusa gestured with her paws, and the monstroom castle raised both arms above its head.

“Rejoice! Sound the great bell!”

BWOOOOM!

The monstroom struck the bell with its right arm, releasing a devastating blast of sound that swept across the city, tearing roofs off houses.

“Aaagh! Th-the sound!”

“Don’t listen to it, Gohei!” yelled Senbei, his fur bristling at the loathsome tone. “It is the sound of the Matango! It’ll turn you into a monstroom!”

But it was too late. Gohei’s face was already plastered with a blithe smile.

“Wh-what a beautiful sound. All my worries are just melting away. The Matango...they were right all along. This world is fleeting... Nothing matters...”

“Blast it! Listen to me, Gohei! Gohei!”

Senbei gripped his neighbor by the shoulders and shook him hard, but Senbei brushed him aside.

“Buh...bu-bu-buh...?!”

His body overflowed with gold. Senbei averted his eyes from the blinding light.

Gaboom!

When he looked back, the only thing standing in the place of his neighbor was a newly created monstroom.

“Bab-ba-ba-bam!”

“G-Gohei!”

And it wasn’t just him. As the wave of sound traveled through the streets, it transformed all who heard it.

“Mush-a-room-a-mush-a-room-a.”

“Mush-a-mush-a-room-a-room-a.”

“Hey. That guy’s got his paws over his ears.”

“That’s not allowed.”

“Cease this madness, Gohei! You must fight it!”

“Let’s see if he’s ticklish.”

“Coochie-coochie-coo!”

“Coochie-coochie-coo!”

“Mya-ha-ha-ha?! S-stop! ...Uh-oh.”

Gaboom!

“Bab-ba-ba-bam!”

“All done.”

“On to the next one.”

...

The great bell continued emitting its devilish tones. The streets glowed with

golden light. Amakusa looked down at the city and laughed. At last, her fiendish plan had come to fruition, and all of Byoma was under her spell.

“What has she done?!”

Milo had headed into the mountains to collect some herbs for Yokan’s treatment, and when he crested the hill on his return, he couldn’t believe what he saw.

“She’s learned to exploit the *Ultrafaith Arrow* so quickly! Maybe she really is a prodigy!”

“The townscats don’t look so sad about it,” said Bisco. “Maybe they’re happier as mushrooms.”

“We can’t just leave them like this!!” shouted Milo, causing Bisco to slink back, ears drooped. “She’s already said she’ll come after the Human Realm next! We have to stop her!”

“Yeah, I know, I know! Don’t get your panties in a bunch!”

“We have two options,” said Milo. “Either we use the *Ultrafaith Arrow* again...”

“Not happenin’,” said Bisco, grinding his fangs, as he eyed the monstroom castle below. “Sides, it won’t work. If two impossible powers collide like that, it’ll destroy the whole world.”

“Then the only other option is to ask our feline friend to lend a paw.”

“Yeah.” Bisco nodded. “That lord’s still got somethin’ up his sleeve; I know he does. Let’s go talk to him.”

With no means at their disposal to help the transformed townscats, Bisco set off down the mountain trail with Milo in tow. Bisco now seemed accustomed to running on all fours, and it was difficult for Milo to keep up.

The pair came to a cliff wall and rolled a boulder out of the way, revealing a hidden cave.

“Yokan!” yelled Bisco, entering. “Got somethin’ I wanna ask you!”

“Hey! Quiet! He’s still asleep!”

The sound of dripping water echoed somewhere in the distance. Yokan Yatsunashi lay on the ground, his eyes wide open.

“No, he’s not.”

“Yokan! Oh, thank goodness! You’ve come to!”

Milo ran over to him and checked Yokan’s temperature with the back of his hand.

“You’re well on the way to recovery, sire. I’d say another month at the most, and you’ll be—”

“I...lost, did I?”

Yokan sat up, grimacing in pain.

“Yokan!” cried Milo, encouraging the lord to lie back down.

“How do I yet move?” Yokan asked. “Why do I yet live? I recall a skewer through the heart, and then...”

“It was your faith, Yokan. It harmonized with the *Ultrafaith Arrow*. Take a look.”

Milo gently undid the bandages around Yokan’s chest, revealing the gaping hole in his torso...and the golden mycelium spread across it.

“The mushrooms...saved me?”

“It was your own determination, sire. The spores simply responded to it.”

Then, Milo’s expression turned grave. “It’s just...well, they weren’t able to save your arm, I’m afraid.”

“I see.”

Yokan closed his eyes. It was not his dominant right paw he had lost, but that was no less an impediment to his unparalleled combat ability. The cornerstone of his style was using the claws of the nondominant paw as a second weapon, and without them, all his training was rendered meaningless.

He stared down at the armless stump, where the golden spores had stopped the bleeding, but below the elbow there was nothing.

“It seems the Catwisp Blade is no more,” he said.

“Don’t say that, sire! Prosthetics are really nifty these days! We’ll bring you one down from the surface, and then we can...”

“...”

Bisco was silent as he watched. He knew his partner’s attempts at encouragement were cold comfort to the distraught Yokan. The lord’s arts were very similar to his own. They required intimate knowledge of the flow of life force around the body. A missing limb interrupted that flow, and that was why it was no easy task to recover from such an injury.

Still... Bisco bit his lip... We need him back. We can’t beat Geppei Amakusa without him.

“We need the Catwisp Blade,” said Yokan all of a sudden. Both Milo and Bisco were dumbstruck by his surprisingly decisive voice. “I may have lost, but I learned one thing in so doing. If I had fought using the real Catwisp Blade, with a soul untainted, then I surely would have won.”

“Glad to hear it!” said Bisco. “Then get outta bed and let’s go beat her together!”

“Don’t be ridiculous! He’s still got a hole in his chest!”

“I’m afraid, Akaboshi, that the catwisps are no longer with me.”

Yokan seemed truly ashamed to admit his weakness, but he laid himself down, wincing in pain. His eyes still burned with fire.

“It can no longer be I who cuts down the wicked Amakusa. That task must go to another user of the Catwisp Blade, equally strong as myself.”

“There’s another swordsman as strong as you in this country?!”

“No.”

““Hey!!””

“Not yet, in any case.”

Yokan’s scarlet eyes glimmered as he went on.

“Time is short. I must train a successor by the time dusk arrives. I know of only

one student capable of the feat.”

Yokan slowly turned his gaze upon the fiery-haired Mushroom Keeper.

“Akaboshi. You shall be the one to receive my arts. I trust you are ready?”

“Wh-whaaat?! Me?!”

“I see,” said Milo. “That makes sense.”

“Like hell it does!” shouted Bisco, grabbing his partner’s ponytail and yelling into his ear. “I ain’t never even used a sword before today!”

“That is fine,” said Yokan. “The only weapons you shall need are right there on your paws.”

Bisco looked down at his transformed hands. Indeed, the claws did look sharp. Sharp enough to slice through rock if need be.

“I am afraid we can spare no leniency,” said Yokan. “I have a duty to my people as their shogun... Surely you do not mean to tell me you are frightened? That you cannot win a fight without your bow by your side?”

“Keep talkin’, asshole.”

“I must say, I thought you ‘Mushroom Keepers’ or whatever it is you called yourself to be made of sterner stuff. If you blind yourselves to the ways of other cultures, your traditions shall eventually lie in ruins.”

“Now you’ve said it, Fuzzball!”

Bisco bared his fangs and grabbed the lord firmly.

“You’re on,” he snarled. “I’ll show you what Mushroom Keepers are made of. Don’t think I’ll go easy on ya just ‘cause you’re missin’ a few parts!”

“So you accept?”

“How many times I gotta say it?!”

“Excellent.”

All of a sudden, Yokan’s serious face was replaced by a confident smile. And then...

Crackkk!

Faster than the eye could follow, he delivered a devastating headbutt to Bisco's brow! To Milo, it looked as if Bisco had simply passed out in the blink of an eye.

"Huhh?!?!?! Y-Yokan?! What was that?!"

"That, my friend, was the *Gurnard's Head*. It completely masks any trace of my intent, making it completely impossible to see coming, even by Akaboshi there."

"That's not what I meant! I thought you said you were going to teach him the sword!"

"All in good time, my fellow. This is a necessary step, I'm afraid."

Yokan looked down at the sleeping Bisco and closed his eyes. Focusing, he drew out the catwisp particles from the air around him. Reacting to his mind, the particles flickered scarlet before disappearing down Bisco's earways.

"While Bisco may be a fast learner, the ways of the Catwisp Blade are simply too vast to be taught in a single day. Therefore, we must finish this lesson within the landscape of his mind."

"Inside his mind?!"

"It is a technique known as *Dreamscale*," Yokan explained. "Using it, Akaboshi can receive the fruits of six moons of training in a single day. However, as you have no doubt surmised, the drawback..."

"...is that it leaves you both defenseless?"

"Indeed."

Yokan gazed out of the cave. Beyond the mountains, the monstroom castle strode through the town, backed by the golden light of dawn. It appeared to be heading straight for them.

"It is coming for me," said Yokan. "It will take some time to sniff us out, but when it does, we shall be powerless to fight it."

"You can count on me, sire!" exclaimed Milo. "I'll distract Amakusa, and that walking fortress, too! You won't have to worry about a thing!"

“It shall not be easy, Nekoyanagi. You would be facing not only Amakusa, but that Tirol girl as well, who possesses no small power of her own. It is much to ask.”

“Sire, you seem to be underestimating me,” said Milo, displaying a confident smile from out of nowhere. “This’ll be a piece of cake. I’ve already seen how it’ll go down in my mind. You see, there’s something we humans have that cats don’t.”

“Hmm? And what, pray tell, is that?”

Milo placed a finger to his temple. “Schools,” he said. “I may not be able to beat them, but I’ll keep them distracted! They don’t call me ‘Neko’yanagi for nothing!”



Plop.

A single drop of water tickled his nose, rousing him suddenly from slumber. His limbs were racked with pain.

Wh...what’s going on? I can’t move?

Cold earth touched Bisco’s cheek. He was lying in a side street somewhere. The pain felt oddly distant as he craned his neck to gaze at clouded skies. Out of the corner of his upturned eye, he spotted a cat dressed in an important-looking outfit.

“...Chief!” the cat squealed, recoiling in shock at his gaze. “The pussycat’s alive! She looked at me!”

“Still alive, you say?”

The chief’s smart clothing identified him as an enforcer of the law, and the cats crowding around Bisco, his subordinates.

“These swines’ resilience would be almost admirable, were it not for their thieving tendencies.”

“It seems she only barely clings to life, Milord. We must bring her to a physician at once...”

“Ridiculous!” roared the enforcer at his underling’s advice, before turning

his cruel eyes on Bisco. “If any doctor laid eyes on her injuries, our unlawful use of force would be exposed!”

“B-but she is merely a child, Milord!”

“Yet the treacherous puss concealed a knife and made an attempt on my life... At least, that is what we shall tell the magistrate. Now kill her.”

The police chief’s callous words left his underlings speechless. Meanwhile, on the floor, Bisco trembled with rage, ready to use his sharp claws to tear the corrupt police-cats apart.

I’ll show you...!

“What’s going on here?”

Hmm?

A voice like an arrow flew into the alley. Its bearer was a young, fresh-faced samurai with soot-black fur.

...Yokan?

“Whaddaya want, kid?”

The enforcer’s lackeys all gathered between their boss and the newcomer. He looked much like the Yokan that Bisco knew, but much younger at the same time.

“Don’t interfere with the chief’s arrests,” one of them said, “unless you wish to be thrown in the gaol!”

“But all she stole was a single fish,” said the young Yokan. “Is it truly the way of our city’s police to harass a starving young puss?”

“It doesn’t matter whether she stole one fish or all the gold in Byoma’s coffers! A thief is a thief, will always be a thief!”

The constable’s underlings all brandished their swords in unison.

“In the name of order, let no freedom go unpunished!”

“You incorrigible fools...”

In response to the police-cats’ furious words, Yokan placed a paw on his

blade. As soon as the enforcer saw it, all the blood drained from his furry face.

“Th-that sword! W-w-w-wait! Lay down your blades, mogs!”

““What?!””

“That golden hilt...it is Kintsuba, the treasured blade of the Yatsuhashi line, and mark of its successor, Yokan Yatsuhashi!”

The enforcer fell to his knees. His underlings didn’t fully understand who they were dealing with, but they followed suit all the same.

“W-we were just bringing this poor injured pussycat to a physician, Milord. My boys just got a little jumpy, that’s all. I’ll teach them some politeness, never you mind...”

“I care not. Begone.”

“Um. Milord? We needn’t bother Rakugan with news of this indiscretion, do we...?”

“I said begone!!”

The black cat’s roar caused the troublesome peacekeepers to leap into the air, scrambling for freedom, hiding their faces as they scurried into the streets.

Soon, the only ones remaining in the alleyway were Yokan and Bisco, who was lying sprawled out on the ground. Yokan walked over and took a look at his face.

“What barbarism,” he said. “I shall bandage you up presently, just wait.”

“Wait?” came a woman’s voice. “I’ve been waiting all my life. Waiting to be free of this hell we call a world.”

It was only after a few moments that Bisco realized that the words had come from his own lips.

“Wait until they see *my* world...glittering, golden, divine. That’ll show them. That’ll show them all!”

“Speak not,” said Yokan, “lest your wounds reopen... There. I have done what I can. I must bring you back to the mansion and have my private physician take a look at you.”

Yokan hoisted Bisco onto his back, and his mouth emitted a brief grunt of pain.

“Does it hurt?”

“Shut up...”

“That’s the spirit. What is your name, fair puss?”

For a moment, Bisco felt an odd feeling of reluctance in his very soul. Then the words came.

“Amakusa... Geppei Amakusa...”

“Geppei, then. I shall allow you to convalesce at the mansion. Otherwise, I can send you to your home, if you prefer.”

He whistled, calling Hokusai, his trusty steed. Yokan climbed into the saddle, with Geppei firmly on his back. Then the horse took off like the wind.

Geppei Amakusa...

Bisco pondered the girl whose eyes he saw through, turning her name over in his mind.

So I’m relivin’ her past? Guess that’s kinda cool.

There you have it. Never one to ask questions, Bisco settled in for the long ride. There was only one problem gnawing at him.

Feels kinda wrong bein’ in a woman’s body, not gonna lie. Even a cat woman’s...

However, Bisco’s finely tuned instincts were telling him that some important revelation lay just around the corner, and so he knew he would have to weather it no matter how uncomfortable he felt. Bisco took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and attuned his mind to that of Yokan Yatsunashi’s old flame.

“BAB-BA-BA-BAAAM!”

The menacing monstroom castle strode through the town of Byoma, crushing all in its path! There was no longer anybody left to cry out in terror, for all of Byoma’s cats had been transformed into monstroooms themselves by the ceaseless tones of Amakusa’s magic bell.

Instead, the monstroooms gathered around the castle’s feet, singing songs and dancing as if on parade.

“Hi-ho! Hi-ho! It’s off to war we go!”

“Bab-ba-ba-bam!”

“Check out the big guy.”

“Careful not to get squished.”

“Huh?”

“Dancing, dancing.”

“Urrggh! Shut up! Can’t a pussycat get some beauty sleep?!”

Geppei Amakusa lay on the rooftop, using the golden carp ornament as a pillow. She was something of a night owl, was Amakusa, and usually slept during the day to recharge her magic. Unfortunately, her monstrous minion was so gigantic, it was as if its thoughts couldn’t quite circulate around its body fast enough, and as a result, every three steps it forgot where it was going.

“HMMM? WHERE IS IT, AGAIN?”

“Over there! To Mt. Oban! Yokan is surely there, I can sense him...! Just like the last fifteen times you asked!”

“AYE-AYE, MA’AM!”

The giant monstroom was quick to set off in the direction Amakusa

indicated...but alas, it was also quick to be distracted. At every turret or watchtower it came across, it would swing its great bell, pulverizing the structure, almost as though it couldn't bear the existence of something else even half as tall as itself. This, of course, would set off another loud gong from the bell, ensuring that Amakusa was never granted a quiet moment.

“*Ooh là là!* I think I feel my sanity slipping... Oh, *mademoiselle!*”

“...”

Tirol was sitting nearby, diligently counting a large pile of *koban* coins before stuffing them in the folds of her *kimono*, her ears twitching and tail dancing with delight.

“You're obsessed with money, I swear! Give it here!”

“Hey! That's mine! That's mine!”

“I gave it to you, and I can take it back, too!” said Amakusa. “Anyway, how can you stay calm with all this dreadful noise?!”

Tirol swiftly removed the earplugs from all four of her ears. “Eh? Sorry, didn't catch that,” she replied.

Her bored expression drove Amakusa into a rage, and she struck the girl's head with her paw.

“Listen to me!” she screamed. “I have all the magic power I need. I shall leave the *Ultrafaith Arrow* with you. Use it to control the castle.”

“Whaaat?! Yer lettin' me drive this thing?!”

“Yes. I'm very pleased with the work you've been doing. You get an A-plus from me.”

“That mean I get a raise?”

“Not a chance, you greedy little girl!”

Gaboom!!

The entire earth shook, and Amakusa and Tirol both turned in the direction of the sound. Then, after a few seconds' pause, the monstroom castle painstakingly did the same.

“What...?”

“WHAT’S THAAAT...?”

Over in the distance, illuminated by the light of dawn, several enormous King Trumpet mushrooms burst out of the ground, casting the town of Byoma in shadow.

And atop those mushrooms stood a lone samurai, his sacred birchwood bow at the ready. He fired one last shot, and the resulting explosion fluttered his sky-blue ponytail.

“What’s up, short stuff?” he said. “You’re looking pretty puny from where I’m standing!”

Milo’s playful remark earned a scowl from Amakusa. “One of the humans,” she spat. “But as every woman knows, it’s not about the size, but about how you—”

“GRRR!”

“What?! Don’t tell me...!”

“HOW DARE YOU...?!!”

If Amakusa had made one mistake, it was in underestimating the simplemindedness of her colossal minion. The monstroom castle was driven by a single desire: to be the tallest thing around, and Milo’s mushrooms were an affront to that desire. Steam welled from its cap as its cyclopean eye burned with ire.

“Ignore him, you myopic mycelium! Yokan is over in the other—”

Pssssh!!

“Waaagh!”

Hot steam blasted the two atop its back, as the slow-witted monstroom castle took off with surprising speed, lumbering toward the offensive mushroom forest. With the strength of a giant, it swung the great bell, which rang out as it crushed the King Trumpets into mushroom chunks. Milo the samurai leaped backward just in time to avoid the blow, landing safely on another identical mushroom a little farther back.

“He’s trying to lure us away!” screeched Amakusa. “How does he understand how the monstrooms think?!”

“Well, that’s ’cuz he’s a pro,” offered Tirol.

“Shut up! Whose side are you on, child?! We must distract our creation somehow. But something must be done about that boy as well...!”

Amakusa chewed on her claws, and her eyes fell on Tirol, whose cat ears fluttered as she gave a big yawn.

“Of course!” she said. “You will face the boy.”

“...What?!” snapped Tirol. “You must be jokin’! That guy’s one of the two strongest humans in the world, and I’m just a skinny little princess! All the money in the world couldn’t get me to take him on!”

“That was not a request, child.”

No longer was there any trace of weakness in Amakusa’s eyes. She twisted her finger, and the bell around Tirol’s neck began to chime.

“N-no! Stop...!”

The incessant sound echoed in her mind. Tirol clutched her head and screamed in pain.

“Aaaaaghhh!!”

“Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!! You have served your purpose, *mademoiselle*. Now, I shall set you free. Free from the restraints of your human mind!”

Tirol clenched her teeth, but her fangs grew longer, her claws sharper, and her eyes wilder. Each of her jellyfish braids reared up like venomous snakes.

“Oh, look at you now. You’re nothing but a ravenous beast,” said Amakusa.

“Ghh...! H...hungry...!”

“Well, there’s some tasty fresh meat just over there. Eliminate him, and I shall reward you most handsomely.”

“Meat... Money...!!”

Zoom!

Tirol sprang off the rooftop like a wild animal, chasing after Milo as he danced through the air. Her paws found purchase on a series of golden *koban* coins that formed in the air like floating platforms.

Milo noticed her path trending toward him as he held his sacred bow tight, preparing to loose another mushroom arrow.

“Tirol!”

“Myaaaagh!!”

She’s fast!

Milo swept his emerald cube, deploying a wall of mantra energy. Tirol had already leaped from her platform, claws bared, and hopefully she would simply run into the barrier like a bird at a plate glass window. However...

Slash!

“Oh no!”

Tirol’s slice was aimed not at Milo but at the mushroom beneath his feet! The crack wormed its way across the King Trumpet’s stalk, and eventually the entire cap gave way, crashing to the ground.

“Oh-ho-ho-ho! Not bad, child!” chuckled Amakusa before turning to address the monstroom castle at her feet. The *Ultrafaith Arrow* amplified her voice like a megaphone. “*Voilà*, that terrible mushroom is gone! Now, can we *please* get back to following Yokan?!”

“AM I THE BIGGEST NOW?”

“Yes, yes! The biggest around! None dare compete with your stature! Now get going!”

“HMMM...”

Landing atop the roofs of the city, Milo watched as the monstroom castle slowly adjusted its course.

Uh-oh! I need to stop it before it reaches Bisco!

“Mmmyah!!”

“Wah!”

Ka-ching! Ka-ching! Ka-ching!

Using his shortsword, Milo deftly parried Tirol's claws, but the fight was about even. Tirol wasn't exactly the most muscular girl around, so what could be granting her the incredible strength with which she kept up the assault?

"It must be the *Ultrafaith Arrow*!" Milo reasoned. "Wow, Tirol! What do you believe in that grants you so much of its power?!"

"Money!!" Tirol cried.

"Hmm. Fair enough," said Milo.

"You shouldn't have come alone, you arrogant brat!" boasted Amakusa, standing and chuckling atop the castle's carp head decoration. "You can't bear to hurt your little friend, but she doesn't care in the slightest about you! Her mind has been replaced with that of a feral beast! She has no ability to think for herself at all!"

"No ability to think for herself?"

"That's right! Which means no amount of eye-watering melodrama can possibly break my spell!"

"That's...a good thing, actually!"

Tirol leaped at Milo, fangs bared. Amakusa closed her eyes, listening eagerly for the *Crack!* of Milo's neck...

...But the sound never came.

"What?!"

Amakusa leaned over the rooftop to see...

"Myao! Myao!"

Milo stood unharmed, having not moved one millimeter from where he was standing. Instead, all around him danced emerald butterflies, and it was at these ersatz bugs that Tirol leaped and bit playfully.

"Myao!"

For each she caught, another took its place. Milo could thus keep the feline-minded girl eternally occupied, while Amakusa could only gaze on in horror.

“Wh-wh-what on earth is that girl doing?!”

“I mixed in some of my own blood to create these mantra butterflies,” said Milo, revealing the slash marks on his wrists. “Any predator would go crazy for them! It’s a good thing your brainwashing was so effective, or else Tirol might have still been able to resist!”

“Grrrrrrhhh!! How dare you?!”

“Now just to take care of this!”

Milo brandished his shortsword and deftly slit the collar of the distracted Tirol without harming her at all. Then, as it slipped from her neck and fell through the air, he delivered a second slash that cleft the bell in two.

“Meow?!”

Startled by the attack, Tirol lost her balance and fell into Milo’s waiting arms.

“There, there. Good kitty. That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“Mrao...”

Milo’s dexterous fingers tickled Tirol’s throat. Purring, she turned over and nuzzled up against him. Then, all of a sudden, she wound her supple body around his neck, glaring back up at Amakusa with gleaming golden eyes.

“Myah!”

“I see how it is,” spoke the white cat with venom. “So this is how you repay your mistress. I should have seen it coming. You ungrateful, despicable humans are all the same.”

“Hisss!!”

“Am I fated to be alone? Am I simply too beautiful to live?” she asked, gazing forlornly at the sky. “Ahh, ’tis lonely at the top. What I wouldn’t give for a proud male companion...with pedigree, of course.”

“It isn’t too late, Geppei Amakusa. Give us back the *Ultrafaith Arrow*, and we can pretend all this never happened! Forget about good or evil, right or wrong; this is for your own good! Because if you carry on like this, if you keep fueling the arrow with your desires...it’ll consume you!”

“Sob... Sniff... Sob... Even after all this, you would show mercy to a silly little puss like me...?”

She held up her paw. The *Ultrafaith Arrow* floated just above it.

“How very...FOOOOLISH!!”

Milo spotted the mad glint in the monstroom castle’s singular eye as it raised the great bell and smashed it into the building where he was standing. Milo and Tirol barely managed to leap aside in time, but the escape put them off-balance, unable to evade the straight punch with which the monstroom continued its assault.

““Barrier!!”” they both yelled, and two mantra shields of emerald and gold manifested in order to block the blow. However, the castle’s unimaginable strength allowed it to shatter the barrier with ease, only slowing it enough that Milo and Tirol could leap safely aside in time.

“What’s going on?!” cried Milo. “Why is it so fast all of a sudden?!”

“Meow,” said Tirol.

“What? It’s because Amakusa is finally showing her true power?”

“Meow.”

“She’s using the *Ultrafaith Arrow* as an antenna, amplifying her magic through it, and using it to command the monstroom directly?”

“Meow.”

“What’s that?! We have to take down Amakusa to stop the castle, but we also have to get past the castle to reach Amakusa, so it’s kind of a catch-22. Also, Amakusa likes to say her favorite food is scorpion honey Montblanc when it’s actually pickled skipjack liver?!?!?”

“Enough of this farce, you imbeciles!!”

Amakusa made signs with her paws, and the *Ultrafaith Arrow* glowed!

“Ultrafaith Art: *Golden Ray*!”

The castle glared with its single eye, which emitted a golden beam of light. The destructive beam lay waste to all it touched, leaving explosions of golden

dust in its wake. Everything the blasts touched was transformed into gold.

“Myaah!! Money!”

“Leave it, Tirol! You can pick it up later! We’ve got a job to do!”

“Myagh!”

Tirol leaped into the air, manifesting *koban*-shaped platforms beneath her paws. Milo hopped across them, firing his sacred bow in the castle’s direction. His arrows exploded into emerald mushrooms, but the monstroom didn’t seem to react to them in the slightest.

“You imbecile! Nothing can match the might of an Ultrafaith mushroom! Now, burn them to ash!”

“WOOOHH.”

“Ultrafaith Art: *Golden Bell Artillery!*”

“WOHHHHHHH!”

The monstroom leveled its bell like a cannon and fired off a barrage of golden shells, each striking one of Tirol’s platforms, destroying them.

“We’ve only got one choice now, Tirol. Let’s do it!”

“Meow!”

Milo and Tirol jumped off the final platform, into the air high above the monstroom’s head. Their blue and pink hair fluttered in the wind.

“*Won/ul/viviki/snew!*”

“*Nyan/nyad/nyaviki/smeow!*”

Milo’s mantra and Tirol’s miantra commanded the Rust and the catwisps respectively, combining to turn Milo’s cube a bright shade of gold. The cube then transformed into an enormous sword, with a main blade over four meters long, and six other blades branching off the first.

““*Seven-Tailed Adamant Sword!*””

Amakusa gave a defiant hiss, the veins on her temple ready to blow. “Just because it’s big and gold,” she screeched, “doesn’t mean it’s any good!”

““We don’t wanna hear that from you!!””

“Die, wretches!”

A *Boom!* thundered from the monstroom’s bell cannon, and a golden shell flew toward Milo and Tirol! But their shining sword sliced through the projectile, continuing to the head of the castle itself!

“Cataclysm Strike!”

““Seven-Tailed Adamant Slash!!””

A flash of gold, a fissure of light, shone diagonally across the great monstroom castle.

Then...

“I-impossible... I am invincible! Perfect! Divine!” cried Amakusa as she realized what was happening. Slowly, the top half of the castle began to slip sideways, like sliced butter, before plummeting into the ground with a titanic *Crash!* After that, the mushroom’s headless legs buckled lifelessly.

Meanwhile, Milo tossed a *shuriken* at the ground, and a cluster of clamshell mushrooms sprouted forth to break the pair’s fall. Too injured to land safely, Milo and Tirol hit it, rolled across the ground, and finally came to rest when they collided with the wall of a building.

Milo rose to his feet, panting. “We...we did it! Tirol!”

“Myaaagh...”

“Don’t worry, I’ll turn you back to normal! We’ve just got to get the *Ultrafaith Arrow* back!”

“...Mya...Miao?!”

“Tirol?”

“Myaah! Myagh! Myaagh!”

The half-feline girl was indicating frantically to something behind Milo. Puzzled, Milo slowly turned his head...and paled at the sight.

“*Sob. Sob.* I don’t think I’ve ever seen something so sad...”

“I-impossible! We just killed that thing!”

A long shadow engulfed the pair as the fallen monstroom rapidly regenerated its own body. Soon it towered over the town again, even larger than before.

“The poor little human girl and the poor little human boy tried so hard...”

Amakusa’s grin widened.

“...But it was all for naught!”

She made signs with her paws, and the *Ultrafaith Arrow* glowed. At this light, the lifeless bottom half of the fallen monstroom also got up and began regenerating its missing head.

“Myaaaa?!”

“Aaah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Tremble in fear, miserable wretches!!”

There were two of them now, standing imposingly side by side, looking down on the half-ruined town. Milo stepped before Tirol, ready to defend her, baring his teeth in frustration.

“BAB-BA-BA-BAM!”

“BAB-BA-BA-BAM!”

“Even I didn’t know I had all this power in me!” Amakusa smiled, gleeful, stroking the *Ultrafaith Arrow*, which had allowed these miraculous feats. “Now, rejoice. For your deaths shall be the first step on the road to freedom!”

She gently combed her hair, applied her lipstick, and put on her collar and bell. With one last look in the mirror to ensure everything was perfect, Geppei nodded. Her stunning appearance served as a reminder to all, including herself, that she was the finest cat in all the realm.

Four years had passed since she was found bleeding in the street and brought to Yokan's mansion. In that time, she had grown tall, and her ivory coat was full and plush. There was no longer any trace of the miserable thief she once was.

...He's late.

How can he spend all his time training when he knows I'm waiting for him?

...

I wonder, would he like it if I brought him some treats?

Geppei quickly changed tack and arranged some treats on a tray. Balancing it delicately on one paw, she headed out into the hallway.

She had grown quite adept at making lukewarm tea, dressing smartly, and wearing exotic makeup. In the past, her shabby appearance would give cause for the courtesans to giggle and titter as she passed, but now her beauty shocked them into silent submission, and they scurried out of her way.

With a "Hmph!" Geppei turned her whiskers up at them, making her way to the dojo, which stood detached from the main house.

Plonk!

As she approached, she heard the pleasing sounds of bamboo training targets hitting the ground. She hid herself around a corner and watched the young lord's training session, which was led by his trusted retainer, Shibafune.

"Yokan..."

She whispered his name, enraptured by the sight.

Plonk!

“Very good! All seven targets, smoothly dispatched! Your training is almost complete, young master.”

“Absurd. How am I meant to improve when all my opponents are made of wood?”

“It is true. Very soon I will have nothing left to teach... Oh! My Lady, what brings you?”

Startled, Geppei gave a little jump and attempted to enter the dojo as naturally as possible.

“I thought you might be tired, sires. Would you like to take a break? I have brought some delightful treats for you to share among yourselves.”

“Hmm? Treats, you say?”

“Why, these do seem awfully delectable, young master. I’ve never even seen such variety!”

Shibafune excitedly approached the platter, snatching up a lovingly placed macaron and tossing it into his mouth.

Geppei barely tried to conceal her displeasure. It was clear that, despite her words, she had made these for Yokan, and for no one else.

“I say! Pretty *and* thoughtful. What a catch she is, do you not agree, young master?”

“Oh, come now,” said Geppei, straining her modesty. “You do flatter me so. Oh-ho-ho-ho.”

“She is,” replied Yokan. “But, Shibafune...”

“Oh, I beg your pardon, young master. I just had to put my paw in it, didn’t I?”

The old Chinchilla got to his feet and slunk off toward the door, as if to give the couple some space.

“I’ll leave you two lovebirds to it, shall I?” he said.

“Uh, no. I actually wanted to ask about tomorrow’s—”

“Take your time!”

And with that, he closed the sliding door, leaving Geppei and Yokan alone.

“...”

“...”

“L-lovely weather we’re having,” said Geppei at last.

“Yes. Quite.”

“Er... Em...”

“...”

“Be at ease, Geppei. You need not be so formal while Shibafune is not around.”

“Yokan...”

“What’s the matter? You’re shaking...”

“Yokan!”

All of a sudden, she threw her arms around him. Yokan was surprised by his wife’s strange behavior, but nonetheless he placed his soot-colored arms around her.

“Yokan!” she cried. “I’m scared, I’m so, so scared!”

“This isn’t like you, Geppei. Is someone threatening you? I thought every cat in the court had learned to respect you by now...”

“It’s not me I’m scared for; it’s you!”

She was crying.

“Rakugan is soon to choose an heir.” She spoke between stifled sobs. “Whatever will happen to us if he doesn’t pick you?!”

“...”

“If that happens, it’ll be the end of us, and all of Byoma! Your brothers are nothing but blackhearted fools, the lot of them! From atop their rotten

thrones, they will oppress all us hardworking and talented cats!”

“Preposterous. My brothers would never—”

“They already do!”

Her voice was a scream.

“I’ve seen the way they talk about you when they think nobody’s listening. Why should you have to endure such malignant slander from the lips of those ignorant fools?!”

Yokan had known his wife to get emotional, but never like this. Right now, she was a violent storm of resentment, anger, sadness, and love.

“Let us run away together, Yokan,” she said. “What does it matter who leads this country? Together, we can make our own kingdom. You know I would do anything for you...”

Yokan wasn’t sure how to respond. He knew he had to say something—anything—to fix her wounded heart, but he could think of nothing suitable as the silence wound on and on.

“...I beg your pardon,” said Geppei at last. “I shouldn’t have said that. Perhaps the heat caused me a funny turn.”

“Geppei.”

“Forget it, please.”

Geppei dried her tears, and in moments she was back to her usual captivating self.

“I apologize for causing a fuss. Shall I draw us a nice, relaxing bath? I shall rinse your back for you.”

It was only her eyes that had changed, and Yokan swore he could now see trapped within them some fierce yet unfathomable determination.



“What a fine woman...”

In Rakugan’s bedchamber, the seventh shogun grinned, his powerful body lit only by the soft glow of the oil lamps.

"I have bedded more women than there are stars in the sky, and yet never have I laid eyes upon one so utterly charming as you."

"Oh, Rakugan." Geppei giggled. "You do know how to make a woman feel special."

"Indeed I do."

With only the bedsheets covering her shame, Geppei tickled the base of Rakugan's throat. Rakugan, a massive tiger of a cat, purred softly and contentedly, his enormous pectorals rising and falling with each breath.

"A pity you must attend my son's bedchamber, and not mine," he growled.

"About him, My Lord. Would you not consider...?"

"Yes, yes. Don't think I don't know your game. He has always stood out among his brothers; that much is true. He would do a far greater job than the rest of my talentless sons."

"So then...!"

"Stop. The walls have ears, you know."

"Yes...My Lord."

An indescribable feeling washed over her. Perhaps, just perhaps, it was worth the permanent staining of her soul. Geppei turned aside, so as to hide the tears.

Just then, the door to the bedroom opened, and a servant appeared.

"My Liege."

"What is it? Can't you see you're interrupting me?"

"Apologies. Your sons have come to see you, Sire."

"Hum."

Rakugan rose to his full, imposing height.

"Go. Stall them until I arrive."

"As you wish, Sire."

He began to get dressed, pulling on his *hakama*.

“Erm, My Liege...,” ventured Geppei.

“Leave through the back. Let no one see you were here.”

“Yes, My Lord...”

Geppei sat there, her ears drooped and shivering, until Rakugan was gone.

“Rest assured,” Rakugan told his seven eldest sons, “I have no intention of bequeathing anything to that dirty cat. He is a fool. A fool who thinks himself a hero. Engrossed in his swordplay, he dreams of answering the call of the people and challenging the peace and order my rule has achieved. Already he has made his dissatisfaction with my government quite clear.”

“Quite right, Father.”

“What a relief.”

“We hoped you would say that.”

“Although we worried you might not...”

“Not me! I always had faith in you, Father!”

“Hey! He’s trying to make us look bad!”

“Silence, all of you!” bellowed Rakugan. His seven sons all quailed at the lion’s roar. “Somehow, I need to pick one of you equally stupid scions to succeed me. Luckily, I have a plan. Whichever of you rids me of this meddlesome son shall be crowned eighth shogun.”

““You want us to...””

““...kill Yokan?!””

“The method concerns me not. Bring me his head. It’s high time our black sheep had a little *change of heart* and retired from public life.”

Rakugan’s seven sons could scarcely believe their ears. For years they had schemed how best to take the throne; now the opportunity was being handed to them on a silver saucer. Greedy little smiles crept across each of their faces.

“Why, what an idea! This way, you choose an heir and eliminate a nuisance at the same time!”

“How wise you are, Father!”

“Yokan won’t see it coming! A little poison in his cup, and it’ll all be over!”

“Guh-huh.”

“Ah, Father is laughing!”

““““Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha!””””

“Guh-huh. Hugh. Gheh! Ggghahh!”

All heads turned in concern. Rakugan’s laughter became a choking cough, and then all of a sudden, blood from his gullet coated his table.

“Eep!”

“Wah!”

“Gbluh!”

Splaaat!!

There was a sharp flash of metal as a silver hairpin emerged from the tiger’s breast. The hairpin danced in the air as if possessed, then slit the throat of one of Rakugan’s sons.

“S-sorcerer! There’s a sorcerer about!” another one screamed.

“Craven scoundrel! Come out! Come ou—!”

Splaaat! Splaaat! Splaaat!!

In a matter of seconds, all lay facedown in pools of their own blood. The hairpin flew back toward the door, landing in Geppei’s paw just as she entered the room.

“What’s all this noise...? Eeek!”

“You two-tailed traitor!”

Splaaat! Splaaat!

Two innocents, a maidservant and a samurai guard, were roused by the noise, yet Geppei slaughtered the both of them. She looked at their bodies, and at her work, with eyes utterly devoid of remorse.

That was...so easy.

Dressed only in a thin robe, Geppei stepped through the blood toward where Rakugan lay, still clutching to life.

“Ghah... You lowborn wretch...,” he muttered.

“You. You are no cat,” said Geppei.

“Sto...p... Don’t...”

“A cat has no need for order.”

Geppei brought her foot down, her claws tearing a hole in Rakugan’s chest. A gush of blood cloaked her face and dribbled down her nose.

Then she turned, registering a familiar presence standing in the garden. There, with soot-black fur, was her beloved. His crimson eyes burned with regret at his own tardiness.

“I killed him,” said Geppei.

“...”

“He was weak. Weaker than I.”

“...”

“Come, Yokan. Take my paw. We can begin all over again, just the two of us...”

Yokan said nothing. Silently, he slid Kintsuba from its sheath, readying it in his paws. Directing its point at Geppei’s gesture of companionship.

Then he struck.

Fwoop!!

“Whoa?!”

Bisco was flung from Geppei’s body and onto the ground. He looked up to see the pair frozen, as if encased in ice, with the edge of Yokan’s blade poised just millimeters from Geppei’s neck.

“I’m sorry,” came Yokan’s voice from directly beside him, “but this is as far as we go.”

Bisco looked up at the feline in shock. “Huh?!”

“Because...I do not recall what happened after this.”

The Yokan who Bisco conversed with possessed the spectral appearance of his younger self. He stroked his chin with his paw, eyes fixed on the Geppei of his past.

“The power of the catwisps,” he said, “is that of disrupting your opponent’s heart. For the particles to assist you, you must first learn what drives your foe.” He turned to Bisco. “So having lived her life, do you think you understand—?”

Fwip!

“...?!?!?”

Yokan gave a start as, quick as a flash, Bisco leaped to his feet, drawing his *wakizashi* and bringing it down in an overhead strike. Despite missing an arm, Yokan spared no time in drawing his own blade and blocking the blow.

Clanggg!!

“Wh-what?! What has possessed you, Akaboshi?!”

Bisco growled, his eyes flickering with unconcealed rage.

“You...ASSHOLE!!”

Like a typhoon, he spun, delivering strike after strike with terrifying precision. Yokan parried them all as though his absent limb was no impediment at all, but the sheer tempestuous fury of his would-be pupil caused him to break out in a cold sweat.

What anger! It must be the remnants of Geppei’s mind!

The black cat found himself pushed back, his claws digging into the *tatami* mats.

“Calm yourself, Akaboshi!” he yelled over the sounds of their clashing blades. “That anger is not yours! It is Geppei’s!”

“It’s all the same to me, asshole! Both me and her wanna tear you a new one!”

“Whatever have I done to earn your ire, Akaboshi?!”

“You’ve done exactly what I did!!”

“Wh-what?”

“You tried to ignore Pawoo’s prayers! You decided not to interfere! You thought it’d be fine if both of you just kept to your own path, but it ain’t!”

“Pawoo...? Who is Paw—? Whah?!”

Clang!

Bisco’s jade-green eyes trembled. Somewhere within them, Yokan caught a glimpse of Geppei—a part of her he feared was lost forever. And also something else. Something of Bisco’s own. Something Yokan didn’t recognize.

“Can’t you see it’s all for you?!” Bisco yelled. “She’s alone and unsure, trying her heart out to make you happy! Why didn’t you take her away?!”

“B-but that way lay madness! What she wanted was evil! It was completely incompatible with the ways of feline-kind!”

“So fuckin’ what?!!!!”

Clang!

A furious slash! But it was a strange emotion that lent Bisco’s blade its weight. There was anger, yes, but a constructive anger, accompanied by love, sadness, and regret.

“Cut the bullshit!” he roared. “This ‘feline-kind’ of yours don’t fuckin’ exist! In this world, there’s only two things that matter: you and her!!”

The sunlight spores glittered in his eyes. They danced about him, singeing Yokan’s fur with their heat. Then Bisco jumped into the air, raising his shortsword above his head!

“What kind of hunter are you,” he yelled, “if you can’t even take what’s yours?!”

Fwoom!

Bisco’s anger tore the air apart. The frozen, dreamlike world instantly dissolved into a mass of fiery particles.

Even Bisco seemed surprised by what he had just done. The sword in his

hands disappeared like the rest of the fabricated memory.

“Whoa?!”

“Hmm?!”

The particles, the catwisps that had allowed this glimpse into Yokan’s past, gathered around Bisco, mingling with the golden spores of the Rust-Eater to create the illusion of a burning flame.

“What’s goin’ on?!”

Yokan couldn’t believe his eyes. “It’s the catwisps,” he exclaimed. “They have accepted you as their new master!”

He gazed at the sight, enchanted, like he was witnessing something impossible. Then, suddenly, he realized something.

“No! It’s too early! I haven’t even taught you a single move yet!”

“O-ow! That hurts! This shit’s burnin’ me!”

Unlike the continuous, heated glow of the Rust-Eater spores, the catwisps would suddenly burst into sparks like a firecracker, singeing Bisco’s skin as though he were standing too close to a crackling bonfire.

“Listen to me carefully, Akaboshi,” said Yokan. “The Catwisp Blade is born of my regret! It is the only thing that can change Geppei’s mind!”

“How the hell—? Ow—! Am I—? Ow—! Supposed to listen to you like this?!”

“The *Ultrafaith Arrow* converts Geppei’s belief into infinite power! By altering the course of that belief, you can—! Are you listening?!”

“You listen to me, you stupid, idiotic...!!”

As Bisco cried out in anger, the catwisps gathered in him, and then...!

“Whooooaaa?!”

A blinding flash of light drowned out everything, and the dreamworld, its purpose apparently fulfilled, dissolved away into nothing, ejecting its hapless passengers back into reality.



“BAB-BA-BA-BAM!”

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The original of the two monstroom castles (which we shall name Castle One) fired its bell-shaped cannon with reckless abandon, destroying the rooftops of the town of Byoma and putting large craters in the ground. From each of these holes spurted geysers of golden sand that sprayed out of the earth itself, turning the town into a dazzling desert of gold.

“Myao! Milo!”

“Uh-oh! Behind us!”

Boom!

Milo leaped through the air, bouncing off the golden sand with Tirol in his arms.

“We ain’t gonna be able to keep this up,” said Tirol. “We gotta escape into the meowntains!”

“We can’t,” replied Milo. “We have to keep her distracted so she doesn’t go after Bisco!”

“Well, what the frick is he doin’?! Sleepin’ on the job?!”

“...Pretty much, yes.”

“What?!”

“Watch out!”

Boom!!

An eruption beneath their feet lifted the pair high into the air. The golden dust gilded every hair atop their heads—and the hair across the rest of their bodies, for some—turning them into gleaming gaudy statues.

“Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho!! So fast and pretty, I could watch this all day!”

From atop Castle One, Amakusa twirled her finger, and the giant bell ejected a spent casing, which fell to earth in a cloud of steam.

“I think I prefer the boy. He will look *très magnifique* adorning my throne

room!”

“I can’t wait to get up there and give Mittens a load of my mind!” Watching her lord over them from high above, Tirol hissed. “C’mon, Milo, we gotta get movin’... Huh? What’s wrong? Yer sweatin’.”

“I think I messed up...” Milo grimaced. Tirol looked down at his clutched ankle. It must have been caught in the prior blast, for the whole foot had become solid gold.

“Ya’ve been hit!”

“Get out, Tirol, while you still can!”

“I ain’t leavin’ ya!”

The shadow of Castle Two loomed over the pair. Tirol chanted her miantra, and the gold dust swirled before her, creating a golden greatshield to catch its punch.

“Gryao! It’s...too strong! I can’t hold it!”

Tirol maintained the shield as long as she could, but soon cracks began to appear across its surface.

“You just can’t sit back and watch somebody die, can you, Tirol?” said Milo with a smile.

“Stop sittin’ there like a dumbass and help, will ya?!”

“What an idiotic child.” Amakusa chuckled as Castle One finished reloading and leveled its bell at the pair! “Blocking that attack just leaves you wide open to this one!!”

“Milo, frickin’ *do* something!”

“I can’t. My mantra’s not powerful enough to stop that shot.”

“Say cheese, fools! I want my statues to look happy!”

Kaboom!!

The golden shell sped from Castle One’s bell, gently curving toward the pair, when all of a sudden, from the side, came...!

Pchew!

“Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho...huh?!”

Amakusa watched in horror as a horizontal streak penetrated the shell in midair, exploding with a *Gaboom!* This shock altered the trajectory of the shell, sending it on a collision course with the shoulder of Castle Two.

Ka-boom!!

“WHUUUH?!”

The impact blew off the monstroom’s arm and knocked it off-balance, causing it to lift its massive fist from Tirol’s shield.

“That’s...a mushroom arrow!” cried Milo.

“It’s Akaboshi! Akaboshi’s here! Aw, man, we can’t lose!”

“Wait, Tirol!”

Tirol watched as the color drained from Milo’s face, then she turned to follow his gaze. Castle Two tottered to and fro before eventually losing the battle to gravity in the precise direction that Milo and Tirol were standing.

“Gyaaagh!! It’s gonna squash us flat!”

“Haven’t you always wanted to drown in a sea of gold?” quipped Milo.

“How am I supposed to spend it when I’m dead?!”

Gaboom!

Just then, a second mushroom arrow exploded beneath their feet, catapulting them up and out of the way of the toppling castle. As Tirol watched it make a splash in the desert of golden sand, a red blur streaked through the sky and caught her, landing safely on a golden dune.

“Look at all this gold,” said the figure. “Bet you ain’t ever dreamed of somethin’ like this.”

The boy lifted his goggles.

“Forget Imihama—you could buy the whole country with this!”

“Akaboshi!!” Tirol cried, shaking her head like a dog to rid her fur of the gold

dust coating it. She grabbed Bisco by the lapels and pulled him in. “What the hell took ya so long?! Always showin’ up at the last minute like a frickin’ superhero!”

“Hey, it’s better than bein’ late,” Bisco replied.

“Stuff it! You know how hard me and Milo have been workin’?! ”

“You think you had it bad? I was gettin’ my back blown out by Tony the fuckin’ Tiger.”

Excuse me??

“Ah, Bisco, you’re back!” said Milo, suddenly appearing at his partner’s side. He whipped out a medical syringe from his pouch and injected it into his own leg, his starry eyes still fixed on Bisco’s.

“Looks like you had a fight while I was gone,” said Bisco. “The big guys give you any trouble?”

“Not at all!”

“Uh, yes they did?! ” yelled Tirol.

“Ooh, ooh! Tell me what Yokan taught you!” said Milo. “What kind of secret technique did you pick up this time?”

“You know, now that you mention it,” said Bisco, squinting. “I guess he didn’t really teach me anything. Is that bad?”

He watched as the prone Castle Two slowly lifted itself back up out of the sand.

“BAB-BAM!”

Castle Two raised its arms, and its wounded arm miraculously healed in an instant.

“Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!!”

Seeing the monstroom castle restored, Amakusa let out a sonorous laugh.

“So now the red one is here as well! It doesn’t matter how many of you there are; your arrows and blades are powerless against my monstroom army!”

“You’re bluffin’!” yelled Tirol.

“Nah, I don’t think so,” said Bisco. “Those mushrooms are chock-full of Ultrafaith energy. The concept of death means nothin’ to them!”

“Huh?! Then they’re unbeatable, aren’t they?!”

“Immortal doesn’t mean unbeatable, young grasshopper.”

“Shut yer sanctimonious pie hole before I sew it shut!!”

“That’s right!” said Milo. “We don’t need to kill them at all! If we can disperse the spores, we can make them shrink! Bisco, can you do that?”

“Only one way to find out.” Bisco looked unfazed as he drew his extra-long *odachi*. “If this don’t work, blame Yokan.”

“That’s what I’m talking about!” cried Tirol. “Go get ’em, Akaboshi!”

“I’ll take the one who just grew back his arm,” Bisco told Milo. “Once your medicine works its magic, you two keep Snowball occupied for me.”

“All right, got it!”

“Yeah, yeah— Wait, me too?!”

“No time to chat about it—it’s comin’!”

Boom! went the giant monstroom’s giant golden bell, and Bisco, along with Tirol, holding Milo in her jaws, evacuated the area just before the projectile hit. Amakusa ground her fangs in frustration.

“That red one is planning something, I just know it! I have to squash him, fast!”

Her mycelian minion pointed its bell, but moments before it could fire...

Pchew! Gaboom!!

“What?!”

“Over here, Amakusa!!”

The shot came from Milo, wielding his birchwood bow while riding Tirol like a horse. Castle One reeled, its singular eye glowing red in concert with its rage.

“After the boy!” Amakusa screeched! “No, not that one, the red one!”

“Ha-ha! Too slow, Snowball!”

Bisco launched himself up on a cluster of clamshells before swinging his *odachi* at the head of Castle Two.

“Oh no!”

Amakusa’s reaction was immediate. She waved her paws, and the *Ultrafaith Arrow* uprooted itself from the ground at her feet before flying over to Castle Two and embedding itself in the back of the mushroom’s head, allowing Amakusa to take direct command of the creature.

“Here we go!” yelled Bisco. “Catwisp Art!”

“Not if I have anything to say about it!”

Her blood vessels swelled in concentration, and a trickle of blood ran from her nose as Amakusa mentally ordered the second monstroom castle to raise its arm overhead in attack.

“TIME TO DIE!”

Meanwhile, Bisco flew through the air, his aim unerring.

“Drop dead!!”

Thuddd!!

The monstroom’s right fist connected solidly with Bisco’s frame. Amakusa squealed with delight as she watched her victory unfold, but then she noticed something strange.

“...I-it can’t be?!”

Bisco had not moved one millimeter since the attack connected. He opened his gleaming eyes, and the air ignited around him.

It’s the catwisps!!

Enveloped in their crimson light, Bisco twinkled like the sun!

“Karmic...Retribution!!”

Bwoom!

There was a thunderous sound. Bisco did absolutely nothing, yet a large hole

appeared in the center of the monstroom's body. The earth-shattering impact of its punch had been miraculously redirected into its own stomach.

“WAAAAH!!”

The monstroom's cry echoed across the land.

“...The frick just happened?!” cried Tirol, turning her head. “Akaboshi didn't do a darn thing!”

“I reflected the monstroom's anger back at itself!” said Bisco, sweating, almost as though he hadn't been 100 percent sure the technique would work. “The Catwisp Blade is about reversing the opponent's mind. If it can reverse the mind, then it can reverse consequences, too!”

“That makes no goshdarned sense! What about Newton's third law?! Tell him, Milo!”

“I mean, if Bisco says it, it must be true. Besides, we all saw it happen.”

“What happened to ‘*I learned it at school*’?!?”

Meanwhile, Amakusa glared down at the toppled Castle Two with shock in her eyes.

“The reversal of consequence?! But that's the Catwisp Blade's ultimate technique!”

Baring her fangs, she channeled her power into the *Ultrafaith Arrow*.

“To think a mere human now wields its secrets! But no matter! Remember, my minions are immortal! One little accident with the hole punch isn't going to be enough to stop him!”

“WHAHHH?”

“What are you doing, you imbecile? Regenerate already!”

“WAAHHHH...”

Then something happened that Amakusa could never have predicted. Instead of healing its wound, the colossal monstroom began to deflate. And as it did, little clones of itself spilled from its mouth. These tiny monstroons (although still taller than most humans) clambered over the body of their disabled

progenitor, looking to one another in confusion.

“Bab-ba-ba-bam!”

“Who are you?”

“Who am I?”

“I’m hungry.”

“Hey!” screamed Amakusa. “Who said you were allowed to split up?! Put yourself back together and squash that red one flat!”

“Who’s this broad?”

“Beats me.”

“I am not a broad! I’m a lady! Aargh! They’re not listening to me! What have you done, Akaboshi?!”

Amakusa’s surprise was little wonder, for her amalgamated monstrooms had never been able to split themselves back apart before. It was meant to be irreversible.

“I gave them a heart,” said Bisco, standing atop the ruins of Castle Two, tail swinging, as curious monstrooms poked and prodded his face. Angrily, he swept them all aside before continuing. “One that tells them to reject all control. To forge their own philosophy. And with philosophy comes individuality!”

“I-impossible! Even with the Catwisp Blade, how could you implant a heart into these mushrooms when you have nothing to do with them?!”

“Oh, but I do! They’re my sons!”

Then Bisco turned and announced to the monstrooms who had gathered around: “I’m gonna go take down the other one! Go hide somewhere safe!”

“... ..”

The monstrooms all shared uncertain glances.

“Who’s he?”

“He’s our mommy.”

“That’s our mommy?”

“He can’t be a mommy; he’s too scary.”

“Goo-goo ga-ga.”

While they spoke nonsense among themselves, Bisco sprang atop a dune, facing off against Castle One, where Amakusa stood. Her bloodshot eyes quivered with rage.

“So what if you can split one heart into many!” she screeched. “It doesn’t matter if the whole world bows down to you! *I* have the *Ultrafaith Arrow*! That means I have the power!!”

She waved her paws, readying her mystical weapon. Bisco drew his *odachi* once more.

Two opponents, he thought. *The monstroom castle and Geppei. I can only use the Catwisp Blade on one of ’em. Now, what’s it gonna be?*

As the *Boom, Boom* of gargantuan footsteps thundered toward him, Bisco tightened his gaze...and heard the pitter-patter of the little waddling monstroooms.

“What?! I thought I told you lot to go hide!”

“Mommy!”

“Buy it for me!”

“Goddammit, get away from me! ...Wargh!”

Boom!

Castle One unleashed its golden bell at point-blank range! Bisco’s reaction was slowed by the prospect of protecting not only himself but his mushroom children. However...

““““Bab-ba-ba-bam!!””””

Dozens of monstroooms threw themselves in front of Bisco, forming a thick mushroom wall that deflected the shell far into the distance, where it exploded harmlessly in a spray of gold.

“Whoa?!” cried Bisco, astonished.

““““Bab-ba-ba-bam!!””””

“Don’t you dare hurt Mommy!”

“I saved her!”

“No, I did.”

“Whuh?”

The monstrooms clamored around Bisco like baby ducks, free from their tyrannical programming. Bisco briefly wondered what part of their empty minds gave them such strength, but then he remembered they were born of the *Ultrafaith Arrow*, and nothing was impossible when it came to that strange power.

“You guys saved me...”

Bisco gazed in wonder when, all of a sudden, inspiration struck. He took one of the monstrooms and shook it violently by the shoulders.

“Hey, can you lot distract the big guy while I take care of Amakusa?!”

“Distract?”

“Beat him up, knock him down—whatever it takes. Can you do it?”

“Hmm...”

The monstroom children all gathered around, exchanging their own opinions. “Yes, we can.” “No, we can’t.” It seemed like they were going to be at it all day, so Bisco took a deep breath and yelled, “Yes, you can! You can do anything you want if you put your minds to it! Listen, if you do this for me, I’ll buy you anything you want! (Well, Pawoo will.) How about that?!”

“Anything we want?!”

“I want some bath toys.”

“I want a Game Boy.”

“Think big! ’Cause the more you want it, the stronger you’ll become! You guys are the children of possibility, and nothin’ can ever get in your way!”

““““Whoa!!””””

The monstrooms’ eyes went wide as saucers. From behind came a *Boom!* as

the castle's golden bell fired again, but the mushrooms swiftly mobilized. Standing atop one another's shoulders, they formed into the shape of an enormous baseball bat, which swung and knocked the projectile away.

Then, with a cry of “““Chaaaarge!!””” the mushroom children all swarmed the monstroom castle. As they attached themselves to its legs and torso, the immobilized castle gave a cry of despair.

“What’s gotten into you all?! Have you forgotten it was / who took care of you all this time?!”

“You got a lot to learn about mushrooms, Snowball!”

“Erk!”

Bisco stood there, glittering in the sun, his sword raised above his head!

“Who the hell expects mushrooms to repay their debts?!”

Clanggg!!

Amakusa quickly brought the *Ultrafaith Arrow* in the path of Bisco’s blade.

“Y’know, I have to salute your willpower!” said Bisco. “It ain’t easy to make the *Ultrafaith Arrow* do what you want!”

Their blades clashed. Then, once they were close enough, each drove their brow into the other’s.

“But I’m afraid it belongs to us.” Bisco grinned. “It’s time to put the cat back in the bag!”

“You act as if you’ve already won...!” growled Amakusa. “But a lowly human can never defeat me!”

While commanding the arrow with one paw, she swept her other at Bisco. Bisco wasn’t expecting a physical attack to come from this magic user and was caught off guard.

“Whoa?!” he cried as he reeled back to avoid her razor-sharp claws.

“Now!”

While Bisco was on the back foot, Amakusa launched the *Ultrafaith Arrow* at him. Bisco brought his sword in front to parry, but the force of the impact

snapped the blade in two!

“Uh-oh.”

“Aha! Ha-ha-ha!!”

Her power almost spent, Amakusa chuckled in triumph. Beneath her feet, the monstroom castle swung its massive arms, ridding itself of the mushroom children climbing up its body.

“Whatever cheap tricks Yokan taught you, they’re all useless without your sword! What will you do now, you pathetic human child?”

“Hmm.”

Bisco glanced at the broken hilt and tossed the remains of the weapon aside.

“I didn’t wanna use a sword anyway. But you know what they say: *When in Byoma, do as the Byomans do.*”

“A laughable bluff. You might as well speak the truth, *mon petit enfant*, for it will be the last thing you ever say!”

She waved her paws, and the arrow flew at Bisco, who leaped into the air, completely bereft of a weapon!

Idiot! No human can evade this!

Amakusa had already predicted Bisco might attempt to take to the air, and she was ready to twist the arrow’s trajectory on a moment’s notice. Now in the arms of gravity alone, he was powerless to avoid the projectile as it barreled toward him.

“Now die!” Amakusa screamed.

“Pipe Snake Style!” yelled Bisco. “*Iguana!*”

Thwack!

The *Ultrafaith Arrow* never met its mark. Bisco flicked his tail with all the force of a mounted iguana flattening its prey and struck the arrow out of the air.

“What?!”

“And next...!”

Bisco grinned, revealing his lengthened fangs.

“Pipe Snake Style: *Flying Blowfish!*”

He landed on Amakusa and sank them into her neck! Blood spurted from her wound as her eyes widened in shock.

“Myaaaaagh?!”

“And finally...!”

With terrifying strength, Bisco lifted Amakusa off the ground entirely! He spun her over and around and went crashing headfirst into the ground with the speed and majesty of the divine serpent itself!

“Pipe Snake Style: *Pipe Snake!!*” Bisco yelled.

The roof tiles shattered, and great dust clouds covered all! Amakusa spluttered blood, her eyes white.

“Ghhh... Rgh...”

“Not bad for a lowly human, eh?”

Bisco sat atop the golden carp ornament, wiping the blood off his mouth. Meanwhile, Amakusa lay sprawled out on the tiles, her claws quivering with rage.

“This...cannot...be! I cannot lose! The *Ultrafaith Arrow* will grant all my wishes...!”

“It ain’t gonna grant shit if you don’t got enough prayers in your heart,” said Bisco matter-of-factly. “You were blinded by possibility, and in the end you forgot what you even wanted all that power for. If you’d’ve kept sight of yourself all this time...well, maybe it’d be me lyin’ there now instead of you.”

“...”

“Now, gimme my arrow back. And next time, think about who you’re fightin’ for.”

“...Myah-ha-ha-ha-ha...!”

“...”

“You’ve fallen into the trap of enlightenment, Akaboshi...!”

Bisco sensed an emotion in Amakusa unlike anything he had felt from her before. He jumped backward, his ears twitching and claws at the ready, watching her bleed out on the floor.

“All I’ve known, my entire life, was hunger!” she said. “A hunger no words could ever satisfy!”

“So you tried to satisfy it with miracles?! I know you’re not that kind of—”

“You and Yokan both! You stagnate in your enlightenment! While I will take the world to *la terre promise*!!”

“Uh-oh. The *Ultrafaith Arrow*!”

Clutched in Amakusa’s dying paw, the arrow heard her heartfelt pleas and began shimmering brightly in all the colors of the rainbow.

“...*Oh, c’est magnifique*. Like a shooting star...”

“Geppei! Get away from it!”

“*Ultrafaith Arrow*!” she shouted. “Fulfill my boundless hunger and bring about a miracle!!”

Amakusa jumped into the air and hovered, raising the arrow high. The winds whipped up into a frenzy around her, causing a tornado that lifted the golden buildings of Byoma off the ground.

“WAAAAH!”

“What’s happening?”

“Waaah!”

“It’s sucking us in!”

Even the monstroom castle was affected, along with Bisco’s mushroom children, sucked into the swirling maelstrom. The vortex attracted everything Amakusa’s power had touched, dragging it all into its center like a black hole.

Bisco narrowly avoided getting sucked in himself by jumping from the castle roof at the last minute, and his face contorted when he saw the full scale of what the *Ultrafaith Arrow* was constructing.

“What the...?!”

A golden sphere hung in the skies above Byoma like a meteor, with all sorts of mushrooms flourishing across its surface. It was a world of infinite potential.

“I have you to thank for this, Akaboshi,” said Amakusa, bleeding profusely. “Your presence has allowed the *Ultrafaith Arrow* to unleash its true power! This planet is my golden ticket to *la terre promise*! At last, the Feline Realm shall be brought into harmony! The world shall be remade!”

“Stop this, Geppei!” yelled Bisco. “You’re not gonna solve anything this way! You’ll just be inventin’ the same problems all over again!”

“You’ll be all alone!” shouted Milo, now beside him. “A fabricated freedom is no freedom at all!”

“And your makeup sucks!” added Tirol. “Looks like a clown farted on yer face!”

“Shut up! Shut up! You insignificant infants!”

Above her head, the “Ultrafaith Planet” reached critical mass.

“This is *adieu*,” said Amakusa. “You rats shall become one with everything else!”

“Here it comes!”

“Be transformed, into the soil of my new kingdom!!”

Whoosh!!

Amakusa swung her paw down, and the golden planet began descending to earth, the air quaking as it approached.

“Jumpin’ Jesus! We gotta get the frick outta here, Akaboshi!”

“There’s nowhere to run,” Bisco replied. “Once that thing hits earth, everythin’ on the damn planet becomes one big mushroom.”

“Then just shoot it outta the sky! You know, like always!”

“That’s not going to work, either,” offered Milo. “Not even Yokan’s greatest technique could lay a scratch on that thing.”

“...Wait, that’s it,” said Bisco, calm as a spring day even as the sky fell about his ears. “I think I finally get it. What we were brought here to do.”

“Bisco?”

“Milo. Give us the Mantra Bow!”

“S-sure!”

Bisco closed his eyes, and a figure appeared in his mind. Not of Yokan, but of a woman very close to him. The catwisps floated around him, glowing like embers. Milo and Tirol combined their chants, and the catwisps produced a sweeping arc.

“...Wh-what the?!”

“Now we’re talkin’,” said Bisco.

““Th-that’s not the Mantra Bow!!””

It was a bow of glimmering crimson!

“This,” Bisco declared, “is the Catwisp Bow!”

“Catwisp Bow??”

“Whatever, whatever! Just shoot that thing down already!!”

Already the force of the incoming impact was uprooting trees and flinging them across the landscape. Bisco pulled the Catwisp Bow tight and pointed it at Amakusa.

“Brute force cannot overcome the power of the *Ultrafaith Arrow*!” she screeched. “It will absorb whatever you fire this way!”

“I know,” said Bisco. “I invented the damn thing.”

“And me,” Milo reminded him.

“Sorry—me and Milo invented the damn thing.”

“Krhhhh!”

Amakusa was fit to burst with all the power stored inside her. Meanwhile, Bisco and Milo steadied their bow, its crimson arrow pointed directly at the golden sphere.

“Let’s do this, Milo!”

““Ultimate Catwisp Art!!””

“Diiiiieee!”

““Catwisp Bow!””

A magnificent *Twang!!* sent the arrow on its unerring voyage, burrowing through the air toward the planet of spores...

...where it landed with a *Splot*.

“...Huh?!”

Given the fanfare with which the two boys had announced their technique, not to mention all the other impressive moves she had personally witnessed in the past, like the Ultrafaith Bow and the Ghost Hail Bow, Tirol was undeniably confused.

“*Splot? Splot?! What the frick is Splot?!*”

“...Huh. That’s odd,” said Bisco.

“Odd?! Yer tellin’ me! Where’s your usual *Kerblammo?! Ka-Gaboom?! That thing should be halfway to Venus by now!*”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Well, I suppose we can’t expect to work miracles every time,” offered Milo.

“Yeah. A miracle ain’t a miracle if you know it’s coming.”

“How frickin’ philosophical! I’ll just ponder that while we’re all crushed to death by a giant meteor, shall I?!”

Tirol pointed to the golden orb, now so close it was almost scraping the ground, and for the second time in a row, she was shocked speechless.

“...Huh?”

For the golden sphere...had stopped moving. In fact, it was slowly but surely *rising*, accelerating upward, until it was rocketing back toward its creator, Amakusa.

“Wh-what?! My meteor!!”

Milo turned to Bisco. “When we fired that shot, I felt something...different. It felt...kind. What did you do to her?”

Bisco just watched the golden planet on its upward trajectory. “I don’t think I did anythin’,” he said. “It’s just...”

“Just...?”

“Milo, I don’t think what she wanted was freedom at all.”

“She just wanted to be happy?”

“Yeah. All we did was plant the seed. She figured the rest out on her own.”

With that, Bisco tossed his miracle bow aside, and it dissolved into catwisps once more, whisked away by the wind and carried toward the golden sphere.

“Wh-why?!” Amakusa stammered. “Why won’t it listen to me?! It is the earth that needs your salvation, not me!”

The sphere rumbled and roared as it closed in on her.

“No...please...stay back..... Waaaaaagh!!”

Thuddd!!

In one last-ditch effort to prevent her own planet from colliding with her, Amakusa deployed a golden barrier. But the Ultrafaith Sphere was the crystallization of all her hopes and dreams, and would not be denied. As she strained to hold it at bay, a trickle of blood ran down from her nostril.

“Listen to me!! This isn’t what I want!!”

Then the ball spoke. “*LET US GO,*” it said. “*TO LA TERRE PROMISE!*”

“Noooooooooooo!!!”

Ka-BOOOM!

““Whoa?!””

The golden sphere burst in a spray of gold. Bisco, Milo, and Tirol were thrown head over heels as the blast wave swept across the land.

“That hit like a damn truck,” said Bisco after finally coming to a halt. “Hate to think what woulda happened if we’d blown the damn thing up.”

“...Bisco, your ears!”

“Huh?”

Bisco placed his hands to his head. As Milo indicated, his cat ears were already shrinking, retracting back inside the skin.

“Whoa, what the hell?!”

“Look!” cried Tirol. “My claws, they’re going away! And my tail, too!”

Even her slitted golden eyes returned to their usual shape.

“I’m cured! Yippee!”

Tirol jumped and pranced for joy, causing a trove of *koban* coins to spill out of her *kimono*. “Aw, crap,” she said, and began picking them all up again.

“I wonder if all of Amakusa’s magic has been dispelled,” said Milo. “If that’s the case, then—”

“Milo, heads up! It’s rainin’ cats!”

Milo turned skyward to see that Bisco’s words were the truth. It seemed that, with its mistress gone, the sphere had released and reverted all the monstrooms it had absorbed. The boys briefly worried about how they were ever supposed to catch them all, but of course, each and every cat turned in the air, deftly landing on their feet. Milo breathed a sigh of relief to see them all safe and sound.

“Akaboshi! Nekoyanagi!”

The voice of one of these cats caught their attention. The pair turned to see Yokan’s aged retainer, Shibafune, last seen helping the pair escape Amakusa’s basement.

“You did it! I am glad to see you both well,” he said.

“And you, old cat,” said Bisco.

“Shibafune! You’re okay!”

“*Okay* is an overstatement, perhaps,” the old Persian replied. “I didn’t much fancy being a hundred paws tall and rampaging through the city... But what of my liege? You must tell me!”

Milo looked to Bisco, unsure how to respond.

"He's fine," Bisco said. "He just told me he had something to do."

"Something to do...? Mayhap he is grieving the life of his lost love?"

"...Wait a minute," said Milo, suddenly tugging on Bisco's arm. "What about the *Ultrafaith Arrow*?! Where did it go?! We'd better find it and destroy it for good!"

"Nah, not our problem," said Bisco, an oddly satisfied look on his face. "I'll let Sooty take care of that. We got our own shit to deal with."

"Bisco...?"

Bisco looked out over the cat-folk, happily reuniting with their loved ones, and spoke quietly.

"...I guess this is why they say, 'Kitty see, kitty do.'"

"I don't think anyone's ever said that in the history of mankind."

"C'mon, Milo, we gotta go!"

"Huh?! Whah?!"

Bisco suddenly grabbed Milo's arm and pulled him along.

"Where are we going?!" cried Milo, his starlight eyes wide with surprise.

"We gotta hurry. I've made her wait too long already."

"Bisco...!"

"I was such a fuckin' idiot."

His eyes once more matched the ferocity of the wind. They burned with newfound determination. His inner conflict was nowhere to be seen, and the only thing that drove him now was his own beating heart.

"I did all that mad shit, risked my damn life, and in the end it was all so simple."

Milo sensed the pain in Bisco's voice. He leaned over, brought his lips close to his partner's ear, and whispered.

"So all you have left is one simple thing?"

“ ... ”

“I see. Well, that’s okay. That’s all you need. Just like my love for you is all I need.”

“ ... ”

“Don’t be afraid, Bisco. You can go anywhere, touch anyone. Just like you touched me in Imihama and took me away.”

Bisco didn’t say anything. Instead, he squeezed his partner’s hand. In the skies over Byoma, the clouds parted, allowing the sunbeams to filter through and impart a blessing of light for the boys’ journey home.

Stalks of pampas swayed together in the north wind, making for an enchanting and mystical sight. Overhead, the moon hung impossibly big and bright in the sky.

The only sounds were the whistling of the wind, the crunch of toppling stalks, and heavy breathing, mixed with blood, as though the fluids its bearer had inhaled were too much trouble to cough up.

A single white cat dragged herself through the field. She was not difficult to spot, even among the similarly colored stalks, for her path was marked by a wet crimson trail that extended over the rolling hills and out of sight.

...

Just...a little...farther...

Suddenly, her paw, slick with her blood, slipped, and the white cat fell face-first to the ground. She had tugged herself so far through the soil that all of her claws had been peeled off, and she lacked even the energy to keep herself upright.

“Gh...gh...”

She clenched her jaw, her fangs ready to crack, and grunted.

If only...I could reach...the temple...

As if in response to her wish, a bright light shone in her paw. It was the *Ultrafaith Arrow*. Using it as a crutch, the white cat staggered to her feet once more, spurring herself on with nothing but sheer determination.

She looked like a wraith, a specter. Cursed to wander the land and never to be free.

I was just...unlucky.

But so long as I have the arrow, I cannot lose.

I need only return to the temple, to await another chance.

One day...the Catwisp Blade will be gone, and my new world will rise...

"So you are alive," came a voice from behind her. "I didn't expect you to last this long."

"Who's there?!"

In her heart of hearts, she already knew. The white cat jumped and spun around, and there he was.

His sleek black fur glimmered. The fated pair stared into each other's eyes, standing in the dazzling light of the moon.

"Geppei Amakusa," said the black cat. "Look at you, ready to die. And yet still you reject the word of the Catwisp Bow."

"Yokan Yatsunashi!"

A silent eternity passed between them, punctuated only by Amakusa's ragged breaths and the whistle of the wind. Her eyes were wild and bloodshot, while his were clear and serene.

"You have come to end me, have you?" she asked. "You one-armed failure. Pathetic."

Yokan stood motionless, his one sleeve dangling limply by his side. It was clear he would never command the Catwisp Arts as he once did.

"Lest you forget," continued Amakusa, "I still possess the *Ultrafaith Arrow*. Even in your prime, you could never defeat it, so how do you hope to—?!"

"I have not come to kill you," said Yokan.

"What?!"

"I just wanted to see you... And to tell you something."

Amakusa's mouth hung open, speechless.

"I was wrong," said Yokan. Then something astonishing happened.

The ruler of this entire country bowed his head to the one who would have

seen it destroyed.

Wh-what?!

Even Amakusa could not believe her eyes.

“What is this, some kind of trick?! Have you come only to mock me?!”

“Does this mean,” Yokan went on, “I have not earned your forgiveness?”

“My forgiveness?! Why do you need my forgiveness?!”

“On the night you slew my family, I always wondered why it was I couldn’t change your mind.” Yokan looked down to the new sword at his hip, then back at Amakusa. “It was that regret, that moment of weakness, that fueled my arts and became the Catwisp Blade. However...”

“So that’s why you’ve come! I might have known...!”

Geppei Amakusa began to cry, although she could not quite articulate why. The tears from her eyes mixed with the blood on her cheeks.

“You’ve come to use that detestable sword to change my mind, haven’t you?! Because you always know what’s best for me! You always know what’s best for the world!!”

“No! You’re wrong, Geppei. Let me explain—”

““Can it, puss! You’re under arrest!””

“Mmm!”

Without warning, dozens of bandanna-sporting cats jumped out of the undergrowth, running on all fours toward the pair.

““Geppei Amakusa! You must die for the sake of peace!””

“Oh no!” said Yokan. “They’ve sniffed us out!”

“Curse you, Yokan! How long will you mock me before you’re satisfied?!”

Slavering with rage, Amakusa tightened her grip on the *Ultrafaith Arrow*. It glowed with a dim, golden light, but...

“Grrh... Rggh...”

Her dreams were shattered. And with no dreams, there was no power to fuel

the arrow's miraculous abilities.

It's the same as it was back then...

...when she lay dying in an alley, bullied by the rich and powerful over a single fish to fill her starving belly.

All my money and faith came to nothing. And so it all ends the way it began...

Her tears rolled down her face and fell onto her clenched paw...

...when a second dark-furred paw appeared and held on tightly to hers.

"...?! Yoka! What are you—?!"

"Focus," he said. "You are the greatest cat who ever lived. Only you can command this unimaginable power."

"Focus?! But..."

"Now!"

"O-okay!"

The two cats, white and black, each channeled their determination into the arrow, and it shone once more with a golden glow!

"“Wh-what?! What's this light?!”" the ninja cats exclaimed.

"Do not falter!" said one. "Our enemy is wounded! Press the assault!"

In a calm voice, Yoka explained. "They are from the military. We must uproot the very ground beneath their paws. Are you ready?"

"W-w-w-wait! Those are samurai! They're *your* army!"

"Which is why we must not kill them. Just slow them down a little."

"But that's absurd! The people would rebel! Who ever heard of a shogun turning against his own people?!"

"I failed that day..."

Yoka turned and looked to the distance. Then he focused his pure, bright eyes on Geppei's.

"...I shall not do so again. Those two human boys taught me what is truly

important in life.”

“Yokan...!”

“It is not my country or my sword. It is not my duty or my ability. It is you, Geppei. You, and nothing else.”

And then he kissed her. As both their paws curled around the *Ultrafaith Arrow*, Yokan gently pressed his lips to hers and hugged her tight. His loving embrace washed all her fears away, and in the tears that streamed from her eyes, there was no anger or regret. All the emotions that had kept her trapped her whole life disappeared, replaced by only love.

““Meow?! What are they doing?””

““We’re in the middle of a fight; can’t they see that?!””

““Get a room, you two! C’mon, mogs, attack them!!””

The ninja cats charged, earning a deadly glare from Geppei. Her fated kiss with Yokan was not to be denied. In her paw, the *Ultrafaith Arrow* glowed brighter and brighter, until...

Thud! Gaboom!

““Meow?!””

Thud! Gaboom!

““Meow?!””

Thud! Gaboom! Gaboom! Gaboom!

Bright golden King Trumpet mushrooms erupted from the ground, catapulting the cats away. That one kiss had restored Amakusa’s faith to bursting. And it was still going.

“...Mm-mmm... That’s enough,” said Yokan, struggling to break free of her grip. “Let me go!”

“No. You’re staying right here.”

“B-but the ninja! They’re coming for us!”

“I beat them all while we were kissing.”

“What? You didn’t kill them, did you?”

“Of course not. See? They are getting back up again. Though perhaps I should have... Eek!”

Suddenly, Yokan took Geppei under one arm and took flight through the long grass.

“Now we are free,” he said. “We can go anywhere our hearts desire!”

“Are you out of your mind? You are the cat to lead all cats! For you to forsake your country would mean exile! You would be abandoning all of feline-kind!”

“Then I do so freely!”

“B-but...”

“Ultrafaith Arrow!”

At his words, the arrow shone, catapulting the pair of them up, beyond the clouds, far into the clear blue sky where the Cat Gate loomed.

“MROOOOOOW.”

“Let us abandon this realm, Geppei, and live as the humans do. As those two boys do.”

“No! I don’t want to be a human! They’re all hairless and cold!”

“Then let us be hawks, or wolves. Let us search until we find what is right for us, Geppei.”

“...You idiot.”

The wind rushed through their ivory and soot-black fur. Geppei threw her slender arms around Yokan’s shoulders and nuzzled his cheek. All the anger she had bottled up her whole life was gone, spent in an instant like a disappointing firecracker—and yet Geppei didn’t seem to care. The arrow ferried them up in a golden streak, as though it were transporting them directly to heaven.

All across the land, cats turned and gazed at the beautiful sight, mouths agape in wonder. Then, once it was gone, they forgot all about it.

All of eastern Japan was paralyzed by the sudden outbreak of Latent Primal Regression Syndrome, also known as “catitis.” It began in Imihama but quickly spread to neighboring prefectures.

Most local governments prided themselves on military might and were ill-equipped to deal with a mysterious plague. The disease could strike anywhere, at any time, and conversations like the following were not uncommon: “It’s a disaster! The catitis has reached our settlement! We could all be turned into cats!”

“So?”

“Sounds like it’ll save us time on cosplay.”

“But think about our business! Our customers will all be biting and clawing at us!”

“Well, that’s bad.”

“I don’t want to get bitten, sounds painful.”

“We have to go west! Quickly, now, quickly!”

And so the population gradually shifted westward, leading to skirmishes between refugees and border police on the entry points into Kyoto.

However, one thing never changed:

“Come, one and all! Buy our bells and continue to rack up virtue, even as a cat!”

“Use our patented gold dust and keep your claws and fangs squeaky clean!”

“Earrings and tail-rings for sale here! You there, young lady, you know what would make you look even cuter? A pair of cat ears!”

A society-ending epidemic was no excuse for these merchants to give up the

grind. Further, there were radical extremists who saw catfolk as mutants and sought to eradicate them, or there were cults proclaiming the disease to be the next step in human evolution, but for better or worse, Japan was brimming with life again.

And with no end to the plague in sight, it seemed all but certain that mankind would be replaced by creatures of base instinct.

That is, until one day...

“Ah-hem. Hello? Is this thing on?”

A single video broadcast all over the country put a stop to the chaos in thirty seconds.

“Erm... According to our research here at Banryouji...”

It was High Priest Ochagama, cat ears and a tail poking out of his cotton wool fuzz.

“The catwisps in the atmosphere have completely disappeared,” he said. “We haven’t the foggiest what happened, but, er... All I can say is the catitis should be completely gone by tomorrow morning. So no need to buy all those dodgy collars and bells. Except ours, of course. Anyway, that’s all... Oh, a butterfly!”

Then the captivated Ochagama jumped headlong into the camera, turning the broadcast to static. Everyone, including those who had avoided infection, looked at one another in stunned silence...

And it was true. By the next day, there was no trace of the disease at all.

* * *

“There you are, ma’am! I wanted to speak with you regarding the refugees from Niigata...”

“Urgent dispatch, ma’am! Surviving members of the Church of Catitis have taken over Tochigi!”

“Captain! The iguanas have developed a taste for human flesh! What shall we do, ma’am?!”

“Ma’am!”

“Ma’am!”

“Lady Pawoo!”

“Rrrrgh! Shut up, shut up, shut uuuup! Can’t you see the mountains of paperwork I have to deal with?! Stop bothering me for such trivial matters!”

Pawoo angrily stood up from her desk, scattering stacks and stacks of paper to the floor. Her cat ears and tail were gone, and she was back to the paragon of humanity she always was...save for the dark bags beneath her eyes, that is. Lately, Pawoo had been at the office night after night, and even her perfect suit was beginning to show signs of wear.

It was enough to make one wonder why she didn’t just hire an assistant or something to do all the work for her. But Pawoo was fastidious to a fault and didn’t want anything going on in her government without her personal oversight. Besides, the chain of command now lay in tatters because of the pandemic and had to be built back up from scratch.

Urgh. I’m so tired... Maybe I’m not cut out for this after all.

Pawoo thought back to the words of the fabulist at the festival. They had stuck with her like a thorn in her side this entire time. She yearned for the good old days as Captain of the Vigilante Corps, where all she had to do was wave her staff and beat up bad guys.

But if I don’t do it, who will? Somebody needs to keep the lights on and the gears turning.

“Ma’am! An urgent message from—! Aaaagh!”

Pawoo’s secretary attempted to enter the room, only to be swept back out into the hallway by a raging river of scattered paperwork. Fighting the current, she eventually managed to reach the governor’s desk.

“What an absurd workload,” she said. “No one should have to do all this alone...”

“What do you want?” asked the humorless Pawoo. “If it’s something to sign, just throw it on the pile.”

“No! Well, yes, but it’s the thing you’ve been waiting for, ma’am! Came all the

way from Kyoto today!”

“From Kyoto...?” Pawoo’s half-dead eyes flickered to life. “Could it be...?”

“Yes, ma’am! It’s the Man-Eating...er, I mean, your husband’s letter of pardon! It’s finally here!”

“Sh-show it to me!”

Pawoo flung the documents she was working on into a forgotten corner of the room, leaping into the sea of papers and snatching the envelope out of her secretary’s hands. With a flick of her nails, she tore the seal and unfurled the contents.

To Bisco Akaboshi

And Pawoo Nekoyanagi (Guarantor)

In light of the evidence you have submitted, we are pleased to agree with your assessment of the alleged criminal, Bisco Akaboshi. We hereby recognize the aforementioned as a free man, and approve the cancellation of any and all outstanding arrest warrants regarding the accused.

Once signed, this document shall serve as the official record of this decision. Please affix your signature below, and return by mail to our Kyoto office at your earliest convenience.

Kyoto Prefectural Bureau

“Ahhh...!”

Pawoo hugged the letter, forgetting all the pain and stress she had accumulated over the past weeks.

At last, a payoff for all that mind-numbing work! she thought. “Now Bisco can finally...”

“Now Bisco can finally live a decent life,” said the secretary.

...Hmm?

“After all, the life of a Mushroom Keeper is no life at all,” she went on. “Living outside of society like some kind of barbarian. I bet you’re happy to finally settle

down with your husband and live like proper, civilized people.”

“Ah...well...I don’t—”

“What are you standing around for?! Sign the letter already!!”

Pawoo looked down at the letter. Her hand shakily went for her pen.

R-right.

I need to make Bisco be accepted by society.

After all, he deserves a life just like anybody else, doesn’t he?

And now I can finally make it happen.

Just one signature, and my husband will finally have a real—

Ker-rash!!

“Eeek!”

All of a sudden, the glass window shattered, and a bright-red figure entered the office. He looked around in confusion before letting out a bewildered sigh.

“The hell? Looks like a tornado hit this place.”

“Bisco!”

“‘Sup?”

Pawoo looked into his jade-green eyes, stunned. “Wh-why do you always have to break a window whenever you enter a room?! Have you ever heard of this invention called ‘a door’?!”

Bisco adopted an imitative tone. “*We’re sorry, the governor is very busy right now.*”

“Huh?”

“That’s what the guys at the entrance said. So I got here my own way.”

Bisco picked up a sheet of paper off the floor and, after glancing at it for only a few seconds, tossed it over his shoulder, completely unable to parse its sesquipedalian contents.

“C’mon, Pawoo. It’s time to go.”

“Go?”

“Hey, what are you doing?!” squealed the secretary. “Even the governor’s own husband needs to make an appointment! She’s very busy!”

“Where? Where are we going, Bisco?” Pawoo asked.

“You’re goin’ wherever I’m goin’.”

“Now, listen here, you selfish man! You can’t just come barging in here when Pawoo’s trying to work! Look! You see this letter? This is all for you, so show some gratit—!”

Fwip.

Bisco tossed a mushroom throwing-needle, which ripped the letter of pardon out of the secretary’s hands and pinned it to the wall. The next second, it exploded into a cluster of *enoki* mushrooms, tearing the letter to shreds.

Then he picked up Pawoo in his arms. “Here’s what I think of your letter, assholes!” he yelled, as though to Kyoto’s government itself. “Who said I wanted to be pardoned, huh?!”

“Bisco. You know what you’re doing, don’t you?”

Pawoo’s eyes trembled. With fear, and with something even larger that was not fear.

“You’re kidnapping the governor of Imihama. You’ll never be allowed back through the city walls, and I won’t be able to help you anymore.”

“Sure. Let’s go.”

“Are you sure? You’re throwing away your one chance at a peaceful life!”

“I never asked for a peaceful life. Did you?”

“Huh?”

Bisco was nothing but a young boy. He didn’t want to talk or argue. He didn’t want to hear people complain. All he wanted was to take his wife and get out of there, no matter whom he pissed off in the process.

“We’re animals,” he said. “Our claws are too sharp for humanity.”

“B-Bisco...”

“I’ve decided to follow my own path,” he said, turning his jade-green eyes on her. “And I’m takin’ you with me.”

“I’m gettin’ you outta here. Sorry it took me so long.”

Except for Milo, Bisco had always seen it as taboo to interfere with another’s fate. Even becoming married to Pawoo hadn’t changed that. It was only now, thanks to the esoteric arts of the Catwisp Blade, that he saw what a mistake his self-imposed isolation had been.

Pawoo looked into his eyes, now clear as water, and felt a magnetic pull. A single tear rolled down her cheek, the cause of which she could not fathom.

“Y-you’re kidnapping the governor?!” cried the secretary, sitting up in the sea of papers where the *enoki* explosion had knocked her flat. “I knew you Mushroom Keepers were crazy, but I didn’t think you were *that* crazy! Ma’am! Use your magnificent strength to break free of that villain’s grip! Look! Here’s your staff—!”

“Shut up!!”

The secretary was nearly crushed to death by a single envelope, thrown with bone-shattering force. On the front, written in powerful brushstrokes, were the words “Resignation Letter.”

“R-resignation?!” cried the secretary, extricating the letter from her face and staring at it. She quickly read through it, but she could find not a single overlooked technicality on which to impel the governor to stay. She didn’t see Pawoo write it, either, which meant that it must have been in her pocket this entire time, waiting for the right moment.

“I’m off to live my own life!” the now-ex-governor said. “Have fun running this place after I’m gone—or burn it to the ground, I don’t care!”

“Wh-what?! But if you go...who’s going to sign all these documents?!!”

Thwack!!

What violated the poor secretary’s face this time was Pawoo’s rubber stamp, ever ready by her desk’s side.

“Any fool can do it,” said Pawoo, “Knock yourself out!”

“All right, let’s get outta here,” said Bisco, preparing to jump from the office window. “Hang on tight!”

“S-security!” cried the secretary. “Somebody come quick! There’s a caveman in the building!”

Gaboom!

A cluster of clamshell mushrooms propelled Bisco out of the governor’s office, through the air, and onto the rooftops of Karakusa Street, which he traversed on his way to the south gate.

“He’s kidnapped the governor!”

“Look at all the work she still has to do!!”

“Send in the iguanas!”

“That Akaboshi! I always knew he couldn’t be trusted!” yelled Nuts, captain of the Vigilante Corps. “Attack!”

His iguana riders pursued the fleeing Bisco, kicking up a storm of dust behind them.

“Hey, Pawoo? Think you can run by yourself now?” asked Bisco. “My arms are startin’ to get tired...”



“Excuse me?? Do you know how long I’ve waited for this romantic moment? Don’t ruin it!!”

“I was just askin’...”

Then the pair heard Milo’s voice. “Bisco! Pawoo! Over here!!”

The voice came from the south gate, which was in the midst of closing when Actagawa came careening out of the sky, swinging his greatclaw and tearing a great big hole in it.

“That’s our ticket outta here,” said Bisco. “You can tell us off later!”

“Tell you off? What for?” replied Pawoo.

“Well, for breakin’ the walls?”

“Who cares? Just hold me tighter!”

Gaboom!

A well-placed mushroom arrow catapulted the pair through the rift and past the city walls. Milo and Actagawa caught them both in midair before landing on the sands of the Northern Saitama Iron Desert.

“You kidnapped her?!”

“Yeah.”

“Nice!” Milo welcomed Bisco with a beaming smile. “Now let’s get out of here! Nuts will follow us by himself if he has to!”

“But where can we go?” asked Pawoo. “We’re enemies of Imihama and Kyoto both.”

“To Kagoshima!” said Milo, whipping Actagawa’s reins and spurring him on. “The Benibishi are supposedly starting a new country over there. Let’s go check up on them.”

“Kagoshima?!”

“It’s a weird-ass place,” said Bisco. “Can people even live there?”

“That’s why it’s perfect! We help them revitalize the land, and they can protect us from the government! ...Uh-oh! Look out!”

Explosions to the left and right kicked up sand, narrowly missing Actagawa. It was the howitzer cannons mounted atop Imihama's walls, sending shells arcing through the air and raining down around them.

"Whoa! Don't they care we got a hostage?!" Bisco cried.

"You two, focus on the road," said Pawoo. "I'll take care of this." She reached for Actagawa's luggage, pulling out a spare staff, and stood tall, raven hair streaming in the wind, as the cannon's next shell fell directly toward her.

"Hi-yah!!"

Thwack!!

As nimble and precise as a black cobra, and as fast as a whirlwind, Pawoo swung her staff, repelling the shell back toward Imihama. The resulting explosion caused the surrounding walls to shudder and collapse.

"Hmph. Weak."

"P-Pawoo?! What have you done?!"

"That's overkill, even for you!"

"Who cares? The whole city can perish for all I care."

Pawoo ran her fingers through her hair and gazed at her work with callous indifference. She looked different now, like a huge weight had been unburdened from her shoulders.

"They should have been demolished a long time ago," she said. "There was no need for walls after the Rust Wind went away. All they did was keep Imihama locked up and blind!"

"Weren't you in charge of that place not three minutes ago?!"

"The distant past!" she roared, launching back the rest of the shells. The explosions lit up her glittering smile and the storm in her eyes. "A distant memory. My mind is now fixed solely on the future yet to come!"

The flash of flame and smell of burning steel stole the boys' words clean away.

She's like a fireball.

“...Uh-oh! Bisco, at this rate she’s going to level the whole city!”

“We’ve gotta get Pawoo away from here, fast!”

““C’mon, Actagawa!!””

Hearing a determination in their voice unlike any other, Actagawa took off at top speed, scuttling across the desert sands like a crab possessed.

Pawoo stood atop him, looking back at the city. Then she reached up and, with her long nails, dug into the flesh at the back of her neck, feeling the pain.

With that pain to soothe her fears, she watched as her past receded over the distant horizon.

AFTERWORD

I'm allergic to cats.

It doesn't matter what I think of them, or what they think of me. We are just not compatible for each other. If I so much as see a cat, my eyes go bloodshot, my sinuses clog, and I start wheezing like an asthma patient.

I was thus afraid of cats as a kid. My grandmother used to own one (Berry, female, lived to twenty-one), and whenever I saw that feline running around the house with total disregard for my affliction, I was struck with awe at its completely unhindered life. *What a free beast*, I thought. Surely, that cat lived without a care in the world. But now that I'm an independent grown-up myself, I've realized freedom comes with its own issues. I gained a newfound respect for that cat that my hubris led me to misjudge all those years ago.

It was this completely unreciprocated relationship of fear and respect that gave birth to the volume you now hold in your hands. The free beasts in this installment were Bisco and Geppei, and their enemies, society. Now, I think it goes without saying, but I don't believe society is inherently bad. It's necessary. And there is no clear-cut good and evil in *Sabikui Bisco*; it's all about balance. However, I think there will come a time in many people's lives when they stop, look at the people around them, and think, *Am I a cat?* Because that's what happened to me.

This book is a tribute to both kinds of people. Which are you? A human or a cat? Or perhaps a hawk? Or a wolf? Treasure that question. For in the quest for truth, there is a god. And one day, it will lend you the confidence you need to answer it. And I hope you'll forgive me if I pray that all of you have the courage to follow your own hearts and go boldly where they tell you to.

...Well, that seems to have filled the page nicely. See you next time.

—*Shinji Cobkubo*

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